



# **AN ABC of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland**

**By Reverend Christopher Wilson MA  
Moneyreagh Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church  
1<sup>st</sup> Edition - June 2011**

The views in this pamphlet are those of the author alone. This pamphlet is dedicated to the Clerk and Session, Committee and members of Moneyreagh Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, with grateful thanks for their love and encouragement.

## Welcome to this ABC!

Dear Reader,

Visitors to Moneyreagh, have often asked about Non-Subscribing Presbyterianism. The denomination offers some good material about what might be described as denominational life, as well as the opportunity for more advanced study of the faith. This little booklet, by comparison, seeks to set out in simple terms a summary of the liberal Christian faith, that is Non-Subscribing Presbyterianism.

I should also acknowledge my debt to the Reverend Cliff Reed's '*Unitarian, What's That?*', and to all my friends at Moneyreagh, whose own awkward questions have inspired me to write this little booklet.

Finally, these views are ***entirely my own***. Any errors are equally my responsibility. You will have to decide, in the best tradition of non-subscribers, whether or not you agree with the thoughts which follow!

Rev Chris Wilson, Minister  
Moneyreagh Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church  
Great Yarmouth.

## **An ABC of Non-Subscribing Presbyterianism**

**A is for Authority** - Where does authority in matters of faith lie? Traditionally, Protestants see authority as residing only in the Bible. By comparison, the hierarchical churches such as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox, see authority as residing in the historic creeds and teachings of those churches. Alternatively, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians see authority as residing ultimately in individual *Conscience*; albeit informed by *Reason, Experience, Scripture* and *Tradition*. C.R.E.ST. is an easy way to bring these sources together; but the most important and ultimate arbiter has to be your own conscience.

**B is for Belief** - Non-Subscribers reject simplistic creedal statements, not least as they represent no more than a transitional moment of understanding. What does a Non-Subscriber believe? Historically, they affirmed the religion of Jesus and not the religion about Jesus; and for many that is still a good rule of thumb.

**C is for Congregation** - Non-Subscribers believe congregations are important; but our congregations do not exist in isolation. We are a part of Presbyterian (that is, a democratic) church, and we attach much importance to this. Presbyterianism is a system of governance and not a doctrinal position. In other words, our structures are democratic, but our faith is free.

**D is for Doctrine** - Non-Subscribers are suspicious of doctrines, especially when they are used as a litmus-test of whether or not you can be called a '*Christian*'. They would point out that early Christianity existed, and indeed prospered, without the need to express faith in rigid and unchanging statements. You do not need to subscribe to any doctrinal confession of faith to become a Non-Subscriber. We would, in any case, affirm that the words and teachings of Jesus should take precedence over those of later and lesser men. We would be followers of Jesus, no more, no less.

**E is for Equality** - This may seem an odd one to include in a religious booklet, but not so. Non-Subscribers affirm the fundamental equality of all before God. Our ministry is open to all; men and women serve, from all backgrounds. We do not discriminate between people on *any* grounds that undermine God-given human diversity. Respect for *all* is key.

***F is for Faith*** - Is it possible to summarize the faith of a Non-Subscriber? It is, or would be, the religion of Jesus. But, another way of summing it up might be that we affirm: the unity of God, the primacy of love, the example of Jesus and the calling of each and all to ministry.

***G is for God*** - God is the name we give to the highest we know, the source of our being, expressed in and through beauty, love, truth, conscience, life itself; including the natural world. God is found in the pattern and purpose unfolding around and within us, and particularly in and through the life of Jesus; whom we accept as Lord, and Master, our Model and Exemplar.

***H is for Heaven and Hell*** - Non-Subscribers are likely to hold different views on Heaven. We can never hold a settled view on that which, by definition, lies beyond human comprehension. However, we would affirm that the Kingdom of God, heralded by Jesus, can be found within loving communities in the here-and-now; and that we should focus on life-before-death, rather than on any life after. It is how we live now that matters; the rest is in the hands of God. As for Hell, many would reject it entirely as a medieval concept, but as a state of mind for those lonely or ill, it can still have meaning.

***I is for Independent thought*** - Non-Subscribers encourage independent thought and study, albeit within the context of a loving and liberal Church community. This is no easy option. To take responsibility for your own spiritual growth is hard-work and challenging. Yet we know of no better way to seek - and to win a truth that *really* transforms.

***J is for Jesus*** - Non-Subscribers believe Jesus to be the Son of God. In a real and profound sense, the '*Messiah*', the anointed or chosen of God, whose example shows the way for us all to follow. Sharing in his *humanity* we are challenged by his ministry of love-to-the-uttermost. Jesus is also the new example, the Son of Man.

***K is for the Kingdom*** - Jesus preached the arrival of the Kingdom of God, the reality and the possibility of the loving, journeying and worshipping community. Non-Subscribers believe, as did Jesus, that such a community can be realized in the here-and-now. The Kingdom is within you.

**L is for Love** - Jesus teaches us in the Great Commandment to love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself. Non-Subscribers take this responsibility seriously. To love God and neighbour is the highest and best that we can do. We witness to our faith in and through our ability to love one another; especially those who we find hard to love. Jesus showed us the way. Once more, we are challenged by his example.

**M is for Ministry** - This is something we should all be doing! Ministry can best be described as '*Service to God, and service to humanity*'. How much we all serve is the best example of the non-subscribing faith in action. Deeds not creeds defines the *Christian*. See entry **O is for Orthopraxy**.

**N is for Non-conformism** - Non-Subscribers are also non-conformists. Historically, we came from that part of the Presbyterian family which refused to 'subscribe'; that is, sign-up to the Westminster Confession of Faith. We believed then, and believe now that the Bible is our rule of faith. Although, we would add that scripture should be interpreted in a reasonable and rational way, and we give great emphasis to the rights of individual conscience in interpreting the same.

**O is for Orthopraxy** - This means '*right living*' as opposed orthodoxy which means '*right thinking*'. Non-Subscribers affirms that how we live, how we love and how we act, is so much more important than the words we say. By their fruits you shall know them. Loving acts and not uniformity in doctrine is still key. See entry **M is for Ministry**.

**P is for Prayer** - Non-Subscribers affirm the value of prayer. Prayers can take different forms. They can be prayers of thanksgiving or inter-cessionary prayers. The Prayer of Jesus (The Lord's Prayer), remains a simple, perfect, pattern prayer that we still use - maintaining through its use, our link to the broader *Christian* family. Many believe that Prayer can directly change things. Others affirm that Prayer changes people and that people change things.

**Q is for Questions** - Non-Subscribers welcome questions. We know that faith has nothing to fear from questions, and that we can all learn and grow as a result. Our faith has nothing to fear from honest questions, and frank answers. Non-Subscribers also accept that sometimes: '*we don't know*' is the best answer we can give.

We do not claim to have all the answers, we will instead try to journey and learn some of them together.

***R is for Reason*** - Non-Subscribers affirm with the wider liberal protestant family the importance of '*Freedom, Reason and Tolerance*' in matters of faith. However, these values are expressed best within a Church community, less the liberty they offer becomes license. Non-Subscribers affirm that liberal Christianity and Presbyterian governance, provides the best context for the exercise of such values.

***S is for Scripture*** - Non-Subscribers view the Bible as their '*foundation document*'; as the central text which defines the faith community. We remain in an engaged and critical relationship with the Bible, seeing it as *the place* where God's truth may still be discerned- but not as a simplistic source of authority. *Canonicity*, maintaining that relationship with the Bible, is a key principle for Non-Subscribers See entry ***A is for Authority***.

***T is for Tradition*** - Non-Subscribers are conscious of the historic tradition to which we are heirs. Our tradition seeks to continue an interpretation of Christianity which reaches back through Henry Montgomery through the centuries through early Presbyterians, right back to those earliest, gentle and inclusive first-generation disciples of Jesus. To maintain a thoughtful, tolerant and liberal Christianity, would be an object with which many Non-Subscribers would be in sympathy.

***U is for Unitarian*** - Sometimes Non-Subscribers are called Unitarians. Unitarian Christians are those who stress the unity of God, agreeing with Jesus, when he quotes the '*Shema*', that the LORD your God is One. Jesus, for those Non-Subscribers (I'd be one of them!) may be understood as subordinate to God (but one in will and purpose), or a *mode* of God, but not (as the Doctrine of the Trinity suggests) a third 'person'; co-equal and co-eternal. The Holy Spirit for those Non-Subscribers is seen as God's love at work in the world and not a separate and distinct personality of the Divine.

But it would be quite wrong to say that the denomination is Unitarian. More accurately, it is 'Non-Creedal'. That means that Non-Subscribers can just as easily be, and often are, Trinitarian in their understanding of the relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The key thing is tolerance. What matters is that you worship God in sincerity and in accordance with your own

conscience. Non-Subscribers seek a church where all who follow Christ can worship together.

***V is for Visiting*** - Non-Subscribers take our pastoral responsibilities seriously. Anyone can request a visit from the Minister in times of need. Equally, we would hope that our churches become models of loving communities, where we all look out for the welfare of each other. Non-Subscribing Ministers like to call on and pray with their congregants.

***W is for Worship*** - Non-Subscribing worship tends to be of a traditional character. Four hymns, two readings (with both usually being Biblical), an Address (Sermon), Prayers and the Lord's Prayer could all be expected within a Non-Subscribing Service. Communion or Lord's Supper services are also offered by our churches twice per year, and then as a simple act of commemorating the sacrificial love of Jesus, and one of rededication of Christian community.

***X is for Exasperation*** - OK I know it doesn't begin with 'X'! Still, Non-Subscribers recognise that bad times and frustrations are as much a part of life as are the good time. Our Church would be there for all times, good and bad. None of us can be happy all of the time; and the Non-Subscribing faith understands that.

***Y is for Yeshua*** - 'Yeshua' is the Hebrew version of the Greek word 'Jesus'. Sometimes, Non-Subscribers may talk of 'Yeshua' rather than of Jesus, to stress his Jewish identity. We all need to remember that Jesus saw himself as a faithful Jew.

***Z is for Zacchaeus*** - he was the tax collector visited by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. As per the story, Non-Subscribers also believe that all, *everyone*, can share in God's Kingdom.

Do Justice  
Love Kindness  
Walk Humbly With Your God.  
Micah 6:8