

solved from his sin. The prophet Nathan was divinely sent to convict the king of his wrong doing, and upon conviction and repentance to assure him of God's forgiveness.

In this, Nathan's office was a twofold one, an office, moreover—note this well—prophetic rather than sacerdotal. It was the same office as that which belongs to God's ministers now to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins—first to convince of sin and then to declare the absolution of believing penitents.

The credentials of this office, as regards the Christian Church, are to be found in St. John xx., 21-23. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. . . . Receive ye the Holy Ghost : whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained."

There are few passages in the Bible which have been so unhappily misunderstood as this, and have given rise to such extreme, conflicting and erroneous views.

On the one extreme there is the doctrine of the Church of Rome, which gives to the priesthood the sole and absolute power and privilege of conveying and withholding the divine forgiveness of sins.

On the other, there is an idea, prevalent among Protestants, which denies to the Christian Church at large any part or heritage in our Lord's commission. According to this idea, it is held that these words were spoken to the twelve apostles only and intended for them alone. It is thought that an absolute power of conveying or withholding the divine forgiveness was granted to the twelve apostles, and to them only, so that when they died, the power went with them.

But there are two very decided objections to this view. In the first place, no such absolute power was given. Sin is an offence against God, and He only can forgive it.

The power and the right to forgive sin belongs to God alone. And He has never given it to any other—not even an apostle. No human minister has ever had a higher function than the prophetic and declaratory as to the relations between a human soul and God. The Church has indeed had the power to "bind and loose" as regards communion with herself, to "forgive and retain" offences ecclesiastical, but to dispense or withhold, absolutely, the divine forgiveness of sin, God's own prerogative—never.