

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

DR. BURNS' REPLY TO "C."

The "Corporation," therefore, of which "C" so repeatedly speaks, cannot be the Roman only, especially when we find two of its visible heads giving forth such opposite testimonies on this vital point, which mirror a corresponding contrariety, as we shall afterwards find, on a host of others.

The fact is, it never has been shown, nor can be, that the peculiar powers of the apostles were transmitted or exercised, and as for the continued presence of Jesus, the promise, "Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Mat. xxviii. 20), belongs not to any one in particular. It takes in the "disciples," the whole household of faith. If any special honour be shown to the "twelve apostles of the Lamb" no priority is given to one over the rest, for their Master had just said to them in the previous chapter (xix. 28): "You also shall sit upon twelve seats." But, in point of fact, the same promise of His constant presence is given to the humblest member of His mystical body, as He says in Mat. xviii. 20: "For where there are two or three gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." In v. 19, two members of the Church, agreeing together in prayer, are promised an answer, and the verse before that (the 18th), couched in the same general terms, is the oft-quoted, "Amen, I say to you, whatsoever you bind upon earth shall be bound also," etc. Might I not here, as in several other places, with a felt sense of its appropriateness, introduce "C's" own statement: "If we do not believe Christ's word, we are scarcely fit subjects for serious argument." Still, "C's" confidence that he has a scriptural foundation in this matter to stand on, is far from thorough. In one place he says: "In express words the Gospels testify to the power of remitting sins conferred on the apostles," while, four short sentences afterwards he says: "That confession of sins such as I have described as necessary, is not taught in such express words is quite true." The reason assigned by him for the lack of this "express" scriptural evidence is somewhat novel in its character. "We must remember (he says) that the sermons of the apostles, which are related are few, and were addressed to unbelievers." Not so. Before Pentecost 120 gathered in the upper room. We then read of 3000 and 5000. At the period of Stephen's martyrdom (A.D. 37) we read: "The Word of the Lord increased, and the number of the disciples was multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly; a great multitude also of the priests obeyed the faith. Acts v.

There must, therefore, have been multitudes of believers in the audiences of the apostles, who had been regularly enrolled by baptism as members of the Church, and yet, with reference to those apostolic addresses, "C" has the candour to acknowledge "there is nothing about confession in them." We go further than "C" when we say that the "unbelievers," before being baptized, were ordered by Peter to confess in the sense in which we understand confession—*i.e.*, open and public—"before all"—as distinguished from the priest's ear. Thus, on the day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 38), and in Solomon's porch the day after, to the crowd that collected in connection with the healing of the lame man: "Be penitent therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out." (Acts iii. 19) Then, in Acts iv. 4, we are informed: "Many of them who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men was made five thousand." On their confession, and confession then and there, they received the true absolution, not from Peter, but from Him of whom Peter afterwards says, at the first Jerusalem Council (disowning all monopoly of the Spirit's influence that filled the humblest disciple equally with himself): "God, who knoweth the hearts, gave testimony, giving unto them the Holy Ghost as well as to us, and put no difference between us and them." (Acts xv. 8, 9) Why then should any now make such a "difference," when Peter himself repudiates it, going the length afterwards of saying: "The ancients that are among you I beseech who am also an ancient" (more properly elder or presbyter, for the Greek word is *πρεσβυτερος*). (1. Pet. v. 1.)

"C" goes on to say: "It was in their instructions to the new converts after baptism that they would speak of confession, but we have none of these." Say you so? Then what are the apostolic epistles—Paul's thirteen

(leaving out Hebrews), John's three (leaving out his Gospel and Apocalypse), Peter's two, and the one each of James and Jude? What are these, forming the larger portion of the New Testament, made up of but just what "C" aptly calls "their instructions to the new converts"—yet where in all these twenty epistles is there one single "instruction" on the subject of auricular confession? With their known anxiety for the good of their new "converts," and that they might be kept from what one of them calls "damnable heresies," that were even then beginning to crop out as tares in the field, and with the belief that "C" expresses that neglect of confession exposes to such fearful consequences, how can he account for such singular silence?

Dislodged thus from the open field of the Word (though claiming that "If we do not believe Christ's Word, we are not fit subjects for serious argument"), still feeling not sure of his ground, for, as he frankly owns "that confession of sins such as I have described as necessary, is not taught in such express words, is quite true," it is just what we might expect that this faithful champion of his faith would retreat into the thicket of the fathers. While keeping at as convenient a distance as before, from Christ and His apostles, as well as from the fathers that lived closest to them, "C" rings the changes anew on Irenæus of the second century, Tertullian and Origen of the third, Basil of the fourth, Chrysostom and Augustine of the fifth. We are not careful to answer him in this matter, for even supposing that their testimonies referred, not as we contend, to public as distinguished from private confession, still these were but uninspired men, whose statements cannot for a moment be placed on the same lofty level with those of the Divine founder of our faith and his immediate followers, or those earliest of the fathers who companied with them. Two additional fathers are introduced by "C" to whose testimony he evidently attaches much weight, *viz.*, Dionysius, the Areopagite, and Ambrose.

With reference to the former, he informs us that he was converted by the sermon of Paul in the Areopagus. The quotation from Dionysius, so-called Epistle to Demophylus, is unfortunate in this respect, that it strikingly represents one of the evils of the confessional—in granting absolution too easily to notorious offenders—instance recently, it is reported Carey, Brady, O'Donnell, etc. It is not denied that some of the worst criminals that have gone into eternity from the scaffold have been absolved beforehand. The effect of this as a sedative to the conscience, the knowledge that on such easy terms, it can be got, cannot be helpful to morality and good order. Demophylus, according to the showing of "C," had found fault with a priest for absolving an "impious sinner" who came to him "for the medicine of his vices." In this we conceive Demophylus was as his name indicates, "a true friend of the people." Yet Dionysius rates him severely in the extract given because he said anything to "the good priest" who had "justified the impious." We would have "pity on the penitent," as much as any, but infected characters, "impious sinners," as Dionysius calls this one, should remain at quarantine a good while ere a clean bill of health be given them. "C" adds, "the doctrine of Dionysius is wonderfully like ours." I am sorry for it. The principle and practice of making absolution easy with "impious sinners," or to use the expression of this father, "justifying the impious," is injurious in its influence on society, and the church. Speaking of the writings of Dionysius, he calls it "very old indeed," and twice over styles him "Paul's Convert." But this is all pure conjecture with no historical foundation to rest on.

1. The internal evidence is against it. (a) The high-flown style is so different from the beautiful simplicity of the apostolic age. (b) Peculiar theological terms, too, are employed which were not known till the fourth century. (c) The allusions to persons and events of later date. (d) The mystical and philosophical views brought out in certain of his works bear the stamp of the later outcome of Neo-Platonism that was associated with Proclus, who died A.D. 485.

2. This harmonizes with the time when the works of Dionysius were first spoken of. The stubborn fact cannot be got over that the works of this so-called apostolic father were never heard of till the conference of Constantinople, A.D. 533.

3. Though a bold attempt was made by Abbot Hilduin and others during the dark ages to identify Dionysius with St. Dennis of the third century, the patron saint of France; it also had to yield to the light

of more accurate research. Although certain Jesuit writers such as Halloix, Delrio, Natalis-Alexander, etc., clung to the first or third century theory, the more reliable and authoritative Roman Catholic theologians, such as Sirmond, Launoï, Morinus, Dallaens, Le-Noutry, etc., have candidly yielded the earlier and accepted the later chronology. The authorities are too numerous to mention, but can be given in detail if necessary.

St. Ambrose is the only other new father named and quoted from by "C" (born at Treves, 340, died at Milan 397).

We are surprised at Ambrose being quoted, who in other portions of his work goes against some of "C's" favourite dogmas—*e.g.*: On transubstantiation, Ambrose says: "Make this ascribed oblation reasonable and acceptable; which is the figure of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." ("Figura est corporis et sanguinis Domini nostri Jesu Christi"—Ambrosio Opera, tom II. De Sacramento, Lib., iv. cap. v., folio, ed. Bened., 1690.)

On purgatory, St. Ambrose says: "Death is a haven of rest, and makes not our condition worse, but, according as it finds every man, so it reserves him to the judgment to come"—De Bono Mortis, tom I., Lib. I., cap. iv., et cap. ii., Paris, 1686.

I have in reserve six other fuller quotations of like importance, as: "They are not involved in any trials or troubles. They begin to foresee the future glory, and soothing themselves with that consolation, to rest tranquilly in their mansions, attended by guardian angels." (Idem Lib. I., cap. xi., col. 408 409.) While recommending celibacy, he is silent on the Papal supremacy, and comes out against indulgences, the apostolic succession, the immaculate conception, and the primacy of Peter. We must therefore interpret his views on confession, in "C's" extract in the light of his recognized opinions on other questions. The second part of the passage quoted makes it harmless as an argument for auricular confession—"Are you ashamed to supplicate God, who knows you, when you are not ashamed to confess your sins to a man who does not know you?" The italics are "C's," not mine. Right glad are we that he has emphasized that clause. It goes to the "root of the matter. Again and again, in his previous, as in his present, communication, has "C" made the validity of the absolution depend on "moral dispositions" of the penitent. In No. 1 he said: "How should they remit, and how should they retain, unless they know the person's internal state?" Does not "C's" very quotation from Ambrose show the impossibility of any mere man knowing another's "internal state?" This were to exercise the prerogative of the great Heart-searcher, or of Him who knew all men, and needed not that any should give testimony of man, for he knew what was in man. (John ii. 24, 25) It would be a legitimate inference, from the language of St. Ambrose, to say that we might well be ashamed "to confess our sins to a man who does not know us." It is just at this very point that we can make a score again (to use "C's" expression) in the matter of Simon Magus, where he thought he caught us napping.

He (Dr. B.) thinks (says "C") St. Peter would have absolved him if he could." Well, certainly, from all that we are told of the Holy St. Peter, we could not think him less merciful than Dionysius, the Areopagite, and yet we find that unique character sharply chiding one who favoured this very course of keeping absolution from an "impious sinner," who came for the "medicine of his vices." The lenient course of Dionysius "in justifying the impious" is "wonderfully like ours" (says "C"). The stern course of Peter in refusing to remit the sin of Simon, "that impious sinner" (a course the opposite of the Areopagite's)—this is also "wonderfully like ours." He acted (says C) just as our priests would act to day." Are both right? This suggests another point. What is the reason assigned by "C" for Peter's delay in granting absolution? We have said that absolution cannot be given unless the penitent has the proper disposition. But how can Peter know this man's internal state? To know whether he has the proper disposition is to know the heart. He has already seen that in giving Simon baptism on profession of his faith, Peter, though under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a fuller measure than any can be now, judged of this deceiver more favourably than he deserved. The after discovery of "his heart not being right with God" was not the result of his seeing into his heart—that is hid from mortal eyes. "The heart is perverse