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THE 39 ARTICLES

A FAITH FOR TODAY (3) ARTICLES 9, 10, 11 AND 18: SIN AND SALVATION

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There is other teaching in the Articles on sin and salvation, but these four Articles give a gloriously clear introduction to the biblical teaching, contrasting it with most of the misunderstandings and heresies of the sixteenth century and today.

Man's threefold problem

Put simply, man's problem consists of actual sin, original sin and the power of sin. Many heresies deny one or more of these aspects of the problem and the solution they offer is therefore inadequate. We need, with the Articles, to face up to what Scripture teaches.

Actual sin

Since sin is falling short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), we are all guilty. Even the 'good' person is only good by human standards but it is by God's standards that we are judged. The idea that doing our best will ensure we are safe at the judgment and the notion that God will weigh our good against our evil in the scales, are wrong and dangerous heresies. They are wrong because the standard required is perfect holiness and they are dangerous because they allow or encourage complacency instead of urging on people the need to be saved. Thus Article 11 denies that our good works or deservings can have any effect at all on our salvation, and Article 18 makes clear that doing our best is not enough (and rightly condemns those who teach that it is). Sin is sin and must be dealt with. We cannot deal with sin by pretending it is not there, or by hiding it away, or by balancing it out with good. It is read and it offends our holy God.

Original sin

But the problem is actually much deeper than actual sin. Original sin, a much misunderstood concept, is a very important Biblical truth which we must understand and take into account.

Augustine of Hippo (so called to distinguish him from Augustine of Canterbury) lived in North Africa around the year 400. Undoubtedly the greatest theologian since Paul (and the only post-Biblical one whose teachings we can really trust until the Reformation a thousand years later), he clarified the Biblical teaching on original sin. Pointing to Romans 5:12, he showed that Adam's sin affects us all: not just by example, or by spoiling the world for us but because we are united to Adam in a relationship which means we share his guilt and his sinfulness. Original sin is a predisposition or tendency to sin, which we have all inherited from Adam. Even if we never commit an actual sin, still we are guilty because of our sinfulness. Put this way, the doctrine explains many otherwise difficult Bible passages (such as Genesis 8:21, Psalm 51:5, Matthew 7:11, Galatians 5:16-17).

Pelagianism (named after the British teacher and bishop's son Pelagius who also lived sixteen hundred years ago) is often called the English heresy; it is part of our national way of thinking. Pelagius taught that we are born without any predisposition to sin, free to choose good or evil; sin is caused by bad example or education. This denies original sin as a problem distinct from actual sin. Pelagianism was condemned by the popes and church councils of the early fifth century, and totally demolished by the teaching of Augustine of Hippo.

In the Middle Ages the Roman church developed the idea that original sin was an absence of righteousness or grace, not an evil in itself. Within each of us is a tiny spark of goodness which can be fanned into flame by a good example from outside, a good will from within, or particularly God's grace received through the sacraments. In this thinking, which is typical of Romanism and much Protestantism today, original sin ceases to be a problem, at least for the baptised.

But the sixteenth century Reformers went back to the teaching of Paul and Augustine, showing the errors and dangers of both Pelagius and Rome. Article 9 is vitally important, reminding us that we are, by our human nature, sinful - predisposed to sin. This human nature (often called 'the flesh' in older Bible versions) renders us subject to God's judgment. So even if we could live a life free from actual sin, we would be far from sinless and in no way able to avoid eternal condemnation. In practice, of course, we cannot avoid actual sin: both because we give in to external temptation and because our inner nature leads us astray.

The power of sin

I cannot count the number of times I have heard people talking about 'free will' as something we all have. When we are dealing with salvation from sin, free will makes no sense at all, as Article 10 points out. Who is free to go against his or her own nature? I may be free to put a comma or a full stop after this word, and to choose whether or not to commit a particular act of sin but I am not free (that is, able) to save myself by my own good deeds. Because of original sin and its allied curse original guilt, nothing I do can be wholly good because the heart or will from which such acts proceed is not wholly good; it is forever tainted by sin. To say that we are free to choose good or evil is true enough if we are just talking about actual sin but when original sin is taken into account we are not free at all: we are trapped by sin, enslaved to it and at its mercy.

God's complete solution

If the Articles are thorough in their treatment of sin, they are equally so in their doctrine of salvation. Since man's problem is so all-pervading, the answer to it must be comprehensive. Indeed it is when we see the Scripture teaching, which is of full salvation. The Articles spell this out.

Dealing fully with sin

The doctrine of justification (Article 11) teaches that God has dealt with sin, punishing Christ for it on the cross of Calvary. We do not need to earn God's favour, because Christ has done so. We do not need to atone for our misdeeds, because Christ has done so. We do not need to be good to achieve salvation, because God accepts Christ's perfection instead. This is just as well, when we remember that we cannot do those things anyway. But so often we try, leading ourselves either into danger, if we kid ourselves that we are safe, or into despair, if we see the truth that we are not safe. Justification is a wholesome and comforting doctrine, because it faces the fact that I can do nothing to save myself and tells me that Christ has done all that is necessary!

Dealing fully with us

Not only has God dealt with my sin by justification. He has also dealt with me and continues to do so. He prepares us, accepts us and changes us. In Article 10 we read that 'the grace of God in Christ goes before us so that we may have a good will.' Even my first vague longings after God, my early gropings towards faith, are not my doing but the results of his work in me. The doctrine of justification teaches that for Christ's sake God accepts me as righteous and perfect. Article 10 goes on to describe the state of the redeemed Christian: now saved and forgiven but still depending on God to enable him to live a good life and grow in holiness (not that he needs to for salvation but now he wants to please his Lord).

This is important, not least because of the fact that even as a Christian I am afflicted by original sin, the tendency (shared with and inherited from Adam) to go astray and disobey God. Roman Catholicism teaches that baptism washes away original sin and many Protestants believe that re-birth or becoming a Christian somehow removes it. Not so. Article 9 is quite right to insist that 'this infection within man's nature persists even within those who are regenerate'. How else do I explain my inner struggle for righteousness? How else do we explain Paul's struggles so vividly depicted in Romans 7 and 8? The Bible truth is that in regeneration (new birth) original guilt is removed but sin remains, tormenting me but by God's grace driving me to Christ for continual cleansing and painful growth in holiness. But even here, it is Christ who is in control of my life - thank God!

Dealing fully with fallenness

Article 18 is a cause of offence to some. They see Bible-believing Christians as intolerant when we insist that Christ is the only Saviour and that Moslems, Jews, Buddhists and good people must all turn to Christ to have any hope of salvation. I am not ashamed of insisting on that, partly because it is true and Scripture insists on it, partly because there is no other saviour or system which actually deals with sin in all its depth. Christ's death is sufficient, it actually copes with my actual sin, my original sin and the power of sin. I know of no other religion which deals adequately with any one of these, let alone all three.

We do not call on non-Christians to accept Christ as Saviour because we want to undermine their culture, or denigrate their history, or see them as conversion fodder. We do so because there is no other hope for any of us except beneath the cross of Christ; and there we find not just hope but certainty - salvation that is full and free.