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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (4) ARTICLES 12-16 THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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Every one of these Articles dealing with the Christian life focuses on our sinfulness (Article 14 only by implication, but it is clearly meant). To some people that will make the Articles seem negative, unhelpful and lacking in encouragement. 'We don't want to hear about our sins but to be built up, loved and shown the greatness of God' - so the argument goes. In fact, as we shall see, these Articles are marvelously encouraging, they are realistic; they accept us as we are; they deal with the actual human condition; they magnify the grace and goodness of God.

A Sinless Saviour

When we understand the teaching of Article 15 the others fit into place very easily. Articles 12-14 and 16 tackle important questions and controversies to do with how human goodness and sin affect each other, but Article 15 deals with Jesus Christ's goodness, sinlessness and the way he dealt with our sin. When we focus on Christ and learn from him, the truth about ourselves and the world makes sense.

Jesus Christ was fully human

He shared 'our human nature'; he was not God pretending to be man, or dressed up to look like man, or acting like man. His humanity was full and true. This means that he can understand our condition, sympathise with our weaknesses, share our aspirations. He knows how we live and think and feel. And as a complete human being he was able to be our representative before God; to die in our place, to plead our cause, to be head of his body the church.

Jesus Christ was completely sinless

The Article insists that his sinlessness included both his flesh and his spirit. Some have tried to claim that the flesh is always bound by sin and that only by forgetting this fleshly life and concentrating on the things of the Spirit can we be freed from sin. This is escapist mysticism, not Christianity. Jesus Christ, in this flesh which we share, in his human earthly body with its natural functions and weaknesses, was wholly without sin. This says a great deal about our potential as humans, about the positive attitude we should have to our bodies and the physical world, about the importance of seeing body and spirit (soul) as one united whole rather than two competing parts.

Jesus Christ died for our sins

We all know this truth but the Article stresses certain important elements of it. Christ came to this world with the purpose of dying for sin; there was no mistake or ghastly miscalculation, there is no sense in which good was defeated by evil on the cross; God's purpose was not thwarted and he did not have to change plans to cope with a new situation. Jesus came to be the sacrificial lamb. He came to offer one sacrifice sufficient for sin; we cannot and should not want to see his sacrifice repeated; whether by himself or by human 'priests' or by individuals trying to atone for their own misdeeds. It is easy to fall into these traps, as Roman Catholicism does with its claim that the sacrifice is re-enacted on the altar, or as most folk-religion does with its idea that we must suffer to make up for any evil we have committed. Praise God: Christ has dealt fully and finally with sin! He came to pay a sufficient price for all the sins of the whole world; not that every sin is

automatically forgiven, or that everyone goes to heaven but that anyone and everyone who comes to Christ and is born again in him will receive free and full forgiveness.

Goodness and Sin

The rest of Article 15 and the other Articles in this study deal with our goodness and sinfulness as opposed to Christ's. Article 15 insists, in words from 1 John, very familiar to Anglicans, that 'if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'. It also reminds us, if we need reminding, that even as baptised and born again Christians, we continue to sin. Articles 12-14 and 16 simply spell out these two truths in greater detail and apply them to various situations.

Goodness and sin before conversion

Article 13 gives offence to many but its teaching is true, necessary and gloriously liberating. What it says is that good deeds done by a non-Christian contribute nothing whatsoever to salvation; they have the same ultimate and eternal value for the soul of the one who performs them as a sinful act. That may sound very hard, even unfair. But the Article is careful to be fair and to argue from Scripture. Because such deeds do not spring from faith in Christ they cannot please God. This is not to say that acts of kindness performed by unbelievers are not kind or to be welcomed but that they are not to be thought of as a substitute for faith.

If we say that deeds done by those living in rebellion against Christ's demand for faith and total allegiance are other than sinful we are undermining his claims and his lordship. The critical question is not 'What have you done?' but 'Whose side are you on?' The Roman Catholic teaching was (and still is) that the good deeds of non-Christians make it easier for them to be converted and for God to work in their lives. Does God really depend on your co-operation? If so, there's no hope for any of us! The freedom and joy his teaching gives is to know that my salvation does not depend on my co-operation with God but solely on his free and sufficient grace.

Goodness after conversion

Articles 12 and 14 apply here, both dealing with the good deeds of the Christian believer. Article 12 insists that although our good deeds can never atone for sin and will always be less than perfect, they are a necessary proof of faith and are pleasing to God. There is always the danger in extreme Protestantism of saying that faith is the only thing that counts; here we are warned that faith which does not prove itself by goodness is a lie and that God is genuinely glad to see good deeds stemming from faith. But the opposite danger, of believing that Christian good deeds are in some way a contributory factor to our salvation, is firmly dealt with. This one Article repays much study, which will greatly benefit our Christian lives.

Article 14 deals with Christian good deeds, which according to Roman Catholic teaching can create a sort of bank account to our credit with God. These works of 'supererogation' (pronounced super-erogation) are thought of as voluntary acts of goodness over and above the bare minimum set out in Scripture. What arrogant nonsense! Scripture insists on perfection, on our whole selves being offered to God. We are not even able to meet that minimum and certainly not to exceed it.