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DOCTRINE FOR TODAY

SERIES: THE ARMY'S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

We believe that there is only one God, who is infinitely perfect, the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of all things, and who is the only proper object of religious worship.

ONE GOD

HUMANS are incurably religious! Despite appearances to the contrary, people today are just as religious as preceding generations. Philip Jenkins, columnist for *The Christian Century*, notes with some insight that from a global perspective it is the predominantly secular humanist Western cultures that are the anomaly; the rest of the world holds religious belief as normative. Even to say, 'I don't believe in God,' by very definition becomes a belief statement. Similarly, to say, 'I don't believe in theory' immediately becomes a theory.

This is not a light issue. What comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us. Consequently no people are likely to rise above their religion and image of God. If we have a vulgar god we are attracted to vulgarity. If we have a violent god, we tend towards violence ourselves. If we have a loving God, we are drawn to love. Our thoughts may be low

or lofty, but whatever they are we are becoming made in the image of that thought. We move towards that image.

Judeo monotheism – resolute belief in only one God – not only stood in remarkable contrast to the unapologetically polytheistic surrounding cultures of the day, it can be said to have impacted our world like no other religious assertion. It is a defining statement. Jehovah is unwavering in this matter, as much of the Old Testament records. He cannot abide shared devotion and belief with any other entity. He instinctively recoils from any whiff of idolatry; his infinite perfection simply cannot coexist with another. He truly is mutually exclusive. The Decalogue states unequivocally, 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:3) and the *Shema* reinforces, 'Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4).

CREATOR

We can affirm with certainty that Jehovah is a creative God. We can make a table from wood, but for all our sophistication we cannot make wood. God created the world from nothing – *ex nihilo*. He is the first cause. Scientists increasingly refer to the universe being 'a product of design'. Both astronomers who look outward to the cosmos and molecular scientists who look inward reference what can only be concluded as a divine order.

So supremely paramount is this attribute that the very opening sentence in Scripture calmly states: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1).

This unequalled creative force is intrinsically linked to the omnipotence of God – his all-powerful nature. A.W. Tozer noted: 'God the self-existent Creator is the source of all the power there is, and since a source must be at least equal to anything that emanates from it, God is of necessity equal to all the power there is, and this is to say again that he is omnipotent.'

Given our opening belief that people will move towards the attribute of their God, we will naturally want to be characterised as creative ourselves. Thus, Salvation Army ministry is essentially creative and life-affirming. We see those graces in some of the most difficult and desperate terrains; the orphaned child beams again in one of our homes and the recovering alcoholic rediscovers his piano skills. Similarly, when our officership ceases to become creative, it is a dreadfully dull affair; we have strayed from an original mandate.

PRESERVER

Life is not only created by God but is held together and sustained by him. Were God to withdraw from this world all life would cease completely. Paul personalises this in Christ, 'He is before all things,

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:
WHAT COMES TO YOUR MIND WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT GOD – AND WHY?
WHAT MAKES HUMANS RELIGIOUS?
WHY DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD?
IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU SEE GOD'S CREATIVE HAND TODAY?

“We can affirm with certainty that Jehovah is a creative God. We can make a table from wood, but for all our sophistication we cannot make wood ...”

and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17).

God is vitally interested in our welfare, even the intimate details of our lives, because he is a personal and living God. We believe he is not a god who made the world like a clock only to withdraw and leave it spinning alone (deism), rather God not only created all we know, and more, but also continually sustains its operation (theism).

Social scientists estimate that there are more than enough resources in our world for all people to be adequately sheltered and fed. The resources expended on diets and pets alone could feed the hungry of the world. In other words, God's sustaining provisions require the cooperation of humankind.

The Salvation Army seeks to preserve life. We counter atrophy and decay, we rebuild countless broken walls and we dig wells to provide water. Just as salt functions as a natural preservative, we seek to incarnate 'the salt of the world', vigorously present amidst blight and breakdown. By serving suffering humanity, we dare to embody the preserving nature of God.

GOVERNOR

Many people struggle with the idea of God as Governor. The original problem of pride means that we want to govern our own lives. Very often it is the existence of evil in our world that evokes perplexity, and causes a rejection of God. How can a loving God, whose creation he described as 'very good' contain

such suffering, sin and injustice? Every one of us has asked the question, 'Why?'

Our *Handbook of Doctrine* helpfully notes: 'Just as all spiritual powers, even those opposed to God, owe their existence to him, so also God is ultimately Governor of all rulers and authorities, even though for the present they may appear to be operating outside the boundaries of his control' (p 32).

Another perspective is to question how human freedom and the sovereignty of God exist together. Chuck Colson answers this with an illustration. An ocean liner departs from New York to London. Its destination is set. On board, however, chains do *not* bind the passengers. They are free to move at will and can eat, sleep and play when they want. They are free. All the time the liner is moving towards its destiny, steadily travelling its course. Freedom and sovereignty are both present without contradiction.

Proverbs says it well: 'Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails' (19:21).

As Salvationists we seek to profoundly engage with people and community. We are militantly opposed to brokenness, sin and suffering. We proclaim the Lordship of Christ, confident that under his grace abounds to rightly govern our lives, especially in the face of injustice. Even in the midst of inexplicable natural catastrophe we are present, immediately seeking to

restore wholeness and order, to 're-govern' as it were.

ONLY PROPER OBJECT OF WORSHIP

Bob Dylan crooned: 'You're gonna have to serve somebody, well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody.' The singer-songwriter icon of counter-cultural revolution had insight that people will serve and worship somebody or something.

The wooing of our hearts is such that even well-intentioned movements and entities will contest for supremacy. And that can include our own Salvation Army. The important realisation that we serve and worship God *through* the vehicle of the Army will save eventual disillusionment and disappointment. The Church is human and divine, and it is the former that will invariably prove lacking. God, however, is 'more than enough' (Isaiah 1:11). He performs 'mighty deeds with his arm' (Luke 1:51).

PAULINE DOXOLOGY

For 11 chapters in Romans, Paul systematically and cogently outlines in precise terms the gospel of God as found in Christ. He then seems to lift his pen in astonishment and let fly a doxology that encapsulates our second doctrine. 'Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments. For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen' (11:33, 36).