

Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Autumn 2004 No 94

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THE WAY TO HEAVEN

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Who will go to heaven and how? These are important questions. Indeed, although we rarely acknowledge it, they are the most important questions that face us in this life. Yet there is great confusion on the answers not least in the churches.

One particular area of controversy is what we believe as Christians about the fate of those who hold sincerely and steadfastly to other religious views. Many who accept the teaching of Jesus that He alone is the way of salvation do not want to close the door to heaven to sincere believers of other faiths. Such a view, which is really quite widespread, was reported by the national newspapers to have been articulated by Archbishop Rowan Williams.

The Daily Telegraph gave the following report of the Archbishop's comments at the Greenbelt festival:

Dr Williams said that neither he nor any Christian could control access to heaven. "It is possible for God's spirit to cross boundaries," he said. "I say this as someone who is quite happy to say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except by Jesus. But how God leads people through Jesus to heaven, that can be quite varied, I think."

In a world of hatred and division such a sentiment can seem very laudable, it allows us to believe what we believe without saying that others are wrong. But is it true? In the end this is not a matter of opinion; either people will be, or they will not be, in heaven.

The obvious thing to do is to find out not what an Archbishop has to say on the subject but what God has said in His Word, the Bible. The problem with this approach is that when we follow it criticisms immediately begin that we are misrepresenting the Bible or failing to read it in the context of its time or in the light of our modern understandings of the world and ourselves.

Therefore, a different approach will be taken here. The doctrine, or teaching, of the Church of England is defined in the law of the land and in Canon law. This doctrine is grounded in Holy Scripture etc, but it is to be found 'in particular in the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal' (Canon A5 / Worship & Doctrine Measure 1974). The intention of this article is to ask what does the Church of England believe about how you can go to heaven and to do so by looking at what the 39 Articles teach on this subject? It is my conviction, as it was the conviction of those who drew up our Articles, that this is exactly the same answer as is given by Holy Scripture but it is more concisely and systematically presented.

The Son of God

Our articles begin with God, asserting that God is Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Article 1) and that the Word, the Son of God, was made man (Article 2). The obvious question is why was the Son made man and Article 2 provides an initial answer to this: *to reconcile His Father to us and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men.*

Right from the start therefore the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) is in view, because it is inseparable from the doctrine of Christ (Christology). Christ came to reconcile His Father to us, to be our sacrifice and to deal with our sin and guilt.

How can we know?

Many works of systematic theology logically begin by asking the question ‘how can we know?’ Equally logically our Articles begin with the person and nature of God but they soon turn to the question of how we can know about why Jesus came and how we can be saved. Article 6 famously states what true Christians have always believed - that we can only know about these things because God

has told us about them and what He has told us is recorded for us in the Bible. Specifically therefore, *Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation.*

The Article goes on to explain that the only things we or any person need believe about salvation are those things which the Bible itself teaches or which can be clearly proved from the Bible. Therefore, with regards to salvation Scripture provides sufficient and complete knowledge. If someone claims something that the Bible does not teach or which cannot be proved from the Bible, then they are wrong.

Article 7 follows up the theme of salvation in the Bible. It asserts that in both the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind through Christ. But, more than this, the article states that Christ is *the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man* (cf. 1 Tim 2.5). Here is the heart of the uniqueness of Christ in salvation. There can be no other saviour because salvation requires that the mediator be both God and Man and yet there is no other who fulfils this requirement.

To be fair, many are not questioning this point. In the quotation from Rowan Williams given earlier Jesus’ famous words from John 14 were alluded to: *“I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”* He suggests that it may be possible for those of other faiths to go to heaven through Jesus. We will return to this.

Why do we need saving?

We have seen that the Son of God was made man for our salvation, but why? The main reason for our need of a saviour is set out in Article 9, which speaks about original or birth-sin. This is a teaching that is often misunderstood and misrepresented. Our articles affirm that every person born into this world deserves God’s wrath. It is not simply a matter that we sin against God, though we clearly do, but that when Adam sinned against God, the whole human race fell. Therefore, our very nature is corrupted. Part of the reason we struggle with this idea is that we have a very individualistic understanding of what it is to be human. But the Bible has a much deeper view. A man and woman in marriage become one flesh and a Christian believer is united to Christ. These are not mere words, they describe a deep spiritual reality and there is a connectedness to the human race so that when our first father, Adam, rebelled we were caught up in that rebellion. As a consequence we are under the wrath of God, which is the right and proper response of a holy God to sin and rebellion.

What can we do?

What can we do about our plight? The shocking answer is that we can do nothing. Article 10 explains that we cannot turn and prepare ourselves by our natural strength and good works, to faith and calling on God. What is more, we do not have the power to do good works that are pleasant and acceptable to God, unless the grace of God by the Lord Jesus Christ goes before us. Our Articles teach, as the Scriptures teach, that left to ourselves there is nothing we can do to gain salvation.

Justification

Does this mean there is no escape? Of course not because at the very beginning our articles assert

that the Son of God was made man for our salvation. Article 31 explains this further.

The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is none other satisfaction for sin, but that alone.

Redemption has to do with being bought back, set free from slavery to sin. Propitiation means, as Article 2 says, that Christ came to reconcile His Father to us. God is a holy God, His honour is offended by the rebellion of His creatures and wrath is the just response. But God's justice is satisfied through the saving death of Christ.

All this brings us to the same point, that we can only be saved because Christ came into the world, and He is the only saviour - there is no other satisfaction for sin. But this does not solve our problem, indeed it opens up the possibility that all may be saved because, as Article 31 asserts, Christ's offering was sufficient *'for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual'*.

Application

For the particular issue at hand, the fundamental question is how the saving work of Christ applies to a particular individual. (To use the jargon - the application of the work of redemption). How do the benefits of his death become ours? The answer is to be found in Article 11: *We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not of our own works or deservings.* Salvation is not automatic, nor because of our merit or our works, or because we deserve to be saved, rather we are saved by faith in Christ. What is more, this is the only way. Jesus said *"he who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him"* (John 3:36)

What light does this shed on the commonly held view with which we began: *"I am quite happy to say that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except by Jesus. But how God leads people through Jesus to heaven, that can be quite varied, I think."* The Church of England teaches, as God teaches in His Word the Bible, that this is wrong. There is only one way by which God leads people through Jesus to heaven - *by faith*. The fact that faith is the key to how Jesus saves ought to be obvious from Scripture not least in the gospel of John where John asserts that the whole purpose of the book is to convince people to believe in Christ so that they might have life in His name (John 20.31). Remember too that the context of Jesus' words about being the way, the truth and the life were to do with believing (trusting) in God (Jn14.1), believing that Jesus is in the Father and the Father in Him (v10), believing Him (v12) and believing in Him (v12). Faith is not an optional extra.

It is important to recognise that this is not a matter of academic debate or curiosity, it concerns eternal life and death. It is a terrible thing to deceive people with regards the way of salvation. Article 18 sets out the stark reality: *they are to be held accursed that presume to say that every man shall be saved by his law or sect which he professes. For holy Scripture holds out to us only the Name of Jesus Christ by which men may be saved.* (cf Gal 1.9)

But, they are good people.

Some will no doubt argue that this is unduly harsh. We see some people who live very good and noble lives, who shine by any standard. How can we possibly say that they will not go to heaven? We saw earlier that the problem of the fall and our own sin is too deep for us. Our work, our merit counts for nothing. Moreover, Article 13 asserts *Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God.* (cf. Hebrews 11.6).

The Big Picture.

The whole scope of salvation is set out in Article 17 (see Cross†Way 88 Spring 2003).

In the end salvation depends entirely upon God and upon His *secret counsels*.

He has *chosen in Christ* those who he will bring by *Christ to everlasting salvation*.

This is His sovereign and secret work, yet in His time we see the outworking of it.

- Those whom God has chosen will be *called ... by His Spirit*.
- Through *grace* they will *obey the calling*.
- They are *justified freely*.
- They are *made sons of God by adoption*.
- They are *made like the image* of Christ.
- *They walk ... in good works* (remembering that real living faith will always result in good works, so that faith without works is dead).
- In the fullness of time by God's mercy they come to eternal joy.

This is what the Church of England holds. It ought to be what all its ministers teach. It is neither vague nor uncertain. There is only one mediator - Christ - and there is also only one means of salvation – faith in Christ.