

**THE OBLIGATIONS OF TRUTH IN
RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY; A CRITICAL
EXAMINATION OF A PAMPHLET,
ENTITLED "CONFESSION AS TAUGHT BY
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND"**

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The Obligations of Truth in Religious Controversy; A Critical Examination of a Pamphlet,
Entitled "Confession as Taught by the Church of England" by Edward Garbett

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EDWARD GARBETT

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A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF A PAMPHLET, ENTITLED
"CONFESSION AS TAUGHT BY THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND."


BY
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VICAR OF CHRIST CHURCH, SURBITON, AND CHAFLAIN TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE THE EARL OF SHAFTESBURY.



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THE OBLIGATIONS OF TRUTH IN RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY.

PART I.

A PAMPHLET lies before me, while I write, entitled, "Confession, as Taught in the Church of England, by the Rev. C. N. Gray, Vicar of Helmsley, Yorkshire, late Curate of St. John's, Kidderminster." The title-page bears the words, "Fifth edition," showing that it has attained a very considerable circulation. The information subjoined: "Price ninepence. To Clergy, for distribution, 20 for 10s," implies the author's expectation of a large circle of readers, and the purpose, that it should be widely used for the spread of information on an important and pressing question. The Archdeacon of Taunton, in his sermon on Confession, preached in Wells Cathedral, in the summer of 1873, quoted from this pamphlet. Putting these things together, I conclude that this pamphlet is intended to be used as a kind of text-book on the controversy, and I have reason to believe that it is very largely accepted in this character, even in places where accurate information may so naturally be expected to exist, as in the Universities.

The proposed object of the pamphlet is to prove that the Church of England teaches "Confession to Man," and that this Confession should be "habitual." "Habitual Confession" is explained to mean, "that Confession may be repeated whensoever it be required; and that it is not confined merely to those who have committed great crimes, but is allowed to all." It is evident that, in the controversy at present waged among us on the subject of Confession, the point in dispute will turn upon the phrase, "whensoever it be required." If the words mean no more, than that a member of the Church of England, disquieted in mind by the sense of sin, unable to come to the holy Communion "with a full trust in God's mercy, and with

a quiet conscience," and therefore requiring "further comfort or counsel;" or finding at the approach of death his "conscience troubled with some weighty matter," may consistently "make a special confession of his sins" in the one case, and in the other case, go to some "discreet and learned minister of God's Word, and open his grief"—if, I repeat, this is all that is intended by the "Habitual Confession" of this pamphlet, then I for one have no ground of dispute with the author, for all men, so far as I know, frankly avow that this is the teaching of the Church of England. In this case there is no controversy between Mr. Gray and other Churchmen, and the publication of his pamphlet, to prove what all admit, has been altogether unnecessary.

But the author must mean more than this, and it is a just ground of complaint, that he has not more distinctly stated what he means. It appears that by the phrase, "whenever it be required," he refers to, and intends to encourage, such a sensitiveness and scrupulosity of conscience, as renders the habitual assistance of a spiritual physician necessary. That I may avoid the faintest risk of misrepresenting him, I give his own statement in full:—

"I hold that Confession is ALLOWED TO ALL who are troubled in mind, when preparing for Holy Communion or for death; since all are advised, yea, even bidden and 'moved' 'to open their grief,' and 'make special confession.'

I say all; for we should *all* be communicants, we should *all* be prepared to die. It is therefore offered to all, suggested to all. But yet liberty is left to all. Liberty to use, liberty to omit. The formula which I have taught is in accordance with this, viz.:—'The Church of England says you *may* use Confession; the Church of Rome says you *must*.'

"Still further, I hold that the Church lays down no rule as to WHAT IS A 'WEIGHTY MATTER,' and what is not; what sins should cause a conscience to be so troubled as to need Confession, or what should not. To the drunkard, it may be, his sin is no weighty matter, brings no unquiet conscience; while to the saint, the remembrance that his sins (small as they may seem in the eyes of other

men) are yet 'more in number than the hairs of his head,' may justly 'cause his heart to fail.'

"I hold, moreover, that 'CONFESSION MAY BE REPEATED WHENSOEVER IT IS REQUIRED;' since the Church says if you cannot (by means described) 'quiet your own conscience,' 'open your grief.' Your having confessed before matters not: if your conscience be again unquiet, the words of the exhortation again apply to you.

"But though I claim this liberty for English Churchmen, that according to the teaching of the Prayer Book they may come from time to time whenever 'their conscience is unquiet,' for the 'avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness,' my own view is that *very* frequent confessions are probably unhealthy, and I should therefore be inclined to discourage them, though I should hold it impossible for any Clergyman positively to refuse to receive them; because I maintain that the use, equally with the non-use, should be left entirely to the discretion of each individual soul.

Moreover, this I believe, that a person who is in earnest will be careful in self-examination; and though sins be confessed once, human nature is not conquered, nor do we become holy all at once; there are relapses into former sins; sins, too, there are, which once indeed seemed small as compared with those greater ones since in God's mercy trodden under foot, but which now stand forth to clearer eyes in darker form; the soul itself begins to see sin somewhat more as God sees it:—how that one single sin (little you may call it if you will) is enough to make us unfit for heaven and for Christ, enough to damn us for ever; how that each little sin required the outpouring of that atoning Blood; that for one little sin did Adam die, and the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. When, then, the soul begins to see that *no* sin in God's sight is really small, but *all* are weighty; when (shrinking under the awful accumulation of them) it begins, though faintly, still in some measure, to realise the immensity of the Love of God poured forth upon us. His awful hatred of *every* sin, our own gross ingratitude,—it will feel more than ever that the 'remembrance of our sins is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable,' and so again will resort once more to that same fountain of healing and of comfort."

I point attention to the last words. What is intended by "that same fountain of healing and comfort;" they must have some reference to Confession, or else they are wholly irrelevant