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On the Thirty-Nine Articles (YDS 12-186)

Frei prepared three articles (the two reproduced here, and a third 'Of the Resurrection of Christ', published as 'How it All Began: On the Resurrection of Christ' in Anglican and Episcopal History 53.2 (June 1989), pp.139-45; reprinted in TN, pp. 200-6) for a book on the on the Thirty-Nine articles, to be edited by John F. Woolverton and A. Katherine Grieb (Church Hymnal Corporation). CPH 1987d, 1987f.

Article III: Of The Going Down Of Christ Into Hell

As Christ died for us, and was buried, so also it is to be believed that He went down into Hell.

This article plainly is taken from the second article of the Apostles' Creed ('He descended into hell') in which, scholars believe, it was incorporated as a relatively late addition. The main outline of this creed was established in the second and third centuries, C.E. However, the inclusion of this clause probably dates from the early Middle Ages, when dramatizations of Christ's invasion of hell to liberate the spirits imprisoned there became immensely popular. Noteworthy is the fact that there was no reference yet to the descent into hell in the fourth-century Nicene Creed.

The scriptural warrants for the clause have usually been 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6, which tell of Christ's preaching to the spirits of the dead in the place of their imprisonment. Two motifs are combined in the clause: (1) Jesus' preaching to the spirits in hell for their salvation or liberation, while they were awaiting the final resurrection at the end of all times when the spirits of the dead are to be joined to their bodies once again. In this sense the clause was linked in tradition to the doctrine of purgatory, the 'intermediate' state before the final dispensation of the purged soul. (2) Jesus' ransom through his death of the souls rightfully or wrongfully held imprisoned by the devil. In this sense the emphasis of the clause was on its relation to Christ's atoning death on the cross.

Hell is not a very vivid doctrine or reality to many modern people to whom unjust and anonymous suffering, the eternal silence of the grave, or the irreversible scattering of one's own and other people's ashes after final illness and cremation are far more hellish and real. No matter. World pictures and myths change, though the dread embodied in them may not. In Christian confession what remains constant through all such changes is that all reality –

whatever its shape – imaginable and unimaginable, good and evil, is referred to Jesus, God’s own Word, whose life and death on our behalf are adequate to protect us from the abyss. He is not only the representative but the inclusive human being into whose destiny we are all taken up, and as such, he is the all-embracing presence of God. ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things’ (Romans 11:36). In Christian confession there is no reality ungraced by Christ, no terror which he does not face on our behalf.

What is important is not that there be a real location called hell, so that someone could descend into it. Rather, Jesus Christ is so real – and therefore his cross so efficacious that he defines, undergoes, and overcomes whatever it is that is absolutely and unequivocally hellish.

Article V: Of The Holy Ghost

The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory, with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.

Like the preceding articles, this one is taken from the creeds of the Church, specifically the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in its Western form. In the church, beginning in the early centuries, not only was the Spirit acknowledged as coequal and one with the one God, but a certain logical structure gradually came to be recognized which differentiated conceptually between the relation of the Father to the Son (‘generation’) and that of the Father and the Son to the Spirit (‘procession’). The intent of this differentiation was to prevent the inner-divine relations from merging, through lack of specification, into an undifferentiated non-Trinitarian monotheism in which God would be at once denuded of ‘His’ mysterious richness and removed beyond the meaningful worship of ‘His’ human creatures, whose very breath is a seal of the glory of ‘His’ presence. However, theologians conceded they were hard put to specify what ‘procession’ meant, in contrast to ‘generation’ for which there was at least the analogy of natural procreation. And yet, to come up hard against an absolute limit in linguistic meaning like that may not have been loss but gain in matters religious, for in concert with its opposite, linguistic (in this case biological) analogy, it is a way for technical theology to indicate in its own way what believers already know – that in the very veiledness of His majesty, ‘hid from our eyes,’ God is intimately accessible.

The Eastern church has steadily declined to adopt the procession of the Spirit from the Father ‘and the Son’ (the so-called *filioque* clause) because it appears to them to imply the less than full deity of the Spirit. It is a dispute

that seems technical to the point of artificiality at one level, and yet it involves issues of profound significance for the Christian understanding of God as full co-equality in unity.

The formal, complex identification and definition of the Holy Spirit as full Godhead came later than that of the 'Son' or 'Word'; it was worked out less explicitly and, as we have noted, it has less conceptual specificity about it. In fact, quite notoriously, the doctrine of God the Spirit has usually suffered from underemphasis in the history of Christian theology. Cranmer's own omission of reference to the Spirit in the original Forty-Two Articles of 1553 is one example among many of that neglect; Article Five was only added ten years later.

On the other hand, this neglect of the doctrine of the Godhead of the Spirit has often taken its revenge in the history of the church. It has assumed the form of an understanding of God which has been the correlate of a strong drive in religious outlook and behavior, sometimes toward a fierce, rigorous consistency but more often toward unrestrained spontaneity – a drive which in turn has often been justified by appeal to the believer's direct inspiration by an equally spontaneous God – the Spirit.

It is as though the Spirit (God as overpowering, strenuous, sometimes liberating, often unpredictable spontaneity) had completely superseded the Father (God as unitary, unfathomable Origin and Destiny of all that is and is conceivable) and the Son or word (God as rational, structured Wisdom who is also our Redeemer from all evil). But that was not intended by the tradition at large. Our uses of these three nouns in Christian worship, life and thought have rightly been designed to supplement, limit, regulate and cohere with one another. A traditional balance in doctrines says *both* that specific divine acts and gifts in Christian life and the world are appropriated to specific 'Persons' in the Triune God, but also that the external works of the Trinity are undivided, because God is One, undivided though not undifferentiated.

We know that when we use the terms 'Father' and 'Son' of both God and creatures, we do so in radically different senses. To understand that the same sharp distinction must hold in the use of the term 'Spirit,' divine and human, is not so easy a lesson to learn, because 'Spirit' is much less specific than the other two nouns. It seems to be what God and human beings have in common. But Christians must learn that the same distinction holds in this instance also, it indeed we are talking of one and the same Triune God.

Thus, the shape of our 'spirit' as Christian – faith, hope and love; insight *into* and the turn *from* worldly wisdom, from self-enclosed, enslaving sloth and arrogance; growth in grace consequent upon that turn – is the fruit of the same indivisible God now converting and sustaining us as living, present Spirit, who as Father 'made heaven and earth', and who ordered and redeemed the world and humankind as God the Son.

The zeal of Christian life is not the fruit of a spirit separate from or superseding the full and completed redemptive work of Christ. Nor is Christian zeal the result of breaking down the distinction between the divine, Holy Spirit and human – even Christian – spirituality through some direct possession, invasion or merger of the One with the other. The Apostle Paul sharply stresses the abiding distinction between divine Wisdom and Spirit and human or worldly wisdom and spirit (1 Corinthians 2:4–16), and the sharp distinctiveness in the moral consequence of the gift to us of the Spirit of God which is identical with the mind of Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is not fanatical religious self-assertion but the reversal and transformation of all previous dispositions and outlooks into those of faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13). Furthermore, he exalts those gifts of the Spirit that convert what is ordinary and humane in all of us over those that are extraordinary and confined to some of us (1 Corinthians 14:1–19; Galatians 5:22ff.)

But we must also not forget the other side of the coin: the indivisibility of the ‘external works of the Trinity’ (and therefore the sharp distinction between divine Spirit and human spirit) notwithstanding, the Spirit is ‘very and eternal God’ as *Spirit*, not as Father or Son. Thus He has the special ‘appropriation’ of being God’s living and sustaining Presence to His people as they make their way through the world in living testimony to God’s grace and goodness. The association of the words ‘god’ and ‘spirit’ goes back not only to the New Testament but also the Old Testament, the intertestamental period and, more generally, the Hellenistic world. ‘God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24). And clearly the Spirit is both spontaneous, presently living freedom Himself and moves us also in the same way; He is God as our Life and Liberty (John 3:8; 6:63; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 2 Corinthians 3:17). The simple but important point to be made, then, is that the Christian life – faith, hope and love; the transformation of the ordinary, mundane and humane; the turn from self-enclosedness toward God and neighbor – is not an inhibiting, externally or internally imposed self-discipline; instead, it is identical with, indeed it is the gift of liberty in and by God the Spirit.

Most of us know what this means in the Christian life of interpersonal relations. In all their many varieties, there is nonetheless a similarity about the ways Christian people are disposed toward others, Christians and non-Christians alike; there is a quiet and nonoppressive dedication to the good of other human beings for their own sake under God. But the more orthodox, Trinitarian Christian communions have not often faced up to the fact that liberty in the Spirit also has a communal shape, both within the church and also in the Christian community’s work in the world. The Christian community is a community because (and to the extent that) it is bonded by the liberating Spirit.

The cutting edge of that assertion is that the Christian community (the church militant) has been put here on earth not for self-nurture or nourishment but to exercise the painful, glorious work of reconciliation across the terrifying barriers erected all across our communal existences in this world. To be the community bonded by the liberating Spirit is first of all to embody and exhibit the Spirit in its own joint life and not only in its ecclesiastical order; but secondly and fully as significantly, it is to be a community which lives in and works with the faith that God is the God of but also beyond all nations, creeds, races, classes and interest groups. It is to live in the hope that Christians are freed to be active in the often apparently (but not truly) hopeless task of reconciliation across these barriers. This is the office of the members of this community even though it may well go against their ingrained disposition because they – like all people – are themselves members of particular groups with particular interests. But to be lifted beyond such partiality to a far, far wider compassion for all (including one's enemies) and especially those who have never met with justice, is the liberating work of that Spirit who mysteriously, invisibly, hastens us all toward the glory of His salvation – despite the appearances on all sides.

To a natural or rather secular understanding, and even to some Christian minds, it seems at best odd, at worst utterly incongruous to put together a highly technical, theological formula such as Article Five with a plea for patient labor toward mutual human understanding. But in the logic of the Christian faith nothing is more naturally congruent and coherent than saying 'do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8) and saying 'The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory, with the Father and the Son, very and eternal God.'