

KNOTS UNTIED.

BEING
PLAIN STATEMENTS ON DISPUTED POINTS IN RELIGION
FROM THE
STANDPOINT OF AN EVANGELICAL CHURCHMAN.

BY
JOHN CHARLES RYLE, D.D.,
LORD BISHOP OF LIVERPOOL.
Author of "Expository Thoughts on the Gospels," etc.

Tenth Edition.
(*SPECIAL ISSUE.*)

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY,
12 PATERNOSTER ROW.
1885.

CONFESSION.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”—1 JOHN i. 9.

THERE are occasions when circumstances give a peculiar importance to particular doctrines in religion. The assaults of enemies sometimes make it needful to exhibit some special truth with special distinctness. The plausible assertion of some error sometimes requires to be met by more than ordinary carefulness in showing “the thing as it is” in the Word. A doctrine may perhaps be in the rear rank today, and tomorrow may be thrust forward by the force of events into the very front of the battle. This is the case at the present time with the subject of “Confession.” Many years have passed away since men thought and talked so much as they do now about “the confession of sins.”

I desire in this paper to lay down a few plain Scriptural principles about “Confession of sin.” The subject is one of primary importance. Let us beware, in the din of controversy and discussion, that we do not lose sight of the mind of Holy Scripture, and injure our own souls.—There is a confession which is needful to salvation, and there is a confession which is not needful at all.—There is a confessional to which all men and women ought to go, and there is a confessional which ought to be denounced, avoided, and abhorred. Let us endeavour to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the precious from the vile.

I. In the first place,—*Who are they who ought to confess sin?*

II. In the second place,—*To whom ought confession of sin to be made?*

Once let a man have clear views on these two points, and he will never go far wrong on the subject of confession.

I. In the first place,—*Who are they that ought to confess sins?*

I answer this question in one plain sentence. All men and women in the world! All are born in sin and children of wrath. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Before God all are guilty. There is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not. There is not a child of Adam that ought not to confess sin. (Eph. ii. 3; Rom. iii. 23, 19; Eccles. vii. 20.)

There is no exception to this rule. It does not apply only to murderers, and felons, and the inmates of prisons: it applies to all ranks, and classes, and orders of mankind. The highest are not too high to need confession; the lowest are not too low to be reached by God’s requirement in this matter. Kings in their palaces and poor men in their cottages,—preachers and hearers,—teachers and scholars,—landlords and tenants,—masters and serv-

ants,—all, all are alike summoned in the Bible to confession. None are so moral and respectable that they need not confess that they have sinned. All are sinners in thought, word, and deed, and all are commanded to acknowledge their transgressions. Every knee ought to bow, and every tongue ought to confess to God. “Behold,” saith the Lord, “I will plead with thee because thou sayest, I have not sinned.” (Jer. ii. 35.) “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John i. 8.)

Without confession there is *no salvation*. The love of God towards sinners is infinite. The readiness of Christ to receive sinners is unbounded. The blood of Christ can cleanse away all sin. But we must “plead guilty,” before God can declare us innocent. We must acknowledge that we surrender at discretion, before we can be pardoned and let go free. Sins that are known and not confessed, are sins that are not forgiven: they are yet upon us, and daily sinking us nearer to hell. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall find mercy.” (Prov. xxviii. 13.)

Without confession there is *no inward peace*. Conscience will never be at rest, so long as it feels the burden of unacknowledged transgression. It is a load of which man must get rid if he means to be really happy. It is a worm at the root of all comfort. It is a blight on joy and mirth. The heart of the little child is not easy, when he stands in his parents’ presence and knows that he has been doing something wrong. He is never easy till he has confessed.—The heart of the grown-up man is never really easy, until he has unburdened himself before God and obtained pardon and absolution. “When I kept silence,” says David, “my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgression unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalm xxxii. 3-5.)

There is no gainsaying these things. They stand out plainly on the face of Scripture, as if they were written with a sunbeam: they are so clear that he who runs may read. Confession of sin is absolutely necessary to salvation: it is a habit which is an essential part of repentance unto life. Without it there is no entrance into heaven. Without it we have no part or lot in Christ. Without it we shall certainly go to hell. All this is undoubtedly true. And yet in the face of all this, it is a melancholy and appalling fact that few people confess their sins!

Some people have *no thought* or feeling about their sins: the subject is one which hardly crosses their minds. They rise in the morning and go to bed at night; they eat, and drink, and sleep, and work, and get money, and spend money, as if they had no souls at all. They live on as if this world was the

only thing worth thinking of. They leave religion to parsons, and old men and women. Their consciences seem asleep, if not dead. Of course they never confess!

Some people are *too proud* to acknowledge themselves sinners. Like the Pharisee of old, they flatter themselves they are “not as other men.” They do not get drunk like some, or swear like others, or live profligate lives like others. They are moral and respectable! They perform the duties of their station! They attend church regularly! They are kind to the poor! What more would you have? If they are not good people and going to heaven, who can be saved?—But as to habitual confession of sin, they do not see that they need it. It is all very well for wicked people, but not for them. Of course, when sin is not really *felt*, sin will never be confessed!

Some people are *too indolent* and slothful to take any step in religion so decided as confession. Their Christianity consists in meaning, and hoping, and intending, and resolving. They do not positively object to anything that they hear upon spiritual subjects. They can even approve of the Gospel. They hope one day to repent, and believe, and be converted, and become thorough Christians, and go to heaven after death. But they never get beyond “hoping.” They never come to the point of making a business of religion. Of course they never confess sin.

In one or other of these ways thousands of persons on every side are ruining their souls. In one point they are all agreed. They may sometimes call themselves “sinners,” in a vague, general way, and cry out, “I have sinned,” like Pharaoh, and Balaam, and Achan, and Saul, and Judas Iscariot (Exod. ix. 27; Num. xxii. 34; Josh. vii. 20; Matt. xxvii. 4); but they have no real sense, or sight, or understanding of sin. Its guilt, and vileness, and wickedness, and consequences, are utterly hid from their eyes. And the result, in each case, is one and the same. They know nothing practically of confession of sins.

Shall I say what seems to me the clearest proof that man is a fallen and corrupt creature? It is not open vice or unblushing profligacy. It is not the crowded public-house, or the murderer’s cell in a jail. It is not avowed infidelity, or gross and foul idolatry. All these are proofs, and convincing proofs indeed, that man is fallen;—but there is to my mind a stronger proof still. That proof is the wide-spread “spirit of slumber” in which most men lie chained and bound about their souls. When I see that multitudes of sensible men, and intelligent men, and decent-living men, can travel quietly towards the grave, and feel no concern about their sins, I want no more convincing evidence that man is “born in sin,” and that his heart is alienated from God. There is no avoiding the conclusion. Man is naturally asleep, and must be awakened. He is blind, and must be made to see. He is dead, and must be made alive. If this was not the case there would be no need for our pressing

the duty of confession. Scripture commands it. Reason assents to it. Conscience, in its best moments, approves of it. And yet, notwithstanding this, the vast majority of men have no practical acquaintance with confession of sin!—No disease of body is so desperate as mortification. No heart is in so bad a state as the heart that does not feel sin.

Shall I say what is my first and foremost wish for men's souls, if they are yet unconverted? I can wish them nothing better than thorough *self-knowledge*. Ignorance of self and sin is the root of all mischief to the soul. There is hardly a religious error or a false doctrine that may not be traced up to it. Light was the first thing called into being. When God created the world, He said, "Let there be light." (Gen. i. 3.) Light is the first thing that the Holy Ghost creates in a man's heart, when He awakens, converts, and makes him a true Christian. (2 Cor. iv. 6.) For want of seeing sin men do not value salvation. Once let a man get a sight of his own heart, and he will begin to cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

If a man has learned to feel and acknowledge his sinfulness, he has great reason to thank God. It is a real symptom of health in the inward man. It is a mighty token for good. To know our spiritual disease is one step towards a cure. To feel bad and wicked and hell-deserving, is the first beginning of being really good.

What though we feel ashamed and confounded at the sight of our own transgressions! What though we are humbled to the dust, and cry, "Lord, I am vile. Lord, I am the very chief of sinners!" It is better a thousand times to have these feelings and be miserable under them, than to have no feelings at all. Anything is better than a dead conscience, and a cold heart, and a prayerless tongue!

If we have learned to feel and confess sin, we may well thank God and take courage. Whence came those feelings? Who told you that you were a guilty sinner? What moved you to begin acknowledging your transgressions? How was it that you first found sin a burden, and longed to be set free from it?—These feelings do not come from man's natural heart. The devil does not teach such lessons. The schools of this world have no power to impart them. These feelings came down from above. They are the precious gifts of God the Holy Ghost. It is His special office to convince of sin. The man who has really learned to feel and confess his sins, has learned that which millions never learn, and for want of which millions die in their sins, and are lost to all eternity.

II. I now turn to the second branch of my subject: *To whom ought confession of sin to be made?*

I enter on this branch of the subject with sorrowful feelings. I approach it

as a sailor would approach some rock on which many gallant ships have made shipwreck. I cannot forget that I have arrived at a point on which millions of so-called Christians have erred greatly, and millions are erring at the present day. But I dare not keep back anything that is Scriptural, for fear of giving offence. The errors of millions must not prevent a minister of the Gospel speaking the truth. If multitudes are hewing out broken cisterns that can hold no water, it becomes the more needful to point out the true fountain. If countless souls are turning aside from the right way, it becomes the more important to show clearly to whom confession ought to be made.

Sin, to speak generally, ought to be confessed to God. He it is whom we have chiefly offended: His are the laws which we have broken. To Him it is that all men and women will one day give account: His displeasure is that which sinners have principally to fear. This is what David felt: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight." (Psalm li. 4.) This is what David practised: "I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord." (Psalm xxxii. 5.) This is what Joshua advised Achan to do: "My son, give glory to God, and make confession to Him." (Josh. vii. 19.) The Jews were right when they said, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" (Mark ii. 7.)

But must we leave the matter here? Can vile sinners like us ever dare to confess our sins to a holy God? Will not the thought of His infinite purity shut our mouths and make us afraid? Must not the remembrance of His holiness make us afraid? Is it not written of God, that He is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity"? (Hab. i. 13.) Is it not said, that He "hates all workers of iniquity"? (Psalm v. 5.) Did He not say to Moses, "There shall no man see My face and live"? (Exod. xxxiii. 20.) Did not Israel say of old, "Let not God speak with us, lest we die"? (Exod, xx. 19.) Did not Daniel say, "How can the servant of my Lord talk with this my Lord"? (Dan. x. 17.) Did not Job say, "When I consider, I am afraid of Him"? (Job xxiii. 15.) Did not Isaiah say, "Woe is me, for I am undone:—for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts"? (Isa. vi. 5.) Does not Elihu say, "Shall it be told Him that I speak? If a man speak, surely he shall he swallowed up"? (Joh xxxvii. 20.)

These are serious questions. They are questions which must and will occur to thoughtful minds. There are many who know what Luther meant, when he said, "I dare not have anything to do with an absolute God." But I thank God they are questions to which the Gospel supplies a full and satisfactory answer. The Gospel reveals One who is exactly suited to the wants of souls which desire to confess sin.

I say then that sin ought to be confessed to God in Christ.—I say that sin ought specially to be confessed to God manifest in the flesh,—to Christ Jesus

the Lord,—to that Jesus who came into the world to save sinners,—to that Jesus who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, and now lives at the right hand of God to intercede for all who come to God by Him. He that desires to confess sin should apply direct to Christ.

Christ is a great High Priest. Let that truth sink down into our hearts and never be forgotten. He is sealed and appointed by God the Father for that very purpose, to be the Priest of Christians. It is His peculiar office to receive, and hear, and pardon, and absolve sinners. It is His place to receive confessions, and to grant plenary absolutions. It is written in Scripture, “Thou art a Priest for ever.”—“We have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens.”—“Having an High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith.” (Heb. iv. 14; v. 6; vi. 20; x. 21, 22.)

(a) Christ is a High Priest of Almighty power. There is no sin that He cannot pardon, and no sinner that He cannot absolve. He is very God of very God. He is “over all, God blessed for ever.” He says Himself, “I and my Father are one.” He has “all power in heaven and earth.” He has “power on earth to forgive sins.” He has complete authority to say to the chief of sinners, “Thy sins are forgiven. Go in peace.” He has “the keys of death and hell.” When He opens no one can shut. (Rom. ix. 5; John x. 30; Matt. xxviii. 18; ix. 6; Luke vii. 48-50; Rev. i. 18; iii. 7.)

(b) Christ is a High Priest of infinite *willingness* to receive confession of sin. He invites all who feel their guilt to come to Him for relief. “Come unto Me,” He says, “all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”—“If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.”—When the penitent thief cried to Him on the cross, He at once absolved him fully, and gave him an answer of peace. (Matt. xi. 28; John vii. 37.)

(c) Christ is a High Priest of perfect *knowledge*. He knows exactly the whole history of all who confess to Him: from Him no secrets are hid. He never errs in judgment: He makes no mistakes. It is written that “He is of quick understanding. He shall not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears.” (Isa. xi. 3.) He can discern the difference between the hypocritical professor who is full of words, and the broken-hearted sinner who can scarce stammer out his confession. People may deceive ministers by “good words and fair speeches,” but they will never deceive Christ.

(d) Christ is a High Priest of matchless *tenderness*. He will not afflict willingly, or grieve any soul that comes to Him. He will handle delicately every wound that is exposed to Him. He will deal tenderly even with the vilest sinners, as He did with the Samaritan woman. Confidence reposed in Him is never abused: secrets confided to Him are completely safe. Of Him it

is written, that “He will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax.” He is one that “despiseth not any.” (Isaiah xlii. 3; Job xxxvi. 5.)

(e) Christ is a High Priest who *can sympathize* with all that confess to Him. He knows the heart of a man by experience, for He had a body like our own, and was made in the likeness of man. “We have not a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb. iv. 15.) To Him the words can most truly be applied, which Elihu applied to himself, “Behold, I am according to thy wish in God’s stead: I also am formed out of the clay. Behold, my terror shall not make thee afraid, neither shall my hand be heavy upon thee.” (Job xxxiii. 6, 7.)

This great High Priest of the Gospel is the person whom we ought specially to employ in our confession of sin. It is only through Him and by Him that we should make all our approaches to God. In Him we may draw near to God with boldness, and have access with confidence. (Ephes. iii. 12.) Laying our hand on Him and His atonement, we may “come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. iv. 16.) We need no other Mediator or Priest. We can find no better High Priest. To whom should the sick man disclose his ailment, but the physician? To whom should the prisoner tell his story, but to his legal advocate? To whom should the sinner open his heart and confess his sins, but to Him who is the “Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”? (1 John ii. 1.)

Why should we confess our sins to angels and dead saints, while we have Christ for a High Priest? Why should we confess to the Virgin Mary, Michael the Archangel, John the Baptist, St. Paul, or any other creature in the unseen world? The Church of Rome enjoins such confession as this on her millions of members, and many members of the Church of England seem half-disposed to think the Church of Rome is right! But when we ask a Scriptural reason for the practice, we may ask long without getting an answer.

There is *no need* for such a confession. Christ has not given up His office, and ceased to be a Priest. The saints and angels cannot possibly do more for us than Christ can. They certainly have not more pity or compassion, or more good-will towards our souls.

There is *no warrant of Scripture* for such a confession. There is not a text in the Bible that bids us confess to dead saints and angels. There is not an instance in Scripture of any living believer taking his sins to them.

There is not the slightest proof that there is *any use* in such a confession. We do not even know that the saints in glory can hear what we say; much less do we know that they could help us if they heard. They were all sinners

saved by grace themselves:—where is the likelihood that they could do anything to aid our souls?

The man who turns away from Christ to confess to saints and angels is a deluded robber of his own soul. He is following a shadow, and forsaking the substance. He is rejecting the bread of life, and trying to satisfy his spiritual hunger with sand.

But why, again, should we confess our sins to living priests or ministers, while we have Christ for a High Priest? The Church of Rome commands her members to do so. A party within the Church of England approves the practice as useful, helpful, and almost needful to the soul. But, again, when we ask for Scripture and reason in support of the practice, we receive no satisfactory answer.¹

¹ The only passages in the Prayer-book of the Church of England, which appear at first sight to favour the Romish view of confession and absolution, are to be found in the Exhortation in the Communion Service, and in the Visitation of the Sick.

In both these cases I am entirely satisfied that the Reformers never *intended* to give any countenance to the Romish doctrine, and that the true and honest interpretation of the language used affords no help to those who hold that doctrine.

In the Exhortation in the Communion Service, the case is supposed of some person who “cannot quiet his conscience.” The advice then follows: “Let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned minister of God’s holy 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.”

If men are determined to twist this passage into a sanction of the Romish doctrine of habitual confession and absolution, it is useless to reason with them. To my own eyes the exhortation seems nothing more than advice to people who are troubled with some special difficulties, to go and speak to a minister in private about them, and to get them cleared up by texts from the Bible.

But I can see nothing in the passage like Romish auricular confession and priestly absolution.

In the Visitation of the Sick, the language used about absolving the sick man, “if he humbly and heartily desire it,” is undoubtedly very strong, and the direction to “move” the sick person to “make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any mighty matter,” is unmistakable.

Yet, even here, it is hard to prove that this confession means more than any faithful minister of the Gospel would press on any sick and dying person, if he saw him “troubled,” or distressed about “some weighty matter.” It is only in this case, be it remembered, that he is to be “moved to make” it.

As to the absolution, the most that can be made of it is that it is *declaratory*. It is a very strong and authoritative declaration of the forgiveness of the Gospel, addressed to a dying person, in need of special comfort. It is the custom of the Prayer-book to call any ministerial declaration of God’s willingness to pardon those who repent and believe, an “absolution.” We see this very plainly in the beginning of the morning and afternoon service. After the general confession, the minister reads what is called “an absolution.”

The language of the absolution in the Visitation of the Sick is undoubtedly very strong.

Is there *any need* for confessing to priests or ministers? There is none. There is nothing they can do for a sinner that Christ cannot do a thousand times better. When Christ has failed the soul that cried to Him, it may be time to turn to ministers. But that time will never come.

Is there *any Scriptural warrant* for confessing to priests or ministers? There is none. There is not a passage in the New Testament which commands it. St. Paul writes three Epistles to Timothy and Titus about ministerial duty. But he says nothing about receiving confessions.—St. James bids us “confess our faults to one another,” but he says nothing about confessing to ministers.—Above all, there is not a single example in Scripture of anyone confessing to a minister and receiving absolution. We see the Apostles often declaring plainly the way of forgiveness, and pointing men to Christ. But we nowhere find them telling men to confess to them, and offering to absolve them after confession.

Finally, is *any good likely to result* from confessing to priests or ministers? I answer boldly, There is none. Ministers can never know that those who confess to them are telling the truth. Those who confess to them will never feel their consciences really satisfied, and will never feel certain that what they confess will not be improperly used. Above all, the experience of former times is enough to condemn “auricular confession” forever, as a practice of most vile and evil tendency. Facts, stubborn facts, abound to show that the practice of confessing to ministers has often led to the grossest and most disgusting immorality. A living writer has truly said, “There is no better school of wickedness on earth than the confessional. History testifies that for every offender whom the confessional has reclaimed it has hardened thousands; for one it may have saved it has destroyed millions.”—*Wylie on Popery*, p. 329.²

But still it must be observed that it only declares a person absolved, who is already absolved by God. The very form itself says that the Church’s absolution is to be given to “all sinners who truly repent and believe in Jesus Christ.” Now all such are of course pardoned the very moment they repent and believe. When, therefore, the minister says, “I absolve thee,” he can only mean, “I declare thee absolved.”

When I add to this explanation the striking fact that the Homily of Repentance contains a long passage most strongly condemning auricular confession, I can see no fair ground for the charge that the Church of England sanctions auricular confession, as a practice of general utility to the soul. At the same time I deeply regret that the formularies of the Church contain any expressions which are capable of being twisted into an argument in defence of the doctrine, and I should rejoice to see them removed.

² Those who wish for more information on this painful subject will find it fully supplied in Elliott’s *Delineation of Romanism*, (p. 210), under the head “Confession.” Those who take a favourable view of auricular confession, and wish to see it introduced into the English Church, would do well to study Elliott’s account of the Bull of Pope Paul IV. against those Spanish confessors who were called “Solicitants.” If then they are not convinced of the

The man who turns away from Christ to confess his sins to ministers, is like a man who chooses to live in prison when he may walk at liberty, or to starve and go in rags in the midst of riches and plenty, or to cringe for favours at the feet of a servant, when he may go boldly to the Master and ask what he will. A mighty and sinless High Priest is provided for him, and yet he prefers to employ the aid of mere fellow-sinners like himself! He is trying to fill his purse with rubbish, when he may have fine gold for the asking. He is insisting on lighting a rush-light, when he may enjoy the noon-day light of God's sun!

If we love our souls, let us beware of giving to ministers the honour that belongs to Christ alone. He is the true High Priest of the Christian's profession. He ever lives to receive confessions, and to absolve sinners. Why should we turn away from Him to man? Above all, let us beware of the whole system of the Romish confessional. Of all practices that were ever devised by man in the name of religion, I firmly believe that none was ever devised so mischievous and objectionable as the confessional. It overthrows Christ's office, and places man in the seat which should only be occupied by the Son of God.—It puts two sinners in a thoroughly wrong position: it exalts the confessor far too high; it places those who confess far too low. It gives the confessor a place which it is not safe for any child of Adam to occupy. It imposes on those who confess a bondage to which it is not safe for any child of Adam to submit. It sinks one poor sinner into the degrading attitude of a serf; it raises another poor sinner into a dangerous mastery over his brother's soul. It makes the confessor little less than a god: it makes those who confess little better than slaves.—If we love Christian liberty, and value inward peace, let us beware of the slightest approach to the Romish confessional!

Those who tell us that Christian ministers were intended to receive confessions, and that Evangelical teaching makes light of the ministerial office, and strips it of all authority and power, are making assertions which they cannot prove. We honour the minister's office highly, but we refuse to give it a hair's breadth more dignity than we find given in the Word of God. We honour ministers as Christ's ambassadors, Christ's messengers, Christ's watchmen, helpers of believers' joy, preachers of the Word, and stewards of the mysteries of God. But we decline to regard them as priests, mediators, confessors, and rulers over men's faith, both for the sake of their souls and of our own.³

immoral tendency of the confessional, I shall be surprised.

³ It should always be remembered that the word "priest" in the Prayer-book, was not intended to mean a sacrificing priest, like the Old Testament priests. It signifies the same as presbyter or elder.

The vulgar notion that Evangelical teaching is opposed to the exercise of soul-discipline, or heart-examination, or self-humiliation, or mortification of the flesh, or true contrition, is a mere invention of man's. Opposed to it! There never was a more baseless assertion. We are entirely favourable to it. This only we require,—that it shall be carried on in the right way. We approve of a confessional; but it must be the only true one,—the throne of grace. We approve of going to a confessor; but it must be the true One,—Christ the Lord. We approve of submitting consciences to a priest; but it must be to the great High Priest,—Jesus the Son of God. We approve of unbosoming our secret sins, and seeking absolution; but it must be at the feet of the great Head of the Church, and not at the feet of one of His weak members. We approve of kneeling to receive ghostly counsel; but it must be at the feet of Christ, and not at the feet of man.

Let us beware of ever losing sight of Christ's priestly office. Let us glory in His atoning death, honour Him as our Substitute and Surety on the cross, follow Him as our Shepherd, hear His voice as our Prophet, obey Him as our King. But in all our thoughts about Christ, let it be often before our minds that He alone is our High Priest, and that He has deputed His priestly office to no order of men in the world.⁴ This is the office of Christ, which Satan labours above all to obscure. It is the neglect of this office which leads to every kind of error. It is the remembrance of this office which is the best safe-guard against the plausible teaching of the Church of Rome. Once right about this office we shall never greatly err in the matter of the confession of sin. We shall know to whom confession ought to be made; and to know that rightly is no slight thing.

⁴ The passage, "Whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained" (John xx. 23), is often quoted in defence of the Romish view of priestly absolution, but I am firmly persuaded, in entire contradiction to our Lord's intention.

I believe that in these words our Lord conferred on His apostles, and all those disciples who were present with them at the same time (Luke xxiv. 33), the power of authoritatively declaring whose sins are forgiven, and whose sins are not forgiven, but nothing more.—I believe, moreover, that from their peculiar gift of discerning spirits, the Apostles were fitted and enabled to exercise this power of declaring, in a way that no minister, since the apostolic times, ever can or ever did.

But that the Apostles ever took on themselves to "remit or retain sins," in the way that the Romish Church enjoins on her priests to do, is not to be traced out in any passage in the whole New Testament.

The reader who wishes to investigate this subject further, will find it fully discussed in my *Expository Thoughts on St. John's Gospel* (vol. iii., pp. 444-453), together with many valuable quotations from eminent divines elucidating the whole matter. The passage is too long for insertion in this place.

I shall conclude this paper with two words of practical application. (a) We have seen who ought to confess sin. (b) We have seen to whom confession ought to be made. Let us try to bring the subject nearer to our hearts and consciences. Time flies very fast. Writing and preaching,—reading and working,—doubting and speculating,—discussion and controversy,—all, all will soon be past and gone forever. Yet a little while and there will remain nothing but certainties, realities, and eternity.

Let us then ask ourselves honestly and conscientiously, Do we CONFESS?

(1) If we never confessed sin before, let us go this very day to the throne of grace, and speak to the great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, about our souls. Let us pour out our hearts before Him, and keep nothing back from Him. Let us acknowledge our iniquities to Him, and entreat Him to cleanse them away. Let us say to Him, in David's words, "For Thy name's sake, pardon my iniquity; for it is great." "Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities." Let us cry to Him as the publican did in the parable, "God be merciful to me a sinner." (Ps. xxv. 11; li. 9; Luke xviii. 13.)

Are we afraid to do this? Do we feel unworthy and unfit to begin? Let us resist such feelings, and begin without delay. There are glorious Bible examples to encourage us: there are rich Bible promises to lure us on. In all the volume of Scripture there are no passages so encouraging as those which are about confession of sin. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John i. 8.) "If any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light." (Job xxxiii. 27.) "Father," said the prodigal son, "I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servant, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry." (Luke xv. 21-23.) If Christ had never died for sinners, there might be some excuse for doubting. But Christ having suffered for sin, there is nothing that need keep us back.

(2) If we have been taught by the Holy Ghost to confess our sins, and know the subject of this paper by inward experience, let us keep up the habit of confession to the last day of our lives.

We shall never cease to be sinners as long as we are in the body. Every day we shall find something to deplore in our thoughts, or motives, or words, or deeds. Every day we shall find that we need the blood of sprinkling, and the intercession of Christ. Then let us keep up daily transactions with the throne of grace. Let us daily confess our infirmities at the feet of our merciful and faithful High Priest, and seek fresh absolution. Let us daily cast ourselves

under the shadow of His wings, and cry, “Surely in me dwelleth no good thing: Thou art my hiding-place, O Lamb of God!”

May every day find us more humble and yet more hopeful,— more sensible of our own unworthiness, and yet more ready to rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh!—May our prayers become every day more fervent, and our confessions of sin more real;—our eye more single, and our walk with God more close;—our knowledge of Jesus more clear, and our love to Jesus more deep;—our citizenship in heaven more manifest, and our separation from the world more distinct!

So living, we shall cross the waves of this troublesome world with comfort, and have an abundant entrance into God’s kingdom. So living, we shall find that our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Yet a few more years, and our prayers and confessions shall cease forever. We shall begin an endless life of praise. We shall exchange our daily confessions for eternal thanksgivings.⁵

⁵The attention of all members of the Church of England is particularly requested to the following passages from the “HOMILY OF REPENTANCE”:—

“Whereas the adversaries [Roman Catholics] wrest this place [in St. James—(James v.)—], 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 show thyself unto the priest*’ (Matt, viii.), do they not see that the leper was cleansed from his leprosy before 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, before that we come to confession. What need we then to tell forth our sins into the ear of the priest, since 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 forever, after the order of Melchisedec? 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 Sovereign Bishop, doth with the sacrifice of His body and blood, offered once forever 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.

“It is most evident and plain that this auricular confession hath not the warrant of God’s Word, else it had not been lawful for Nectarius, Bishop of Constantinople, upon a just occasion to have put it down. (*Nectarius Sozomen Eccles. Hist.*, lib. vii. cap. 16.) For when anything ordained of God is by the lewdness of men abused, the abuse ought to be taken away, and the thing itself suffered to remain. Moreover, these are St. Augustine’s words (*Confessionum*, lib. x., cap. 3):—‘What have I to do with men, that they should hear my

confession, as though they were able to heal my diseases? A curious sort of men to know another man's life, and slothful to correct and amend their own. Why do they seek to hear of me what I am, which will not hear of Thee what they are? And how can they tell, when they hear by me of myself, whether I tell the truth, or not; since no mortal man knoweth what is in man, but the spirit of man which is in him?' Augustine would not have written thus if auricular confession had been used in his time.

“Being, therefore, not led with the conscience thereof, let us with fear and trembling, and with a true contrite heart, use that kind of confession that God doth command in His Word; and then doubtless, as He is faithful and righteous, He will forgive us our sins, and make us clean from all wickedness. 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 show 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 time of blindness and ignorance.”