

# CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Church Association Tract 028

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THE following *brief* remarks are intended to indicate what we believe to be the doctrine of the Word of God, and the Teaching of the Church of England, on Confession and Forgiveness of Sins, with special reference to the office of Christian Ministers.

We begin, as our Church would have us in all such inquiries, by ascertaining what God has said in His Word, that we may judge the Church by the Bible, and not the Bible by the Church, being fully convinced that, "as many as may be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way unto God, must apply their minds to know Holy Scripture; without the which they can neither sufficiently know God and His will, neither their office and duty," and that "Ignorance of God's word is the cause of all error<sup>1</sup>."

We believe that no truth is more frequently and distinctly set forth in the Bible, than that through Christ's atoning merits and perfect righteousness, there is free, full and complete forgiveness offered and granted to all that truly repent and believe. Whether we turn to the pages of the Old Testament or New, we encounter but one difficulty, viz., to select passages from the mass of evidence which lies before us. The Old Testament abounds with such declarations as the following, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? . . . Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." In these and similar passages there is not so much as a hint given that the forgiveness promised is made to depend upon confession to a priest, or that God had ordained some special authorized channel through which the absolving grace was to flow. But though we do not find a hint of this kind dropped from Genesis to Malachi, we do find the blessing of pardon offered to all who repent and confess their sins unto God. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." Words cannot be more definite than those of David, "I acknowledged my sins unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."

We believe, to use the language of Archbishop Usher, whom the University of Oxford pronounced to be "The unanswerable defender of the Orthodox Religion," that "in Scripture we find that the confession which the penitent sinner maketh to God alone, hath the promise of forgiveness annexed unto it, which no priest upon earth hath power to make void upon pretence that himself, or some of his fellows, were not first particularly acquainted with the business."

We cannot, for a moment, entertain the belief, except upon the most explicit testimony, that the privilege of direct access and communion with our Heavenly Father, accorded to the saints under the Old Testament dispensation, is denied his adopted children, under the brighter and better dispensation of the Gospel. "Whilst the New Testament abounds with promises of pardon to the contrite suppliant, we know but of one passage, (John xx. 23) and that only when considered apart from the rest, which gives any countenance to the theory, "that our Lord Jesus Christ has instituted in His Church a special means for the remission of sin after Baptism," and that any other way is "extramedial, exceptional and abnormal." We are fully convinced that the words of our Saviour to

his disciples will not sustain this doctrine, if we accept for our guidance the sound canon of interpretation laid down in our 20th Article, viz., that “it is not lawful . . . so to expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.”

After the Resurrection, the Apostles and other disciples being assembled together, Jesus “breathed on them and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained.” In these words the Apostles received a commission which would affect their daily ministrations.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have a record of their labours and teaching; and we have the Epistles which were specially designed to promote our communion with God and growth in grace. Looking over these records to find out what the Apostles did and said, we shall get much light to help us to the right understanding of these words. But we may first, with advantage, compare the words by St. John, with the terms of our Lord’s commission, as given by St. Mark, and His declaration by St. Luke. “Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be damned.” (Mark xvi. 15.) “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke xxiv. 47.)

We believe that St. Peter carried out our Saviour’s commission, when on the day of Pentecost he commanded his hearers (Acts ii. 38) “to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins;” and again, when he addressed the Jewish elders, “Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Similarly, when he preached to the assembly in the house of Cornelius, telling them that “to Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth on Him shall receive remission of sins.”

What can be more explicit than the words of St. Paul at Antioch, (Acts xiii. 38,) “Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

It would be easy to multiply such passages from the Acts of the Apostles; but to whatever portion of the New Testament we look, we learn that the substance of what the Apostles preached and taught was, “Repentance towards God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” The practice of the Apostles must be regarded as a comment upon the words of our Lord. These words cannot, and are not, taken in their literal sense by any one. If the Apostles understood our Saviour to invest them with the power of conveying the pardon of sin as committed against God in any other sense than by proclaiming the terms on which God will forgive, we have no record that in a single instance they ever obeyed; but on the other hand, if their commission required them, as ambassadors of Christ, to beseech men to be reconciled unto God, telling them “that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them,” and that forgiveness is granted to all who repent and believe—then, in every recorded act of their ministry, they carried out their Saviour’s command. Without repentance and faith no one professes that Christ gave the Apostles power to forgive men their sins; but the Apostles themselves constantly declare that God Himself forgives all who turn to Him with penitence and faith. Therefore, nothing can remain for His ministers to do but to make known to men the terms upon which God graciously pardons sinners<sup>2</sup>.

We are convinced that the following statements cannot be successfully controverted:—

1. That in the Bible there is no command given to men to confess their sins to a priest under the law, or to a minister under the Gospel.

2. That there is no case recorded of any such confession being made.
3. That we nowhere read in Scripture of sin against God, being forgiven by a priest or minister.
4. That the Bible abounds with promises of free and full forgiveness to all who feel the remembrance of their sins to be grievous unto them and the burden intolerable.

## THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

As members of the Protestant Reformed Church of this land, we sincerely rejoice in the conviction, that her Formularies, without resorting to evasive and non-natural interpretation, cannot be strained into affording any justification for the practice of Sacramental Confession and Absolution.

In the Ordination Service the ministers receive their commission in these words:—"Receive the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands, whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the word of God, and of His holy Sacraments, &c." As this commission, so far as regards the forgiveness of sins, is couched in the words of our blessed Lord to His Apostles, we can only learn from those portions of our Formularies which bear upon the subject, the meaning our Church would have us attach to them. But before proceeding to do this we may remark, that Thomas Becon, chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer, and Editor of the first Book of Homilies; Archbishop Whitgift,<sup>3</sup> who wrote his book in reply to Cartwright, at the request of Archbishop Parker, and is described by Strype as "one of the public books of the Church of England," Bishop Jewel, whose Apology received the sanction of Convocation in 1562; and Richard Hooker; maintained that the words of our Saviour only invested the first disciples, and since then, all faithful ministers of Christ's religion, with the authority to declare free remission of sins to the truly penitent, or on behalf of the Church to impose and relax church censures; and that in all they have written they always assume that this is the teaching of the Church of England as against the Church of Rome, which claims for her priests the power of a judicial Absolution.

There are three forms of Absolution in our Prayer Book:

1. The form of Absolution read in our daily service is strictly *declaratory and conditional*. It ascribes forgiveness to God; and the *declaration* of forgiveness to His ministers. No declaration can make a thing to be what it was not previously; but it assumes the thing to be what it is declared to be. We have here a clear definition of the province of ministers in reference to the forgiveness of men's sins. Whilst God "pardoneth and absolveth all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His Holy Gospel," His ministers are commissioned "to *declare* and *pronounce* to His people being penitent the Absolution and remission of their sins." Our Church in this form has limited, and clearly defined the limitation of the power with which she invested her ministers at the time of their Ordination.<sup>4</sup>
2. The second form of Absolution, which occurs in the Communion Service consists of two parts, the first a declaration that "our heavenly Father" "hath promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto Him;" the second a prayer that God will grant pardon to those who have just confessed their sins unto Him.
3. The third form is in the service for the Visitation of the Sick, and reads thus: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to His Church, to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences; and by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." "Possibly," says Bishop Mant, "this part of the office may still seem to have ascribed so high a

power to the minister, of absolving the sick from their sins, as may lead them into great mistakes. And it is, indeed, more liable to be so misunderstood, than the earlier forms, which were expressed in the manner of a prayer. But still all writers on the subject have agreed that this absolution either was intended, which is indeed most probable, only to set persons free from any ecclesiastical censures, which they might have incurred, . . . or, if it means also to declare them restored to the favour of God, means it only on supposition of a sincere and thorough repentance.”<sup>5</sup>

Either of the two interpretations indicated by Bishop Mant is in harmony with all the Church has said on absolution; but the modern interpretation of the Ritualistic school, viz. that the absolution is judicial, is utterly inconsistent with her teaching.

Such a view contradicts the prayer which immediately follows the absolution, where the minister prays—“*Open thine eye of mercy upon this Thy servant, who most earnestly desireth pardon and forgiveness;*” and again he prays, “*Impute not unto him his former sins.*” If the minister’s absolution had actually conveyed pardon to the heart of the sick person, why should both the minister and the sick man still pray that God will pardon his past offences?

On the supposition that the former part of the absolution, which is a prayer to Christ that He will *forgive*, refers to sins committed against God; and that the second part, where the minister is said to *absolve*, refers to sins as scandals committed against the Church, the Absolution and the whole service are in perfect harmony.

To interpret the words in the sense of conveying a judicial absolution, flatly contradicts the plain words of the Homily on Repentance, which assures us that if we are truly penitent we need not “tell forth our sins into the ear of the priest, since they be already taken away;” and that “we ought to acknowledge none other priest for deliverance from our sins, but our Saviour Jesus Christ.”

With regard to Private Confession, to use the words of Mr. Burgon, a well-known and learned “High Churchman,” we believe that “It must be plain to any man of common sense and honesty, that to the whole system of auricular confession, whether constant or periodical, the Church of England stands utterly opposed.”

The Church in her Communion office recommends those who desiring to come to the Holy Communion, but cannot by prayerful self-examination (the ordinary way recommended by the Church) quiet their own conscience, and desire further comfort or counsel, to go to “some discreet and learned minister of God’s Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God’s Holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice.” There is not a word here about auricular confession or a *formal* absolution. A contrite soul in trouble and perplexity is exhorted “to open his grief”—not to confess his sins—to a discreet and learned minister of God’s word,” that he may receive, by the ministry of the same word, the benefit of absolution: that is, that he may obtain peace and comfort for his troubled conscience, by a learned minister’s judicious application of some of those “exceeding great and precious promises” contained in God’s Holy Word. In the Prayer Book of 1549, the troubled in conscience was “to receive absolution from the ministers of God and the Church;” but by the book of 1552, it is the benefit of absolution by the ministry of God’s Word; and at a subsequent revision the word “Holy” was added, thereby placing it, we should have thought, beyond the ingenuity of man, to contend that the words could refer to some formal absolution, when it is distinctly declared that the benefit to be looked for is from the ministry of God’s Holy Word.

It is undeniable that by the changes made in our Liturgy, the Reformers were charged by the Romanists, at the time these changes took place, with having abolished Auricular Confession; also that the Reformers acknowledged the correctness of the charge, but defended what they had done by an appeal to the practice of the early Church.—(*Bishop Pilkington’s Works, Parker Society Edition*, p. 554.) It is a matter of fact, with these changes in our Liturgy, Confessional boxes

disappeared from our churches, and have been unknown in the English Church since the Reformation until within the last few years; and they were removed because the system of the Confessional had been abolished.

The Service for the Visitation of the Sick is the only place in the Prayer Book where confession to a minister is mentioned, and even there the minister is only to recommend it when he finds “the conscience is troubled with some weighty matter,” from which it clearly follows that it was the intention of the Church to limit the inquiry and the confession to that one thing which was the cause of the sick person’s trouble or distress. Besides there is not one word to indicate that the confession must of necessity be made secretly, as the service assumes the presence of relatives or friends. Here is confession, but the circumstances are so special and exceptional, that they constitute a strong protest against the doctrine of Auricular Confession as defined and practised by Romanists and Ritualists. The following passage by Bishop Phillpotts, the late Bishop of Exeter, must commend itself to unbiased and impartial men:—“So little is our Church inclined to encourage its ministers to pry into the secrets of their penitents, that it enjoins every other step to be previously taken before the last measure of particular confession be proposed . . . and if from the sick man’s answers to his inquiries, the minister find him in a state of penitence and peace, *his business is completed: he is not authorized—he is by implication forbidden*—to move him to any further disclosure.”

We are unable to believe that a Church can justly be charged with sanctioning Auricular Confession which has clearly and distinctly declared—

1. That Auricular Confession hath not the warrant of God.
2. That justifies its abolition, by Nectarius Bishop of Constantinople, when abused by man’s lewdness, on the ground that it had not been ordained of God.
3. That quotes Augustine to show the absurdity of the practice.
4. That characterizes it as a thing belonging to the time of blindness and ignorance.
5. That charges the adversaries with shamefully deceiving the people, and wresting the Scriptures in order to prove Auricular Confession to stand on God’s Word.
6. And that assures penitents that they have no need to tell their sins into the ear of a priest seeing they be already taken away; and that we ought to acknowledge none other priest for deliverance from our sins but our Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The more strictly and rigidly men enquire into the exact meaning of those passages in our Church’s formularies, which bear upon this subject, the more strongly, we are persuaded, will they be convinced, that our Church discountenances the practice of auricular confession; and that the whole spirit of her teaching is directly opposed to the doctrine of judicial absolution by a priest. Our Church does indeed recommend for a doubting and troubled believer the unburdening of his mind to his spiritual pastor, that he may receive counsel and consolation to the quieting of his conscience, by the ministry of God’s Holy Word.

“While therefore we recognize humble and heartfelt confession of our sins to God as an essential part of Christian worship, and hail with thankfulness the declaration of our ministers that Almighty God pardons and absolves all them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe His Holy Gospel, and while we rejoice in the privilege of consulting discreet and learned ministers of His Word concerning what may at any time perplex our minds and wound our consciences; we are at the same time fully convinced that Auricular Confession, as practised in this country previous to the

Reformation, or as recently revived in our midst, has no real foundation, either in the Word of God or in the formularies of the Church of England; and that in proportion as it prevails, it is injurious to the best interests of individual souls and disastrous to the peace of our homes.

Endnotes:

- 1 Homily on “The Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture.”
- 2 “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 a sweet savour of life unto life, and unto the unbelieving and unfaithful a savour of death unto death.”—*Bishop Jewel’s Apology, Parker Society Ed.* p. 61.
- 3 “The Bishop, by speaking these words, cloth not take upon him to give the Holy Ghost, no more than he doth to remit sins, when he pronounceth the remission of sins; but by speaking these words of Christ, ‘Receive the Holy Ghost; whose sins soever ye remit, they are remitted, &c.,’ he doth show the principal duty of a minister, and assureth him of the assistance of God’s Holy Spirit: if he labour in the same accordingly.”—*Whitgift, Vol. i., p. 489. Parker Society Edition.*
- 4 “Doth it (Absolution) really take away sin, or but ascertain us of God’s most gracious and merciful pardon? The latter of which two is our assertion; the former theirs.”—*Hooker, Book vi. Ch. vi. 4.*  
And again he says:—  
“As for the ministerial sentence of private Absolution, it can be no more than a declaration of what God hath done; it hath but the force of the prophet Nathan’s absolution, ‘God hath taken away thy sin.’”—*Book vi. Ch. vi. 8.*
- 5 Mant on the Book of Common Prayer.
- 6 Homily “Of Repentance and true Reconciliation unto God.”