

OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

DR. BURNS' REPLY TO "C"

The Rev. Dr. Burns delivered the second lecture of his winter course in the lecture room of Fort Massey Church on Friday evening, Dec. 21st, and took for his theme another letter of "C."

I have consented again to reply to "C," because his last, appearing, like his previous communication, simultaneously in two of our local journals, wears an authoritative aspect, and is generally understood to have received the highest sanction. It presents fairly and clearly the R. C. doctrine respecting confession and absolution, and a great variety of vitally important subjects besides. If I do not refer to every point it embraces I must not be held as consenting to his views on those not overtaken at present, or leaving them by default. I regret that the subject has not been kept by "C" within its original limits, but that he has travelled so discursively into the "regions beyond." It would have been better, in order to the distinct elucidation of the theme that originated this friendly interchange, had he concentrated on it, and maintained the common ground on which we stood, in the possession of the same Scriptures. I, at any rate will endeavour to keep the Scriptural ground, appealing invariably as before to the Roman Catholic version (1582 and 1609) while doing a little skirmishing in the wilderness of the Fathers, and glancing in the other directions, towards which the *signis fatuus* of my friend would lure me. To his oft repeated fallacy of "begging the question"—renewed again and again in this long letter—"C" has added another fallacy to which those on our side have now got used—the fallacy, known to logicians as that of "Reasoning in a Circle." "C," like many of his predecessors when hard pushed, has revived the old and oft exploded device of trying to prove the Church by the Bible and then, the Bible, by the Church. It does not satisfactorily meet our respectful request for Scripture proof in favour of auricular confession such as is practised in the Roman Catholic Church, to say "in express words the gospels testify to the powers of remitting sins conferred on the apostles." "That the power of absolving was conferred on the apostles is outside of profitable controversy." We wish to know what these "express words" are. Give us chapter and verse. Meet fairly and squarely the many passages we quoted from your own translation of the Scriptures. You insist on it that the kind of confession you advocate is absolutely necessary to salvation. "For grievous sins (you say, making a distinction between sins for which there is no Bible warrant) confession is not a matter of choice, it is an absolute necessity;" and again, "God will not pardon grievous sins without confession, when it can be made. He has made the law of confession just as much as the law of baptism." We again ask, where? In our sense I know it is written: "He that hideth his sins shall not prosper, but he that shall confess and shall forsake them shall obtain mercy." (Prov. 28, 13) And "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." (1 John i. 9) But that is our kind of confession, not yours. You insist on it that for a sinner to go direct to God is not the right way; and that confessing first in the ear of a priest is essential in order to be finally saved—that this was taught by Christ and practised in apostolic times. When did our Saviour give instructions to this effect? We are not told. On what occasions did the apostles practise this form of confession? Not a solitary instance has been named nor can be. Can a sentence be found in those writings that come closest to the apostolic age that could be even wrested into a favouring of this view? If there were, doubtless such a shrewd and far-sighted observer as "C" would have found it out, and exhibited it in large type.

If it be, as "C" avers, "not a matter of choice, but an absolute necessity," why this ominous silence on the part of those who might be presumed to know most about it? Why were nearly five centuries allowed to elapse before it was made even permissible, and over twelve centuries (4 Lateran Council, 1215) ere it became compulsory? What became of the many who, during these great gaps of time, passed into eternity without knowing or practising this indispensable means of salvation?

"C" says again: "In all times and in all places the Church believed in and practised sacramental confession. Therefore it is God's ordinance, and he who resisteth the ordinance, we are told, purchases to himself damnation." Rather hard on us, my good friend, who resist it so strenuously—"After the way which you call heresy so worship I the God of my fathers" (as Paul puts it, Acts xxiv. 14)—and because I honestly resist what you gratuitously call "God's ordinance," do I and all like minded purchase thereby "damnation?" Are we "explicitly commanded" (as you afterwards state) to "hear and obey its (the Church's) teachings, under pain of eternal condemnation?" We are much more charitable. Far be it from us to cherish such thoughts of you.

"C" admits that a sinner may go straight to God, but God will not receive or remit his sins till he has first appeared before a priest. "The sinner may go directly to Him, but He will say, 'Go show thyself to the priest.'" "C" knows very well the circumstances in connection with which these words as quoted by him were used by our Saviour. They are entirely in harmony with our view of confession, and opposed to his. It is the case of the cleansed leper. Now, according to the law of leprosy as presented in detail in Levit. xiii., what was the priest to do? Not to give the disease or to take it away. The victim was to come with it, and back again when it was removed, that the priest might discover and declare the signs of its presence in the one case, and its disappearance in the other. His office was purely ministerial, not magisterial; his duty, declaratory, not judicial. Six times over in as many verses are we told that he was to pronounce the patient unclean or clean, as the case may be, "binding" him in the former instance, "loosing" him in the latter. Yet the Septuagint rendering of "pronounce unclean" is *meanai*, literally, shall unclean him; and of "pronounce clean," is *katharizei*, literally, "shall cleanse him"—as if it was his doing in both instances, though the passage in the original Hebrew is simply a declaration, not a judicial sentence; Christ and His apostles quoted from the Greek version made nigh three centuries previously, and then generally in use. The purpose of Christ's order "Go show thyself to the priest," is to be interpreted in the light of that ancient article of the Hebrew law. The application to the leprosy of sin is manifest, and the minister's duty as well. When, therefore, Christ authorized His disciples to remit or to retain sin, and so bind or loose the sinner, he used the well understood language of the Levitical statute, to the effect that, just as the former priests were wont to pronounce lepers clean or unclean, so they were to pronounce the forgiveness or non-forgiveness of God in the matter of sin, not to pass the sentence as though it were by "their own power and authority," they did it. "Who can forgive sins, but God only." Man may declare it, but cannot do it. This we have seen over and over again to be the unmistakable teaching of Christ and His apostles. Yet "C" repeats and repeats his former statement, "This power is not merely declaratory, it is efficacious, it is as the power of the Judge, real and effective, though delegated." In view of the "line upon line" which we gave in our lecture on this subject in our last reply to "C," and now, in this, have we not reason for returning to him his own retort: "Now, in sober truth, can any one who feels a responsibility for his utterances assert the above!"

When asserting the efficacious nature of priestly absolution, "C" endeavours to push a parallel between it and the ordinance of baptism. He elaborates this at considerable length, but the gist of his argument is in the sentence, "Confession is just as much of a necessity as Baptism—the latter regenerates us, the former restores us." "Baptism is the one only means of regeneration. Penance, the one only means of restoration after a grievous fall." In a matter so momentous we need something more than mere dogmatic assertion. "Nay, rather to the Law and to the Testimony" (Isaiah lviii. 20) as our old quotation hath it. If, through baptism "the stain of original sin is blotted out the soul regenerated," if, indeed, baptism is the "one only means of regeneration," how comes it: 1. That Christ never presents water baptism as the great regenerating force?

2. That not one instance can be given of Christ having ever baptised.

3. That St. Paul says (1 Cor. i. 14 17): "I give God thanks that I baptized none of you but Crispus and Galus, etc., for Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the Gospel." If baptism be the "one only

means of regeneration," would one so bent on saving souls as Paul have spoken thus or acted thus?

4. That it is said of Simon Magus (Acts viii. 13): "Then Simon himself believed also, and being baptized, he stuck close to Phillip." There are many thoughts suggested by this scene, but these two lie on the surface:

(a) That Simon was baptized on the profession, not on the possession of faith in the Lord Jesus.

(b) That baptism did not regenerate him, for after receiving it from Phillip, Peter says to him: "Thou hast no part nor lot in this matter. For thy heart is not right in the sight of God." (v. 21)

If baptism and confession depend for their efficacy on the mental state of the recipient or penitent, then who can judge of that but He who says: "I am the Lord who search the heart and prove the reins?" (Jeremiah xvii. 10.) Herein even Peter fails, who endorses baptism to one "whose heart was not right with God;" a baptism, too, which works no change on that heart.

5. On the other hand, the dying thief was never baptized at all, but who will deny that he was regenerated to whom his expiring Lord said: "Amen I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." (Luke xxiii. 43.) While arguing thus, I believe in baptism, both adult and infant, though not attaching to it (inasmuch as the Word of God does not) the saving power which Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics claim for it. I am somewhat surprised that the only other passage (in addition to "Show thyself to the priest," and "whosoever sins ye forgive," etc., already fully explained by us) to which "C" refers, is that formerly quoted by him from Acts xix. 18: "And many of those who believed, came confessing and declaring their deeds." He adds: "These words are verified every Saturday night and at other times, in all our churches." He admits also the book-burning, etc., as "at times, verified" which, I suppose, in regard to certain books, is the case. Let the passage be carefully and candidly examined—and can anything else than an open, public confession—be taken out of it? The scene is laid not in a church at all, but "in the school of one Tyrannus," or more probably, from the allusion to the "burning" and "all those that dwelt in Asia, Jews and Gentiles"—flocking to "hear the Word of God," it was in the open air. It is not coming to confess singly, but "many" came, and not in any private way which auricular confession necessitates, but "before all." There is nothing like this, when each penitent goes separately into the confessional usually to be found in R. C. churches, and makes confessions in the ear of the one listener.

"C" speaking of Christ's life in His Church says: "Not only was Christ to remain with the corporation, during the life of the apostles. He was to remain with it for ever." "When Christ explicitly promises to remain for ever with that corporation, He gives us proof enough that it is to live on unchanged." Our friend with admirable coolness and complaisance takes for granted that this "Corporation" must be the one to which he belongs. But what would his favourite St. Augustine say to this? When he acted as secretary to the Council of Melvie and Bishop of Hippo, he along with two hundred and seventeen other bishops threatened with excommunication any who might appeal to Rome. One of the canons of that council runs thus: "Whoever wills to appeal to those beyond the sea, shall not be received by any one in Africa, to the Communion." At the sixth Council of Carthage held in 412, presided over by Aurelius, the Bishop of that city, a formal despatch was forwarded to Celestinus, Bishop of Rome, from the collective episcopate of Africa, warning him not to receive any African appeals or to send any Legates or Commissioners. It is plain, therefore, that for long the African Church belonged not to the "Corporation." Then, what of the Eastern Church with its eighty-four millions with which the strife of the Western was so bitter. Did it not claim to be the "Corporation," too? Nay, did not John IV., Patriarch of Constantinople, its visible head, love to call himself "Ecumenical Patriarch," which so roused the ire of Gregory I., surnamed the Great, his Western brother and rival, that he wrote (A. D. 595) to the Emperor Mauritius bitterly complaining of the presumptuous assumption. One sentence from this memorable missive is worth quoting: "I confidently say that whosoever calls himself the universal priest, or desires to be so called in his arrogance, is a fore-runner of Anti-Christ." ("Ego fidenter dico, quod quisquis, se universalem