

It is by the presence of Christ alone, realized by faith, that the sinner can be effectually sustained as he enters the dark valley of the shadow of death.

The following view of the form of absolution in the service for the visitation of the sick, which has strong reasons to recommend it, has been taken by many eminent divines of our church.\* It has been said that it was specially intended for times and for a state of the church when men were often by the decree of the ecclesiastical authorities, or *ipso facto*, excommunicated for the committal of some grave offence against the church: In such a case a man whose conscience had been wounded and his soul terrified by the thought that he had been cut off from the body of the faithful, might earnestly desire, before he departed this life, to be reconciled and restored by the authorized minister and representative of the church, to that communion from which he had been separated. In the collect which immediately follows the absolution, the man who has been just absolved is represented as still *most earnestly desiring pardon and forgiveness*, and the following petitions are presented to God for him: "Open the eyes of thy mercy upon this thy servant, who most earnestly desireth pardon and forgiveness," "preserve and continue this sick member in

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\* Amongst those divines who have taken the view here given of this form of absolution, I would only mention Wheatly, in his "Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer," under the head, "*The form of absolution seems only to respect the censures of the church*," he thus writes: "Now, whether the church designs, by this form, that the priest shall convey God's pardon to the conscience of the sinner, for his sins and offences committed against him; or whether he shall only remit the censures of the church, and continue him in the privilege of church-communion, which he may be supposed to have forfeited by the sins he has confessed, is thought by some not to be clearly or determinately expressed. But if we look forward to the collect immediately after to be used, it looks as if *the church did only intend the remission of ecclesiastical censures and bonds*. For in that prayer the penitent is said still *most earnestly to desire pardon and forgiveness*; which surely there would be no occasion to do, if he had been actually pardoned and forgiven of God, by virtue of the absolution pronounced before. \* \* \* Now it is plain that the authority first promised to St. Peter (Matt. xviii. 18), and afterwards in common to all the apostles, was a power of admitting to or excluding from church-communion. \* \* \* But now it is the opinion of Dr. Hammond, and from him of a late author of not inferior judgment (Dr. Marshal), that this passage has much the same significance with the former, and that the terms in St. John (xx. 23) of *retaining and remitting* are equivalent to those in St. Matthew, of *binding and loosing*. \* \* \* And if this be the sense of the words in St. John, then it is plain that this commission, as well as the former in St. Matthew, confers only a power of *excommunicating and absolving*; and consequently that no authority can be urged from hence for the *applying of God's pardon to the conscience of a sinner or for absolving him any otherwise than from the censures of the church*. \* \* \* As to the form of absolution, of which we are now discoursing, a parenthesis was added at the last review, to intimate that this is not to be used even over the sick, *unless he humbly and heartily desire it*. For it is fit a man should show an earnest desire and a due sense of so great a benefit before it is offered to him; and then, *if he be rightly instructed in the end and design of it, and the form itself be applied with that prudence and caution above described*, the use of it surely may not only tend to the good of the penitent, but may also prove of singular service and advantage to the church."