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OF OBTAINING ETERNAL SALVATION

By David Phillips

Our title is taken from Article 18 of the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion which remain the doctrinal standard of the Church of England. The full English title is “Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the name of Christ”. This article does not stand alone, there is a clear flow and logic to the articles and the aim here is to show how they build up to the assertion that Christ is the only way of salvation.

We begin in article 2 with the fact of who Jesus is; *the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father*. Many fall at this first hurdle because they refuse to accept that God has come in the flesh and therefore by denying the divinity of Christ they deny that which makes Him truly unique.

But Article 2 also alludes to the fact, which the Articles pick up later, that Christ came in the flesh for a purpose, namely: *to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men*. Again, this fact, that Christ came to save, is of fundamental importance.

The Articles thus begin with the doctrine of God and of Christ. This is logical but many systematic theologies begin instead with the doctrine of revelation, which is also logical, since, in order to consider what we know about God, we must also consider how we know what we know. This question is picked up in Article 6 on Scripture, but rather than being a general statement about Scripture (as for example we find in the Homily on Scripture) the Article focuses on the question of salvation.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

Part of the exclusive claims of the Christian faith is not simply that Christ is the only way of salvation but that the Bible sets out for us the way of Salvation and with such completeness that no other revelation is necessary and any teaching on salvation which does not accord with Scripture is of necessity false. This again is important because sometimes people will claim that it is possible to be saved in some way that Scripture does not teach. Usually they resort to arguing that Scripture is silent or that a particular verse hints at some other way. Article 6 will not allow such arguments, if it is not set out in Scripture and cannot be proved from Scripture (which such views cannot) then it cannot be true.

The Plight of Man

The articles turn next to the plight of man. This also is logical since we cannot understand why Christ is the only means of salvation if we do not understand what he saves us from. Some of those who rejected the uniqueness of Christ for salvation do so because they do not believe that there is any need to be saved.

Article 9 addresses the fact of original or birth-sin. All human beings are the offspring of Adam and have a corrupt nature. Therefore, *‘man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.’* Every person born into this world deserves God’s wrath and damnation, there is not exception, it does not matter

where you were born or the circumstances of your birth, all are offspring of Adam and under wrath.

The greatest barrier to accepting the gospel is human pride. We do not believe that we are as bad as God says we are and we believe that God ought to be impressed by how good we are. It is common therefore to believe that we can make ourselves acceptable to God by what we do and what we do not do. But this also is a grave error and Article 10 spells out why. No one can *turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God*. Although the natural man thinks his good works are pleasing to God this is not so – *we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing (=going before) us*.

Here is our human plight – we are all under wrath and unable to save ourselves – we need a saviour and Article 11 explains the solution to our predicament.

We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings; Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only is a most wholesome Doctrine.

This is the glory of the gospel but it is not uncommon to find people, even in evangelical churches, claiming that people can be saved through Christ, even though they do not know Him. But this article tells us that we are justified only by faith. How can someone have faith in Christ if they do not know Christ, if they have not turned to Christ, if they have not trusted in Christ?

Articles 12 and 13 return to good works which are not the means of our justification but rather they are the *fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification*. Good works cannot *put away our sins* (Article 12). They are pleasing to God because they spring from faith, whereas good works done before justification *are not pleasant to God*, (Article 13).

Thus far the Articles have set out clearly and unequivocally the great truths of our salvation. Articles 14-16 pick up various themes along the way, but in articles 17 and 18 two great conclusions are drawn which are Scriptural, logical, and to a degree uncomfortable because they offend our human pride and place all the glory with God.

Article 17 deals with predestination. For the purpose of this article it is not necessary to dwell long on this except to say that Christ is the only way of salvation because of the sovereign grace of God in election. God has decreed *those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation*. Some people struggle with the idea of Christ being the only way because it seems unfair to them that those who have not heard the gospel should not have the opportunity to repent and believe. But the only possible unfairness is that we who deserve wrath should be shown grace and mercy and I for one would not wish to stand before the judgment seat and argue that God was unjust to show me mercy. Article 17 admits that this can be a dangerous doctrine if misunderstood and misused, but the danger of abuse does not make the doctrine untrue.

The conclusion

Finally then we come to Article 18, which draws together the strings of the argument. It is the only place in the articles which explicitly condemns those who reject its truth. The Latin text of the Article has the word *anathematizandi*. In English the article reads:
They also are to be had accursed that presume to say, That every man shall be saved by the Law or Sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his life according to that Law, and the light of Nature. For holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved.

Some have sought to soften the article by claiming that it is aimed specifically at some unknown

erroneous view held by some unknown group at the time the article was written (even the late W.H. Griffith-Thomas tends to this view in his *Principles of Theology* and he was also clearly uncomfortable with the Article on predestination). But, we have seen that this article does not stand alone, it is part of a full presentation of doctrine of salvation.

Scripture reveals all we need in order to be saved. What it reveals is that all the children of Adam (that is the whole of mankind) are under wrath and that good works are utterly powerless to save. We can be justified only through faith in Christ and God is utterly sovereign in salvation calling *those whom he hath chosen in Christ*. The conclusion is inescapable, it is not possible to be saved by any other means, and the conclusion is not only logical, but entirely Biblical *for holy Scripture doth set out unto us only the Name of Jesus Christ, whereby men must be saved*.

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