

## Salvation in the Thirty-Nine Articles

JOHN RODGERS, JR.\*

*This article is a concise statement of salvation as found in the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Bible. After a statement as to the inherent and ecumenical significance of the theme, the term “salvation” is defined and the central events of salvation in the Old and New Testaments are indicated. The thesis is advanced that Articles 9 and 10 set forth the human need for which divine salvation is needed, and Articles 11 and 12 set forth God’s provision of deliverance. Articles 9 and 10 are then cited and expounded, followed by textual support from Scripture. After that Articles 11 and 12 are treated similarly, with textual support following. The article ends with a brief conclusion.*

“Salvation” is a biblical word and theme. Many if not most Christians would say that God’s salvation of fallen humanity and the world is the central theme of Scripture. Since the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion claim to be biblical, it is important to determine both what the Articles teach about salvation and whether what they teach is, in fact, biblical. This is all the more important because it was Reformation arguments about the nature of salvation and its application to fallen sinners that set, and to some degree continue to set, Anglicans and Roman Catholics at odds with one another theologically.

In Scripture, “salvation” refers to a rescue or deliverance by God of an individual, a group, or humanity as a whole from a predicament that the one rescued could not achieve on his or her own. This deliverance by God could be small or great and done through a person, or

---

\* John Rodgers, Jr., is a graduate of the Virginia Theological Seminary and the University of Basel, Switzerland. He has served in several parishes, and was a founding faculty member and subsequent Dean and President of the Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. He has recently published a commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles, *Essential Truths for Christians: A Commentary on the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles and an Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Classical Anglican Press, 2011). He is a retired bishop of the Anglican Mission in the Americas and an assisting bishop in the Anglican Diocese of Pittsburgh.

group, or thing, or it could be miraculous, done by the direct working of the mighty hand of God or by God working through some combination of such agents.

In the Old Testament the central act and chief model of salvation is God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. In the New Testament the central act of salvation is the deliverance of sinners through the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In both cases the beginning point is a predicament beyond self-salvation, a bondage or slavery from which the group or individual could not rescue itself. In both cases salvation leads to the beginning of a proper relationship with God in which true freedom and godly life are to be found. The Old Testament provides the outline and pattern for salvation, and the New Testament builds upon it and deepens the predicament to a universal condition of the bondage and guilt of sin, leading to the final and eternal rescue that begins in the present and never ends. Thus the New Testament provides the fulfillment of the salvation of which the Old Testament was a "type" and preparation. Together they are part of the one biblical story of God's salvation in Christ that ends in a new heaven and new earth in which only joy and righteousness dwell.

The question before us is the following: How do the Thirty-Nine Articles understand God's salvation of the fallen world and humanity, and is this understanding faithful to the biblical account of the same?

This writer would like to propose that the center of the Articles, in the light of which all of the Articles were written and significantly influenced, is to be found in the four Articles 9, 10, 11, and 12. Here is the heart of the teaching of the Articles on salvation and the crux of the original Anglican conflict with Rome, which was the dominant context in which the Articles were written. Articles 9 and 10 set forth the bondage or human predicament from which human beings need to be rescued. Article 11, drawing upon Articles 2 and 4, sets forth the objective ground of salvation that leads to justification when received in faith. And Article 12, while assuming the outpouring of the Spirit hinted at in Articles 5 and 8 and required by the depth of the predicament set forth in Article 10, sets forth the consequent new life in Christ, or sanctification, that rests on justification as its foundation.

Let us take a closer look at Articles 9 and 10 to get a clear picture of what the Articles teach concerning the human predicament or bondage from which we human beings need to be delivered.

## ARTICLE 9

*Of Original or Birth-Sin*

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam, (as the Pelagians do vainly talk;) but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby 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. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated; whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek, *phronema sarkos*, (which some do expound the wisdom, some sensuality, some the affection, some the desire, of the flesh), is not subject to the Law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe and are baptized; yet the Apostle doth confess, that concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin.

## ARTICLE 10

*Of Free Will*

The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.

Here is what Articles 9 and 10 state concerning original sin or birth-sin and its consequent bondage:

1. The title of Article 9 refers to sin as a condition that begins shortly after the origin of humanity and is, therefore, present at the birth of every human being. We can put it differently, and say that original sin now qualifies the goodness of creation in the birth of every human being, Jesus excepted (see Article 15).
2. This condition of sin does not consist in bad behavior *per se* (sins), but is a condition of fallen human nature which affects our thoughts, wills, and emotions as well as our behavior (sin).

As such it is not simply or essentially a learned behavior based on bad example.

3. This condition of sin is universal since all human nature is affected in the primal fall and is passed on as corrupted human nature through birth. As such, we are all far gone from the original righteousness of human nature. The human nature we now inherit is corrupted at the heart.
4. This condition of sin affects the fundamental inclination of our heart or self, which inclination is to exalt the self over God and the neighbor. This inclination is evil or contrary to God's position as the true and rightful Lord of all creation and contrary to his will for us. It also demeans the neighbor. This ungodly rebellion and idolatry of self places us under the judicial wrath of God and deserves final damnation.
5. This fallen inclination is itself sin, indwelling sin, and continues even in those whom God has regenerated by his Holy Spirit. However, because of the work of Christ and his imputed righteousness, indwelling sin does not condemn regenerate believers (see Articles 11 and 12).
6. Given our fallen condition we are bound or enslaved in sin, that is, we cannot of our own strength or good deeds turn to faith in God or call upon his Name. We cannot take the initiative in our rescue.
7. Any turning to God in repentance and faith that we are called to do must be done as the result of the undeserved grace of God preceding our turning and making it possible and actual (see Article 17).
8. In addition, our abiding in Christ is only possible because the grace of God sustains us in that relationship, enabling the good will and the resultant deeds that we are able to do.

These eight points set forth the human condition according to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The human predicament is sin, with all its dominating power, its pervasiveness and universality, and its devastating consequences in relation to the righteousness and justice of God, in the oppression of the neighbor and in the damage we do to God's creation. This fallen condition is sobering. It is also realistic, for it accounts for both the signs of greatness we see in human nature (being created in the image of God) and the universal failure, the pettiness, and the monstrous evil that we also see. It places us beyond all human help.

On the other hand, since this is a condition that comes about due to a fall from initial goodness, we can be redeemed, should the Lord God choose to do so. Original sin is not as original as creation. Our nature may be corrupted, but it is not corrupt in its initial state; so it can be restored to its initial goodness and beyond that to glory in the final state. The good news is that God has chosen to save us in Jesus Christ.

Some would object that we do not usually see ourselves as being in such a state of “fallenness” and bondage. The response to that is that sin itself blinds us to the sinfulness of sin. For example, if all we see are dingy handkerchiefs then none looks dingy, but let a truly white handkerchief be seen and all the dingy handkerchiefs are exposed. It is when we see Christ Jesus, the truly human person, that our sinfulness is revealed, both by contrast with him and by our rejection of him. In his light we begin to get deeper glimpses of how pervasive the sin in our hearts really is. The eventual crucifixion of Jesus only makes clear the terrible hostility against God that lies in our fallen human heart.

Perhaps we should add that human denial is so strong and so anchored in the bondage of sin that it takes a movement of the Holy Spirit within us to begin to recognize our sinfulness. There can be little doubt as to what the Articles teach concerning what constitutes the human dilemma or bondage, from which we need to be saved.

The Scriptures, upon which these Articles are based, speak in the same way.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Genesis 2:15–17)<sup>1</sup>

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:6)

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5)

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done." (Genesis 8:21)

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, and there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3)

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:36)

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:14-15)

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, . . . among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:1-5)

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Ephesians 4:18)

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Hebrews 8:10)

We now move to the divine rescue, salvation, which is found in Articles 11 and 12. Article 11 sets forth the abiding ground of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who came to “save us from our sins.”

#### ARTICLE 11

#### *Of the Justification of Man*

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, and very full of comfort, as more largely is expressed in the Homily of Justification.

Assuming that God wishes to save us from our sinful predicament, and since God is a righteous judge, how can we, sinful humanity, sinful men and women, be judged or accounted righteous before him? What is to be done with his judicial wrath and with our human accountability to God and our condemnation?

There must be a judgment borne by another in our place and the righteousness of another accounted to us. We must have a representative who is not sinful, who is of such a nature as to be worthy to satisfy both the love and the judicial judgment of God upon all of sinful humanity, and who can be a substitute, able to stand in our place at the judgment seat of God. Further, there must be a link with or means of our participation as sinners in the Savior and in the Savior’s saving work.

Therefore, in redeeming love, God, in the person of the Son, for our sake took our place, became incarnate, lived a sinless and righteous life, revealed the truth, and bore the punishment due to us in our place on the cross. It is the Son’s righteousness or “merit” that is accounted to us, as we are united to him through repentant faith, just as our sin and deserved judgment was accounted to him, Jesus, on the cross, both by his own intention and by the will of the Father.

In this great saving act of God in Christ, the meaning of which is revealed in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, we provide no merit of our own, none at all. How could we, since all our deeds are themselves flawed by sin. Even our faith is not a meritorious act, since it is enabled by the Holy Spirit at work in us, and is a response to the gift of the gospel. One does not earn a gift, and particularly not a gift in which our offering is a wooden cross, the nails, and the cry to “crucify him”—a gift which both reveals the depth of our sin, and, at the same time, the unfathomable depth of the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Being accounted righteous in Christ Jesus is what is called “justification.” It is by God in Christ based on grace alone and the sacrifice of Christ alone, and received through repentant faith alone.

Scripture agrees with this understanding of the Lord Jesus’ work in his life and supremely on the cross.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21–26)

But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Romans 4:23–25)

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” (Galatians 3:13)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)



However, the doctrine of salvation in the Articles and in Scripture does not end with “justification,” which is the abiding basis, foundation, and entrance to salvation, but sees salvation as including the progressive breaking of the power or bondage of sin by the transformation of our character and life. We are being conformed unto the likeness of Christ from “one degree of glory to another,” as the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 3:18). This ongoing work of sanctification is found in Article 12.

## ARTICLE 12 *Of Good Works*

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

“Sanctification” is the breaking of the power of sin by the transforming work of the Spirit within believers. It is not optional in the Christian life. It is an inherent part of salvation, as inevitable as a good tree bearing good fruit. On the other hand, our transformation is only partial, for indwelling sin abides in us all. There is no doctrine of “perfectionism” in the Articles. Nonetheless, our good works are pleasing to our Father for Christ’s sake, and encouraging to us all. Jesus is our Lord and we are called to walk in his ways and follow as he leads. In love, we obey his commandments, care for each other and the neighbor, including reaching out with love and the gospel to those who dwell at the ends of the earth.

Two biblical texts are sufficient to show the relationship between justification and sanctification in our life in Christ:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8–10)

The Articles are void of any detailed discussion of eschatology; they do speak of Christ's return to judge the living and the dead, and they declare their agreement with the three Catholic or Ecumenical Creeds. So a final consummation is assumed and with it a final transformation of our human nature. Not only are the condemnation of sin and the enslaving power of sin dealt with, but the very presence of sin is done away and in glory we shall be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ in a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in the Articles and in Scripture includes justification, sanctification, and glorification and a regeneration of the cosmos.

It is the contention of classic Anglican theology as found in the Anglican Formularies that only this understanding of salvation is true to Scripture and adequate to understand and meet the actual human situation. Other views either prove superficial regarding the human predicament ("just a little education and exhortation will do"), or deny the very human nature they seek to save (as in the Eastern religions), or collapse into final pessimism, which is found both in ancient times and has become characteristic of the modern secular West.