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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (6) ARTICLES 28-31: HOLY COMMUNION

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Sacraments are effectual signs, though not automatic channels, of God's blessing but they must be received aright, with the attitude of the recipient being all-important. Articles 28-31 focus our thinking on the Lord's Supper (the name preferred by the reformers to Holy Communion). Again there is a brief correction of the extreme Protestant misunderstanding; but most of these Articles deal with the dreadful heresies current in the Roman church in the 16th century. Sadly this is still relevant today, with Rome continuing to teach all these doctrines and with many Anglicans once again espousing them. But these Articles are not completely negative: they contain strong and positive teaching too.

A Sharing Supper

Holy Communion is only really a subtitle for the sacrament of bread and wine, which should properly be called The Lord's Supper. This is made clear in the Prayer Book service as well as in the Articles. It is a pity that the modern church overuses the subtitle and ignores the proper name, because 'communion' makes it all sound rather mystical when it ought to be very straightforward. Even worse is the word 'eucharist', which really means thanksgiving (only one aspect of the service and not the most important one). The word 'mass' is worst of all, with its downright heretical associations with transubstantiation and sacrifice. Archbishop Cranmer tried to get the Church of England to use the title 'Lord's Supper' but sadly it never caught on and we now have a string of less suitable titles.

Article 28 begins by insisting, against the extreme Protestants, that Communion is more than a fellowship meal. It is not just a supper but the Lord's supper. As we share it aright and with faith we share in Christ himself, partaking of his body and blood. To receive it properly we must prepare carefully, ensuring that we are right with God and trusting in Christ's death alone for salvation; but once that is done we can be confident of real spiritual blessing, a deeper union with Christ himself, through the sacrament.

The people are to receive both bread and wine (Article 30). In the Middle Ages the Roman church stopped giving wine to lay people altogether and even now offers wine only as an option in more liberated countries like Britain and not at all in many parts of the world. They misapplied the Old Testament restrictions on handling and drinking blood, thinking it too holy, only to be received by priests. But the Article rightly points out that Christ himself gave the bread and the wine to his disciples. As Jews they would have been shocked and horrified when he said 'this is my blood, drink it, all of you'. The whole point of his death, though, was to be a blood sacrifice to make us right with God and once we are right with him nothing that he has made is unclean, not even blood. So we can eat red meat and black puddings, we can touch blood or dead bodies without being ritually unclean and we can drink wine remembering Christ's death and receiving the benefits won for us by his blood.

A Spiritual Sacrament

Article 28 makes the one vital statement about communion which denies and destroys the whole Roman and Anglo-catholic teaching: 'The body of Christ is given, taken and eaten in the supper only in a heavenly and spiritual manner'. The outward sign of the sacrament is that we eat bread

and drink wine; the inner reality is that we feed on Christ; but the two are not to be confused. What we eat and drink with our mouths is only bread and wine. We receive Christ in our hearts by faith, not in our mouths by eating.

Two major errors creep in here, both with serious implications. The first is transubstantiation, the doctrine that the bread and wine change into Christ's body and blood, still the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church and believed by some Anglo-catholics. But, as the Article puts it, this 'cannot be proved from holy Scripture' and 'is repugnant to the plain teaching of Scripture'. A sacrament consists of an outward visible sign and an inner spiritual reality but transubstantiation confuses the two. This doctrine has caused, and continues to cause, enormous problems. In particular it encourages the ridiculous superstition of adoring or worshipping the actual bread as if it were Christ's very presence. This practice is common in many churches and is encouraged by 'Corpus Christi' (body of Christ) processions, the idolatry associated with Walsingham, and so on.

Second, less serious than transubstantiation, is the view held by most Anglo-catholics and many church people who have never thought this through. The technical name is consubstantiation, meaning not that the substance changes from bread to flesh but that two substances are joined together. The bread remains bread but Christ's body is joined with it. This is often referred to as 'the real presence' of Christ in the communion. It leads to the superstition that the bread and wine have some mysterious power and can bring blessing to whoever receives them, prepared or not. So, for example, people ask for or offer communion for the sick even when the sick have no real faith. And sick people ask for communion or agree to take it as some sort of insurance policy, thinking that receiving communion will get them into God's good books. When I was a hospital Chaplain the expectation from nurses and patients, encouraged by the national Chaplaincy Advisers, was that giving communion bread and wine to the sick, even without a service or any Bible teaching, was the Chaplain's primary role. This makes receiving communion a good work by which they hope to be saved. The Anglican reformers, especially Cranmer, were perfectly clear about this, teaching Christ's 'real absence' from the bread and wine. Jesus Christ remains bodily in heaven. By faith he can be appropriated as we receive and believe his word. Bread and wine are symbols of this but in themselves they achieve nothing.

Article 29 deals with a further implication of both transubstantiation and consubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine of communion have some power to convert unbelievers to Christ, or at least to convey some of his blessing. Scripture is very clear about this, and the Article echoes 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. Receiving the sacrament is not enough. Trust in Christ is what is required. Trust in the sacrament is at best misplaced trust and easily becomes idolatry.

A single sacrifice

This may seem wholly negative. It is not, because of the continual stress on Christ and his death. There is a way to peace and salvation, though it is not the sacramental way. Article 31 puts the emphasis where it needs to be (and again has to deal with false teaching).

If we understand Christ's death aright the errors and superstitions surrounding the Lord's supper will quickly disappear. A number of key points are made in Article 31. First, Christ's death was an offering. He acted as a priest with a view to achieving reconciliation between man and God. Second, the offering was made once. There is no need to repeat it, because once was enough. The idea that each communion or mass is a repetition or re-offering of Christ's sacrifice is a slur on the effectiveness of that first offering at Calvary. Third, Christ's self-offering was perfect and complete. Nothing needs to be added to it. We do not need to be good to receive its benefits and we do not need priests to mediate those benefits to us. Fourth, Christ's death deals with sin not by making amends for it (that can never be possible) but by propitiating God. The righteous demands of his anger, his law, his honour, are satisfied. We do not need religion, especially sacramental

religion, to please God. God is no more pleased by religion than by any other human activity. Christ's death alone satisfies his demands. Fifth, the sacrifice of Calvary deals with both original and actual sin. Roman theology makes much of the difference, saying that baptism deals with our original or inherited sinfulness and that the mass is an offering for actual sins we have committed. But sacraments do not deal with sin. Only Christ's death can do so. Sixth, the means by which Christ's death is effective is satisfaction. He died as our substitute, in our place. We cannot make amends for sin. Seventh, Christ is the only Saviour for the whole world. No other person or way can deal with sin or reconcile us to God or God to us. There is no other way of salvation.

This Article finishes with its strong attack on the Roman masses, 'in which it is commonly said that the priest offers Christ for the living and dead so as to gain remission of pain or guilt'. It rightly describes them as 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'. Strong language, but necessary, not least because they dishonour Christ's great work on the cross and they blind people to the only way of salvation.