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Confession.

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REV. CANON TREDENNICK,
AT CHRIST CHURCH, SPARKBROOK, BIRMINGHAM.

"Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."—St. James v. 16.

THE subject of the Confessional is the question of the hour in the religious world. It is very unfortunate that we should be obliged to use a term around which so much controversy has raged, and in connexion with which so much evil has arisen, in dealing with a problem upon which probably all religious people are agreed fundamentally.

We all agree that sin is the evil which we have to face, that it must be faced, recognized, confessed, forsaken, and if necessary reparation made, before there can be the highest life and service. We all recognize the difficulty and complexity of the situation. The duties which we have just enumerated are of the most elementary and obvious character and yet they are just those from which we either revolt with our whole mind or which we ignore and neglect according to our varying temperament.

We further agree that while in one sense religion is absolutely a matter between the individual Soul and God, there is another sense in which no man can either be saved or serve apart from his fellow men. The two sides are beautifully expressed in Psalm xlix. 7 (P.B.V.) "But no man may deliver his Brother: nor make agreement unto God for him: for it cost more to redeem their souls: so that he must let that alone for ever;" and on the other hand Proverbs xxiv. 11, 12. (R.V.) "Deliver them that are carried away unto death, and those that are ready to be slain see that thou hold back. If thou sayest, Behold we knew not this; doth not he that weigheth the hearts consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his work?" We dare not neglect either injunction. Speaking broadly the Catholic ideal ignores the first principle by interfering between the individual soul and God: the Protestant ideal ignores the second by saying in effect, it is no business of mine.

At the present moment this question and all that lies behind it has become crucial. We have all been stirred up to realize the

depths of iniquity which lie within and around us, and those who have been enlightened by the Spirit of God are keenly anxious to lead the highest life which is possible in the sinful world, and to help to lead others into it. We also know one another better than ever before. The War has broken down many barriers between nations and individuals. We think very differently of Frenchmen and Russians on the one hand and of Germans and Turks on the other now than we did a few years ago.

The same may be said of religious opinions. While we all probably hold our own convictions more strongly than ever, because we are morally stronger as a result of the discipline through which we have been passing, we can understand and appreciate other people's conscientious opinions and practices much better. We are learning to see that if we demand to be regarded as conscientious ourselves, by that very claim we must admit the same right to the other man.

A leading Free Church Minister said to me a few days ago, "Although the principles lying behind the practice of the Confessional are not officially recognized by Nonconformity, there is hardly a Nonconformist Minister who does not in some form or another carry out the idea." At a recent Conference of Men held for the purpose of combating moral evils, which was not specifically a religious meeting at all, the lecturer, speaking as a philosopher and belonging to neither the Roman nor the Anglican Church, said that he regarded the Confessional in some form as one of the most essential methods of checking immorality.

Now I think you will agree with me that we cannot afford to ignore the question. As thinkers who want to be abreast of the times we cannot shut our minds to it. As patriots who want to do the best we can for our country, we cannot refuse to discuss it. Above all as spiritual workers we must have a sound judgment and definite policy unless we are content to be mere negations at a time when every one who is worthy of God's call desires to be intensely positive and constructive.

What then is the fundamental principle underlying the system known as the Confessional?

It has two sides as all religious movements have, viz., a Divine and a human. It is adopted by religious men as a method of stirring up people to recognize the evil of sin, to move them to repentance

and discipline and to help them with advice coming from spiritual knowledge and experience.

On the other hand of course there is a subtle tendency in us all and not least in religious leaders, to be busybodies in other men's matters, to consider ourselves experts in spiritual matters and rather to patronize the layman, to try to force our own opinions upon others, to endeavour to use mechanical means for spiritual ends, to find an unsanctified pleasure in having dominion over other men's faith.

Those are the two sides put briefly, and you cannot have an intelligent conception of the question at issue unless you keep both in mind. You must not treat the religious advocate of the Confessional as if he were a designing monster who is trying to allure you into a sort of inquisition, where his one purpose is to destroy you body and soul. That this has been done goes without saying. Exactly the same disastrous results have followed from neglect of the souls of others, and neither statement closes the question.

The conscientious spiritually minded confessor knows that the accusation brought against the system is not true of him or his methods, and what is more important, his converts know that it is not true to their relationship to him and deeply resent it.

On the other hand those who believe in the Confessional must not assume that those who do not practice it are not alive to the evil of sin or are not endeavouring to grapple with it and overcome it in their own way.

Nothing is gained by despising or reviling your opponent. In fact everything is lost that way. This is specially true of religious controversy. Now I am an out and out Protestant: *i.e.*, I accept, as I have always accepted without reserve, every Article of the Protestant interpretation of Scripture teaching, but I do not hesitate to say that the official Protestant attitude or policy to-day is a hopeless one. I mean this, that we must distinguish between principles and methods. If I find that I can learn a lesson in tactics from Mr. Lloyd George, I must not say I will have nothing to do with his policy because I differ from him in almost every question of party politics. If I see that a Roman Catholic or Ritualist or Rationalist has grasped a situation, which I have failed to handle, I must not argue that his methods are useless or depraved simply because I reject his doctrines.

I have frequently pointed out that the Church has had to learn constantly from the world in recent times. So I say without hesitation that we as Evangelicals have much to learn from Roman Catholics and Ritualists. General Booth is reported to have said, or perhaps it was Moody, "Why should we let the Devil have all the best tunes?" Why should we let Romanists and Ritualists have all the best machinery to grind chaff, while we attempt to grind wheat with the old mill stone?

Again I look across at my brother clergyman who works the Confessional, and I find first that he knows intimately all his people's troubles, trials and sins and therefore he is able immediately to sympathize, to help, to advise. More than that, he gets to know of abuses and even crimes close to his own door, and by prompt and private influence can remedy diseases which all the law courts, the police, and even the soldiery could not touch. Moreover, he is at once able to mobilize his spiritual forces either for regular work or great crises. He knows exactly what spiritual work each soul can undertake according to its degree of enlightenment and progress.

Now take my own case, and I fear it is a typical one. I hardly know what half a dozen of my people really feel about the deepest things of the soul. I am sure I often put the square peg in the round hole through sheer ignorance. I feel the greatest difficulty in getting any considerable body of people to take up any united and concentrated line of action. I do not even know what to pray for on behalf of the majority of my flock. In short I do not know them, and therefore how can there be full spiritual sympathy? I fancy I hear some one saying "You have neglected pastoral visitation. That is the way to gain knowledge of and sympathy with your people." I agree, but the difficulties are great. I am serving at the present time on over fifty committees and in most cases have much executive work in connexion with them, besides innumerable other duties national, diocesan, and parochial. Effective visitation is impossible, though I could prove that it has been much more seriously attempted than perhaps many realize. Next there is the difficulty that people are more than often either out or engaged when one does call, or circumstances are unfavourable to close spiritual converse.

The Church is obviously the right and best place for all spiritual

converse. It was built for the purpose. It should always be available. It is quiet, retired, and sufficiently public to preclude the idea of secrecy. It has hallowed and hallowing associations for all of us, and this is a vital point. I could think and say and do things in Church which I could not rise to under ordinary conditions because of the calming and uplifting sense which arises from the knowledge that God is here in a special sense when we meet in His name for mutual prayer, meditation and praise. It is infinitely easier to arrange times when you can see any one who wishes to consult you, in Church, than to arrange separate private interviews in different houses. Much time is wasted in going to and fro and in the necessary preliminaries. The whole thing is unbusinesslike, while the interview at Church is dignified, systematic, inspiring and free from all objection.

Now we come to possible abuses. A clergyman may be ignorant, injudicious or even criminal. Granted, and if so you are undone, precisely as you would be in the case of a doctor who was unworthy. He might make mistakes. He might abuse your confidence. He might betray you. Just so with your lawyer. But in all organized life you have to take that risk and go upon the assumption that people are honest unless you have absolute proof to the contrary.

It is strange that many people fear to speak personally to their spiritual pastor from the feeling that they are giving themselves away: putting themselves unreservedly in his hands. Has it ever struck you that the very reverse is the case? By every law of honour, religion, morality and common sense he is precluded from betraying you or making a wrong use of his knowledge. He cannot repeat or even hint at what you have said to him even to his closest confidant. On the other hand there is nothing to prevent you from retailing every word he says to you to every one you meet. There is no reason why you should not do so. Hence arises your protection. If you do not agree with or do not like what he says or does, it is perfectly open to you to discuss it, contradict it, oppose it or neglect it. Consequently he in a very real sense puts himself in your power. You need not come at all; you leave at any moment; you are not obliged to say or leave unsaid anything in particular; you need not follow the advice given. He must first be present, and we clergy are no more desirous of being obliged to do things than the laity. He must more or less await

your time and claims. He may have to listen to many wearisome or petty details. He is sure to meet with much disappointment. I can assure you that my feeling for the conscientious confessor is one of sympathy, not criticism. I can imagine no more thankless or trying task. In some cases the spiritual peril is far greater to the confessor than to the penitent. I have already said, that if the former is a bad man no more horrible engine of iniquity can be imagined, but that applies with equal force to the very office of the Ministry.

But it is time to give you some practical and positive indication of my ideas on the subject. In the first place, any such spiritual machinery as we have been considering must be perfectly voluntary. It must not be made the condition of any spiritual privileges or a medium of any spiritual tyranny. Too frequent use of such a means should be definitely discouraged. The object is to help each soul to be strong and self-reliant, not to lean upon others, however good. No set questions should be asked of any one, least of all on some of the most sacred and delicate questions of life. Neurotic and sentimental people should be gently but firmly repulsed. The greatest reverence and reserve must be exercised in all interviews with women. I may say frankly, I do not want women to come and consult me about their spiritual affairs as a rule. Let them consult their husbands at home or other experienced friends. I do not understand them very well and might not be able to give them much help. May I say here that I would never listen to any confidences relating to their mutual affairs from either a wife or a husband. I consider any interference here is a crime. I would see them both together in cases of need, and have done so with good results.

What I do want is to talk to men as a brother man not only about politics, business, recreation, but about the deep things of the soul; about the fight that we have in common with the world, the flesh and the Devil: our victories and failures, hopes and fears. Especially do I feel that young men need this help, as they set out in life with strong passions, unformed wills and unenlightened judgments. I am sure many a pitfall might be avoided, many a mistake averted, many a fall saved by a frank and sympathetic talk from one who has been over the course and knows the ropes, I think there is no more holy or happy experience than to grasp the hand of a brother

and tell him you know all he feels, all he dreads, all he hopes for, all he tries to be and do and how often he fails; to tell him you have been through it all; that you know the bitter humiliation of defeat; the glad freedom of victory; the joy of sacrifice and service. It is worth taking some risks, to be able really to help another soul who is wrestling with life's troubled sea to find a footing on the Rock of ages; to find a real Friend in the unseen Christ, as a business man put it at a recent meeting.

Remember He is the only true Confessor. Absolutely the only One Who can give absolution, because He alone can forgive and cleanse and sanctify. May I say then that my idea of the Confessional is precisely what is commonly understood by the enquiry room in connexion with a Mission: only that it is a permanent arrangement, not dependent upon the emotions of the moment or passing feelings, but an opportunity ever ready to meet any sudden emergency which may arise, or to provide ready sympathy for the ordinary trivial round and common task.

The object is to bring the soul straight to the Lord Himself, to administer the comfort, rebuke or advice of His own Word. No absolution is authorized by our Church for private use except in the instance of the visitation of the sick in an extreme case, and it would certainly never be used otherwise by me. I could give no absolution to any one except the assurance that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I have frequently refused to do so when asked for many reasons. It is an encouragement to the soul to lean on man rather than on God. You cannot be sure that a real confession has been made—in fact you may be quite sure that it has not, and to absolve a soul on a false or inadequate confession is a terrible crime. Again, you may let off too easily the guilty whom God would condemn, and, conversely, treat too harshly the smoking flax or flickering torch.

No, what is wanted is to bring the soul by prayer into the very presence of God, to pour out its needs to Him. In most cases details of sin or experience should be avoided. It is reality that is wanted. That is all.

It might be asked—what about discipline and penance? Well, I should certainly advise discipline where it seemed to be needed, and restitution where wrong had been done to another, but in

regard to technical penances I do not know of any authorized by Holy Scripture, and I have no desire to invent needless mortifications of the body, which is crucified enough to-day by the necessities of life. But self-discipline is very needful, especially in the case of the young, and much guidance is really required in most cases.

I imagine some one is now asking "Why have you used the term Confessional about a principle which, as you have defined it, is almost entirely free from all the characteristics of what is known as Auricular Confession?" Well, for this reason, that I know of no other term which would serve to indicate the matter under consideration. Next, I would much rather appear to say more than I mean, than have it suspected that I mean more than I say. To put it plainly, I would much rather run the risk of a little personal abuse by using a strong word, than beat about the bush and say, "Oh, I only mean a little ordinary talk with a spiritual application," and have people saying, "Ah, we all know he means something more than that and is only trying to take us in by using soft words."

Moreover, I do feel we have to meet all divergence of opinion with its own weapons. If you want to defeat a worldly or perverted Confessional you must set up a spiritual one. It is no use saying to people "Your system is wrong and useless," if they find that they need it and it helps them. Moreover, you are very apt to be misunderstood. I know for a fact that many Ritualists believe that we Protestants really do not trouble about sin or salvation, that we are Latitudinarians, who find our pleasure in throwing stones at others, and I must say I think we give them too much cause for this idea. Many of our Churches are closed, the Lord's Table is neglected, many of the appointments of our places of worship would not be tolerated in our own homes. Believe me there is real cause for scandal, and though I do not care what people say if it is not deserved, I do grieve that Christ and His Gospel should be discounted because those who profess to be His purest followers will not take the trouble about these spiritual affairs which even the most ignorant and perverted Romanist or Ritualist would regard as a matter of course.

I know I am to blame. I am not scolding you, but I do want to do better and I do want you to help me, to pray for me, to respond to my appeals, to work together and cast aside all unworthy suspicions, jealousies and rivalries and to realize that we are in the midst

of an unexampled crisis, of an unparalleled opportunity. If we lose it, posterity will have a right to rise up and call us cravens. On the other hand, if we can say, " Though I missed my highest destiny through ignorance, bad influences, inadequate training ; yet I made it easier for my sons and daughters to lead nobler, purer, happier, more useful lives, and I did my little part in helping to rear up a better England, to make the world a little brighter by my brief sojourn in it," then we shall not have lived in vain.

God help us all so to give our hearts to Christ that we may become by the power of His Spirit what He intended us to be when He made us in His image and likeness, redeemed us by His precious blood and gave us the glorious commission " As My Father hath sent me even so send I you."

" Confess your faults one to another." Well, I have tried to do my part. Will you do yours? " Pray one for another that ye may be healed." Here is our mutual strength and joy. Will you make more use of it? " The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous Man availeth much." Shall we all try then to be more righteous that we may have more power?

I have purposely refrained from suggesting details. We must not be in a hurry, but we cannot afford to waste time. " The night is far spent—the day is at hand. Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light."

