

**CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION,
THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND, AS DELIVERED TO
US IN THE BOOK OF COMMON
PRAYER**

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Confession and absolution, the doctrine of the Church of England, as delivered to us in the book of common prayer by John Walter Lea

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JOHN WALTER LEA

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CONFESSIO AND ABSOLUTIO.

THE

DOCTRINE

OF THE

CHURCH OF ENGLAND,

AND HER PROVISION FOR THE RELIEF OF
HER PERPLEXED CHILDREN :

AS DELIVERED TO US IN

THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER.

BY

JOHN WALTER LEA, B.A.,

WADHAM COLLEGE, OXFORD.

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CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION.

THE struggle which has been for years going on in the Church of England for the revival of primitive doctrine and discipline, would, in the very nature of things, be probably progressive. Commencing with the more prominent and momentous subjects, it would pass on gradually to those more in the back-ground, because less generally necessary. It is more necessary that the things which concern all alike should be first set in order, than those which practically affect some only of the members of the Church. The consideration of this would perhaps greatly tend to quiet the minds of many well-disposed, but anxious and timid persons, who give too ready ear to the accusations of the enemies of this movement; viz., that its promoters act in an underhand and jesuitical manner, not venturing to unfold at once their true character and designs, but warily and by little and little, as the times may be able and willing to bear it; and that they creep

onwards softly, step by step, hiding from their followers the mark to which they are driving, until they can by a sudden effort land them all at once in the very midst of all papal corruption. That some may have acted thus is possible: that more may have been themselves carried away as they advanced, and have ended in submitting to Rome which at first they sincerely condemned, is probably too true; but these are the exceptions; either the melancholy effect of too fervid zeal, untempered by knowledge, patience, and self-distrust, or else the deliberate perfidy of enemies who joined themselves outwardly to the movement, in the hope of either thwarting it entirely by bringing it into general suspicion, or of really turning it from its original bent and making it the slave instead of the determined enemy of popery. On calm consideration another solution is more probable as well as more charitable; the one already given, that we must first be right on essentials, on doctrines requisite or most nearly relating to salvation; and then turn our attention to others, of great but not equal value and importance. I do not mean by this that these latter should be entirely unnoticed at an earlier period, but that such would be the general order in which they would be presented. Accordingly we find that at the beginning of the "Church movement," as it is termed, the questions of the Sacraments and of the Apostolical Succession were placed in the foreground, because they had fallen into great oblivion, and were very essential items in the divine

constitution of the Christian Church, nearly concerning the plan of salvation as revealed in the word of God. In process of time, as these doctrines were better understood and more generally accepted, the attention of the Church revivers was turned to other points on which the teaching of the Church had been either ignored, or forgotten, or rejected. At this time it is the doctrine of Confession and Absolution, which is most prominently brought before the minds of men.

And as it was before, so is it now: it has to encounter vehement opposition from various quarters; and when better understood, and by discussion more thoroughly sifted and tried, will probably triumph, as the other doctrines have already triumphed in measure, and are doing more and more continually. At present, however, no doctrine has been assailed with such frantic and reckless insolence, with such malignant and indiscriminating hatred as this. All the vials of abuse and reprobation have been poured out upon it, popular clamour has been excited, mobs raised, inflammatory speeches delivered to wrathful audiences, Churchmen (I am thoroughly ashamed to write it) have leagued with separatists of all sects to revile it, "they that sit in the gate speak against it, and the drunkards make songs upon it." All this has been done under the guise of zeal for what are called, "pure Protestant principles;" partly, God grant it, in ignorance, partly in malice; and at the same time with singular inconsistency, many of these

very men in the heat and whirl of their passion, have confessed or rather complained bitterly, that the very Prayer-book of their vaunted "Protestant" Church of England, sanctions and incites to this great iniquity.

Now what shall be said to all this? To the ungodly and wilfully malicious I have nothing to say; but to the sincere and honest I venture to address these few pages.

As a broad ground whereon to stand, and a starting point from which to commence our investigation, we will take this plain fact. There are three forms of absolution contained in the Book of Common Prayer which the priest is directed to use on three several occasions. 1st. At Morning and Evening Prayer, daily. 2nd. At the Administration of the Holy Communion. 3rd. In the Visitation of the Sick. On each occasion confession is to precede absolution, expressly termed "*General Confession*" in the two first cases, and "*Special Confession*" in the last. It is with this last that I have most to do, as it is this "*Special Confession*" that is made the subject of these vehement disputations.

The direction in the Office for the Visitation of the Sick, is not, however, the only reference to special confession to be found in the Prayer-book. In the Exhortation to be read when notice is given of the Communion, they who cannot quiet their own consciences by other means, are directed to come to the priest "and open their grief," which no un-

prejudiced man will doubt to mean the sins which are the hindrances to their peace of conscience, and is settled so to mean by the next words, "that—they may receive the benefit of absolution;" for as in all the other instances where absolution is to be given, it is to be preceded by confession of sins, it would be unreasonable to conclude the contrary here; and the word "grief" will well bear this meaning of "sin," as we find elsewhere we "are *grieved*—with the burden of our sins:" nor do I believe that any divine of our Church can be produced who would plead for absolution either general or special, without a corresponding confession of sin preceding. This passage may therefore be confidently claimed as a second direction for the use of special confession and absolution.

Still, objections are laid against this ordinance of the Church on the score of its being popish, and various attempts have been made to account for its retention by the Church of England, as that it was done to propitiate the Romish element which still lingered in our Church after the Reformation was far advanced, and the like. Such things may be very easy to say, but they are not by any means so easy to prove, nor will it either do away with the fact that the English Church has constantly, not only at the time of, but ever since the Reformation, given her sanction to this practice under certain circumstances, or explain the equally undeniable fact that her greatest and most orthodox divines have uniformly in their private writings, wherein they