

# VOICES OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND ON AURICULAR CONFESSION

Church Association Tract 27

## THE HOMILIES

“Whereas the adversaries go about to wrast this place (James v. 16) for to maintain their auricular confession withal, they are greatly deceived themselves, and do shamefully deceive others; for if this text ought to be understood of auricular confession, then *the Priests are as much bound to confess themselves unto the lay-people as the lay-people are bound to confess themselves to them.* And if to pray is to absolve, then *the laity by this place hath as great authority to absolve the Priests as the Priests have to absolve the laity.* . . . .

“And where that they do allege this saying of our Saviour Jesus Christ unto the leper, to prove auricular confession to stand on God’s word, “*Go thy way and shew thyself to the Priest;*” do they not see that the leper was cleansed from his leprosy afore he was by Christ sent unto the Priest, for to show himself unto him? By the same reason we must be cleansed from our spiritual leprosy; I mean, our sins must be forgiven us afore we come to confession. *What need we then to tell forth our sins unto the ear of the Priest,* sith that they be already taken away . . . Therefore, Holy Ambrose, in his second Sermon upon the hundred and nineteenth Psalm, doth say full well: “Go, show thyself unto the Priest: who is the true Priest but he, which is the Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech?” Whereby this holy father doth understand, that, both the priesthood and the law being changed, we ought to acknowledge none other Priest for deliverance from our sins but our Saviour Jesus Christ; who, being our Sovereign Bishop, doth with the sacrifice of His body and blood, offered once for ever upon the altar of the cross, most effectually cleanse the spiritual leprosy, and wash away the sins of all those that with true confession of the same do flee unto Him . . . . . I do not say, but that, if any do find themselves troubled in conscience, they may repair to their learned Curate or Pastor, or to some other godly learned man, and shew the trouble and doubt of their conscience to them, that they may receive at their hand the comfortable salve of God’s word: but it is against the true Christian liberty, that any man should be bound to the numbering of his sins, as it hath been used heretofore in the times of blindness and ignorance.”—*Homilies and Canons*, pp. 576-577. S.P.C.K. Edition, 1864.

THOMAS CRANMER, *Archbishop of Canterbury*, 1533

“And where you say, that ‘by virtue of Christ’s Sacrifice such as fall be relieved in the sacrament of penance,’ the truth is, that such as do fall be relieved by Christ, whensoever they return to him unfeignedly with heart and mind.”—*On the Lord’s Supper*, p. 360. Parker Soc. Ed.

HUGH LATIMER, *Bishop of Worcester*, 1535

“This doctrine supposes that a Pope, a priest, a finite creature, can pardon sins, whereas the Scripture holds forth *this as the prerogative only of the true God.*

“Here our papists make ado with their auricular confession, proving the same by this place. For they say Christ sent this man unto the priest to fetch there his Absolution, and therefore we must go also unto the priest, and, after confession, receive of him absolution of all our sins. But yet we must take heed, say they, that we forget nothing: for all those that are forgotten, may not be forgiven. And so they bind the consciences of men, persuading them that when their sins were all numbered and confessed, it was well. And hereby they took clean away the passion of Christ, for they made this numbering of sins to be a merit, and so they came to all the secrets that were in

men's hearts; so that no Emperor or King could say or do, nor think anything in his heart, but they knew it; and so applied all the purposes and intents of princes to their own advantage; and this was the fruit of their auricular confession. But to speak of right and true Confession, I would to God it were kept in England, for it is a good thing. And those which find themselves grieved in conscience might go to a learned man, and there fetch of him comfort of the Word of God, and so come to a quiet conscience, which is more to be regarded than all the riches of the world."—*Sermons and Remains*, Parker Soc. Ed. pp. 179,180.

THOMAS BECON, *Chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer*, A.D. 1547

"The Church of Christ teacheth that we ought to confess our sins to God with a penitent heart, and sure faith to obtain remission of the same for his Son Christ's sake. *The synagogue of Satan commandeth, yea, and enforceth men to make their confession to a priest . . .* and to receive at his hand penance and absolution."—*Conf. Ep. Preface*, p. 198. Park. Soc. Edition.

"What affiance did we put in auricular confession, and in the whispering absolution of the papists, believing our sins straightways to be forgiven, if *ego absolvo* were once spoken!"—*Jewel of Joy, Preface*, p. 414.

"And by a metaphor Christ calleth the preaching of his word a Key: for as a Key hath two properties, one to shut, another to open, so hath the Word of God. It openeth to the faithful the treasure of the gifts of God,—grace, mercy, favour, remission of sins, quietness of conscience and everlasting life; but to the unfaithful it shutteth all His treasures, and suffereth them to receive none of them all, so long as they persist and remain in incredulity and unfaithfulness. These Keys are given to as many as, being truly called unto the office of ministration, preach the Word of God. They loosen, that is to say, they preach to the faithful remission of sin by Christ. They also bind, that is, they declare to the unfaithful damnation . . . These things have I spoken concerning the Absolution, or the Keys, which consisteth only in preaching God's Word."—*Castle of Comfort*, pp. 566-567. Parker Society Edition.

JOHN PHILPOTT, *Archdeacon of Winchester*, 1550

"Over and besides thou affirmest then to have brought in a new way to be confessed of sins. What is this new way? To move eftsoons the people that they condemn and accuse themselves before God to beseech his forgiveness of their trespasses and wickedness. What is more old than this? What more profitable for to know the benefits of God? This confession the Fathers of the old law did use, this confession the Apostles, the Church in their times and after, did observe; but your confession is altogether new, which may be confirmed by no testimony of Holy Scripture."—*Trans. of Curio's Defence*, pp. 407, 408.

JOHN HOOPER, *Bishop of Gloucester*, 1550

"I make no mention here of *auricular confession*, as though that were a thing necessary to be done before or after the receiving of the sacrament. For *this confession is not of God*."—VI. *Sermon on Jonas*, p. 536. Parker Society Edition.

JOHN BRADFORD, *Prebendary of St. Paul's*, 1550

"If a man repent not until he have made confession of all his sins in the ear of his ghostly father; if a man cannot have absolution of his sins, until his sins be told by tale and number in the priest's ear . . . shall not a man by this doctrine be utterly driven from repentance."—*Sermon on Repentance*, pp. 45, 46, 47 Park. Soc. Edition.

ROGER HUTCHINSON. 1550

“As every private man forgiveth his brother, so much more the ministers of God’s word have power to do the same, for to them belongeth forgiving and retaining, binding and loosing of the whole congregation. To them Christ gave the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. How then doth God only forgive sin? Truly they are only ministers of the forgiveness, and preachers of His mercy, or of His wrath. Their forgiving and loosing is to declare the sweet and comfortable promises that are made through Jesus Christ in God’s Book to such as be penitent; and their binding and retaining is to preach the law, which causeth anger to such as be impenitent. Or their loosing is to declare before the congregation, that God forgiveth the believing; and their binding is to show, that God will not pardon the unbelieving, because they are without purpose to amend and reform their livings. The common sort suppose, that God forgiveth them, as soon as the minister layeth his hands upon their heads, although they return to their old living. Be not deceived. Except thou repent, he hath no authority to forgive thee; for he is a minister of forgiveness only to such as repent and will amend. His commission stretches no further. If thou, from the bottom of thy heart, be sorry for thy trespass, if thou be without all desire to sin, if thou earnestly mind to amend, God forgiveth thee before thou come at the minister; who first cleansed the man from leprosy, and after commanded him to show him to the priest, for a witness to the congregation. So He raised Lazarus first, and afterwards bade His disciples loose his grave bonds. As the Priest of the old law made the lepers clean or unclean, so bindeth or unbindeth, forgiveth and retaineth, curseth and blesseth, the ministers of the new Law. They put the name of God upon the people, but he only doth bless them; they minister the sacrament of forgiveness, but He only doth forgive; as St. Paul fortifieth unto the Corinthians, saying:—‘Neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God which giveth the increase.’ As an Ambassador maketh peace with a strange King, to whom he is sent with a message, but they which bear witness of the peace make it not; no more do they forgive sin, but be witness thereof, that God pardoneth them through the ambassage of Jesus Christ, who is our high Ambassador.”— *Works*, p. 96. Parker Society.

CATECHISM PUBLISHED BY ROYAL AUTHORITY IN 1553

“To this Church belong the Keys wherewith Heaven is locked and unlocked, for *that is done by the ministration of the Word*, whereunto, properly appertaineth the power to bind and loose, to hold for guilty, and forgive sins. So that whosoever believeth the gospel preached in this Church, he shall be saved, but whosoever believeth not he shall be damned”— *Liturgies of Edward*, p. 513. Parker Society.

JOHN JEWEL, *Bishop of Salisbury*, 1560

“Moreover, we say that Christ hath given to His Ministers power to bind, to loose, to open, to shut; and that the office of loosing consisteth in this point, that the Minister should either offer by the preaching of the Gospel the merits of Christ and full pardon to such as have lowly and contrite hearts, and do unfeignedly repent them, pronouncing unto the same a sure and undoubted forgiveness of their sins, and hope of everlasting salvation; or else that the Minister, when any have offended their brothers’ minds with a great offence, and with a notable and open fault, whereby they have, as it were, banished and made themselves strangers from the common fellowship and from the body of Christ, then after perfite amendment of such persons, doth reconcile them and bring them home again and restore them to the company and unity of the faithful.”

“We say also, that the minister doth execute the authority of binding and shutting as often as he shutteth up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against the unbelieving and stubborn persons,

denouncing unto them God's vengeance and everlasting punishment; or else when he doth quite shut them out from the bosom of the Church by open excommunication. Out of doubt, what sentence soever the minister of God shall give in this sort, God himself doth so well allow of it, that whatsoever here in earth by their means is loosed and bound, God himself will loose and bind, and confirm the same in heaven."

And touching the keys, wherewith they may either shut or open the kingdom of Heaven, we, with Chrysostom, say they be 'the knowledge of the Scriptures;' with Tertullian, we say they be 'the interpretation of the law;' and, with Eusebius, we call them "the word of God."

"Moreover that Christ's disciples did receive this authority, not that they should hear private confessions of the people, and listen to their whisperings, as the common massing priests do everywhere now-a-days, and do it so as though in that one point lay all the virtue and use of the keys, but to the end they should go, they should teach, they should publish abroad the Gospel, and be unto the believing the sweet savour of life unto life, and unto the unbelieving and unfaithful a savour of death unto death."—*Apology*, vol. iii. pp. 60, 61. Parker Soc. Edition.

"This is the confession that St. Augustine speaketh of; *not secret, or private, or in the ear; but public, and open, and in the thought and hearing of all the people.* In like manner saith St. Ambrose: 'Thou must needs humble thyself, and desire many to entreat for thee. Let the Church thy mother weep for thee, and let her wash thy offence with her tears.' This therefore was no plain dealing, with such sleight to turn public into private, and the open audience of the whole people into only one man's secret ear; and so much to abuse the simplicity of your reader. Certainly these words of Saint Augustine, 'open penance,' 'confess openly,' 'in the sight of all the people;' 'that the whole Church may pray for thee;' *these words, I say, will not easily serve to prove your purpose for private confession.*"—*Jewel's Works*, vol. iii. Parker Soc. Ed.

JOHN PILKINGTON, *Bishop of Durham*, 1561.

"Socrates, lib. V. cap. xix. and Sozomen, lib. VII. cap. xvi. in their ecclesiastical histories write and teach, that shriving to a priest was not commanded by God, but invented by man; and therefore, when they see it abused, they took it away, and used it not any more. . . . Then, if confession might be taken away, as here appears it was, it is not so necessary to salvation: nor the universal church has used it ever, as he says, nor we disobey not the church in leaving it off, seeing so many holy men have done it before us."—*The Burning of St. Paul's*, S. vii. pp. 553, 554. Park Soc. Edition.

THOMAS ROGERS, *Chaplain to Archbp. Bancroft*, 1580.

"The consideration hereof (that is, of the character of penance, as it had been taught up to that time) hath moved, besides the Church of England, all other churches reformed, to shew their detestation of this new Sacrament, as having no warrant from God's word."

"The blasphemies are outrageous, and the errors many and monstrous comprised in this doctrine of popish penance. For neither can the matter of this their sacrament, nor the form, nor the minister, nor the effect, be drawn from the word of God. They say penance is a sacrament, and yet can they shew no element it hath to make it a sacrament."

"To confess all sins, and that one after another with all circumstances unto a priest, as it is impossible, so is it never enjoined by God, nor hath ever been practised by any of God's saints."

"An untruth is it, that any priest, bishop, or pope, hath power at his will to forgive sins, or can enjoin any punishment that can make an amends unto God for the least offence."—*On Article XXV.*, p. 257. Parker Society Edition.

WILLIAM FULKE, *Master of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge*, 1580.

“The tenth Difference is of Confession and Penance; in which he maketh two kinds, open Confession and private. For the open Confession, used in the primitive Church, he bringeth many proofs out of Acts xix, Augustin, Tertullian, Cyprian, the Council of Nice, which need not; for we grant that it was used, and we ourselves, according to such discipline as our Church of England hath, do use it; that public and notorious offenders make public Confession of their faults for satisfaction of the congregation. But when this public Confession was abused, he saith, that this practice of the Church, and the counsel of St. James, willing Christians to confess one before another, was restrained to the auricular confession of the Priest only. But neither he sheweth when, nor by what authority the counsel of the Apostle and practice of the Church was thus altered.”— *Stapleton’s Fortress overthrown*, pp. 89-90. Park. Soc. Edition.

RICHARD HOOKER, *Master of the Temple*, 1585.

“They are men that would seem to honour antiquity, and none more to depend upon the reverend judgment thereof. I dare boldly affirm that for many hundred years after Christ, the Fathers held no such opinion; they did not gather by our Saviour’s words any such necessity of seeking the priest’s absolution from sin, by secret and (as they now term it) sacramental confession: public confession they thought necessary by way of discipline, not private confession, as in the nature of a sacrament, necessary.”— *Hooker’s Works*, Bk. 6, Ch. 4, Sec. 6.

“It is not to be marvelled that so great a difference appeareth between the doctrine of Rome and ours, when we teach repentance. They imply in the name of repentance much more than we do. We stand chiefly upon the true inward conversion of the heart; they more upon works of external show. We teach, above all things, that repentance which is one and the same from the beginning to the world’s end; they have a sacramental penance of their own devising and shaping. We labour to instruct men in such sort, that every soul, which is wounded with sin, may learn the way how to cure itself; they, clean contrary, would make old sores seem incurable, unless the priest have a hand in them.”— *Hooker’s Works*, Bk. 6, Ch. 6, Sec. 2.

JOSEPH HALL, *Bishop of Norwich*, 1641.

“A religion that racks the conscience with the needless torture of a necessary shrift, wherein the virtue of absolution depends on the fulness of confession; and that, upon examination: and the sufficiency of examination, is so full of scruples, besides those infinite cases of unresolved doubts in this feigned penance, that the poor soul never knows when it is clear.”— *Diss. against Popery*, pp. 18, 19, Vol. ix. London, 1808.

“That there is a lawful, commendable, beneficial use of Confession, was never denied by us; but to set men upon the rack, and to strain their souls up to a double pin of absolute necessity (both *precepti* and *medii*); and of a strict particularity, and that by a screw of *Jus Divinum*, ‘God’s law,’ is so mere a Roman Novelty, that many ingenious authors of their own have willingly confessed it.”— *The Old Religion*, Vol. ix. p. 274. London, 1808.

JOHN GOODMAN, *Archdeacon of Middlesex*, 1648.

“Indeed she (the Church of England) hath not set up a confessor’s chair in every parish, nor much less placed the priest in the seat of God Almighty, as thinking it safer, at least in ordinary cases, to remit men to the text of the written word of God, and to the public ministry thereof, for resolution of

conscience, than to the secret oracle of a priest in a corner, and advises them rather to observe what God himself declares of the nature and guilt of sin, the aggravations or abatements of it, and the terms and conditions of pardon, than what a priest pronounces.”—*Dis. on Aur. Conf. Gib. Pres.* Vol. x. p. 163.

JEREMY TAYLOR, *Bishop of Down and Connor*, 1660.

“But concerning confession as it is a special act of repentance, the first thing that is to be said of it, is that it is due only to God.”—*Of Ecclesiastical Penance. Works*, cap. x. s. iv. p. 440, vol. vii. Lond. 1850.

“That confession to a priest is a doctrine taught as necessary in the Church of Rome, is without all question; and yet, that it is but the commandment of men, I shall (I hope) clearly enough evince.”—*Dissuasive of Popery*, vol. vi. p. 503.

“. . . . And supposing both the premises true that Christ had made them judges, and that without particular cognizance they could not give judgment according to Christ’s intention; yet it follows not that therefore it is necessary that the penitent shall confess all his sins to the priest.”—p. 508.

“The question then is, whether to confess all our greater sins to a priest, all that upon strict enquiry we can remember, be necessary to salvation? This the Church of Rome now affirms; and this the Church of England, and all Protestant churches, deny; and complain sadly that the commandments of men are changed into the doctrines of God, by a pharisaical empire and superstition.”—*Auricular Conf.*, vol. vi. pp. 504, 505.

“But to clear the whole question, I shall first prove that *the necessity of confessing our sins to a priest is not found in Scripture*, but very much to disprove it; secondly, that there is no reason enforcing this necessity, but very much against it; thirdly, that there is no ecclesiastical tradition of any such necessity, but apparently the contrary; and the consequent of these things will be that the Church of Rome hath introduced a *new doctrine, false and burdensome, dangerous and superstitious.*”—pp. 506, 507.

‘. . . . But when it (the old ecclesiastical discipline) had degenerated into little forms, and yet was found to serve great ends of power, wealth and ambition, it passed into new doctrines, and is now bold to pretend to divine institution, though it be nothing but the commandment of men, a snare of consciences, and a ministry of human policy; false in the proposition, and intolerable in the conclusion.”—pp. 533, 534.

JOHN BRAMHALL, *Archbishop of Armagh*, 1660.

“. . . . I will shew him what we dislike. First in their doctrine—I. That a private, particular, and plenary enumeration of all sins is instituted by Christ, and absolutely necessary to salvation.”—*Prot. Ordination*, Vol. v. part iv. p. 190. Oxf. 1845.

GILBERT BURNET, *Bishop of Salisbury*, 1689.

“It is enough for the present purpose to shew, that it (auricular confession) is no law of God; upon which we do also see very good reason why it ought not to be made a law of the Church; both because it is beyond their authority, which can only go to matters of order and of discipline, as also because of the vast inconveniences that are likely to arise out of it.”—*On Article XXV.* p. 370. Oxford, 1831.

JOHN TILLOTSON, *Archbishop of Canterbury*, 1691.

“But because the necessity of confessing our Sins to Men (that is to the priest), in order to the forgiveness of them, is a great point of difference between us and the Church of *Rome*, it being by them esteemed a necessary Article of Faith, but by us, so far from being necessary to be believed, that we do not believe it to be true.”—*Sermon cvi. Works*, vol. ii. p. 8. London, 1712.

“To what end is Auricular Confession but to keep people in awe by the knowledge of their secrets.”—*Sermon IXXV*. p. 484, vol. ii.

JOHN SHARP, *Archbishop of York*, 1691.

“Could they produce but one text of the Bible to prove this Auricular Sacramental Confession of Sins to a Priest was recommended by our Lord or his Apostles, or that it was practised by any Christian, either of the clergy or laity, or so much as mentioned by the holy men of that time, something might be said. But this they cannot do, and therefore to impose their doctrine on all the Christian world is most intolerable.”—*Dis. on Prov. xxviii. 13. Rat. Def. Dis. xviii*. p. 249.

WILLIAM LLOYD, *Bishop of Worcester*, 1699.

“For Confession to a Priest, the necessity of it was unknown to the Fathers of the Primitive Church. Nay, above a thousand years after Christ, it was held disputable in the Roman Church.”—*Sermon on Acts ii. 42. Gibs. Pres. vol. 12*. p. 15.