

# THE OXFORD CONFERENCE OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHMEN, 1934.

## THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

AND

## THE PRESENT DISTRESS.

Address given by the REV. C. M. CHAVASSE, M.A., M.C.  
(Master of St. Peter's Hall) and Chairman of the Conference.

IT is hard to consider the Ministry of Reconciliation with an open mind. It is inevitable that strong prejudice should surround a subject which possesses so unsavoury a history, and has occasioned such acute controversy. But fear, watching briefs, party loyalties, and the like, fetter free and helpful discussion; and we must pray that we may lose ourselves in the vital importance of our purpose—namely, how best we may assist burdened consciences to an assured peace and communion with their heavenly Father. If so, then the experience of history will help to safeguard us from taking wrong paths in our eagerness to tend the flock of Christ committed to our charge. And with this object in view I would open this Conference on the Ministry of Reconciliation by (1) glancing at its past history; (2) outlining the present distress which gives such urgency to our subject; and (3) suggesting the broad lines along which practical action is indicated.

### THE HISTORY OF CONFESSION.

First, as regards the history of the Ministry of Reconciliation; it is, in effect, that of Confession and Absolution. It is widely agreed that the charge of our Risen Lord in John xx. 23, which forms so prominent a feature in the ordination of priests: "Whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained"—is a commission addressed to the Church as a whole, and not specifically to the clergy. It is likewise accepted that the words contain a summary of the general mission of the Church with regard to the remission of sins; and one which, from the first, was fulfilled by preaching, baptism, admission to Holy Communion, as also by that "godly discipline" of public penance alluded to in the Communion Service. In the New Testament and in the writings of the Primitive Church during the first two centuries, there is complete silence regarding private Confession and Absolution. Indeed, it may be said that for five centuries the Church was cognisant of public confession only: a discipline which does not fall into our immediate purview, seeing that we are concerned with the private adjustment of personal relationships with God rather than the reconciliation of open offenders to the injured Body of the Church. There is no doubt,

however, that the system of Auricular Confession evolved out of this Public Confession. Like the doctrine of Transubstantiation it is a legacy of the barbarian irruption into the Roman Empire, and both were finally ratified at the Lateran Council of 1215.

At the same time it is obvious that the pastoral duty of ministering privately to burdened consciences is included in the general charge of the Risen Christ to the Church as a whole; and "there existed undoubtedly from a very early period private confession followed by no penitence, but also by no absolution."<sup>1</sup> The minister was regarded as a physician of the soul. His ministry consisted in what is now termed "direction." And it was this ministry of "healing" or "direction," exercised by the Primitive Church, which the Reformers sought to revive in place of the Confessional, as evidenced by the invitation in the Communion Service to any with an unquiet conscience to "open his grief" to some "discreet and learned minister of God's Word." Hooker has expressed the Reformation ideal in the words: "We labour to instruct men in such sort, that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself."<sup>2</sup> But there will always remain special cases which require special treatment; though owing to the horror of the Confessional in the sixteenth century, and again at its revival by the Oxford Movement, the Church of England has never developed this primitive and private Ministry of Reconciliation which I might describe as Spiritual Surgery or Healing. It is towards the need and possibility of so doing to-day that I would direct your particular attention; and to this end we must examine more carefully what is involved in the terms "Confession, Absolution, and Direction."

#### THE CARDINAL POINT IN CONFESSION.

(a) *Confession* to a priest is sometimes called a Sacrament, on the ground that the confessor represents God to whom confession is thereby made. But, whatever the procedure, it is a misnomer to term Confession a Sacrament. Sacraments are movements of God to men; they cannot exist where the movement is from men to God. As if God, Who is Spirit, requires outward signs to enable Him to apprehend inward reality! Rather, when any such material representation of God intrudes between the approach of His children and their heavenly Father, the true name for it is Idolatry. This means that even when confession is made to God in the presence of a priest, it need not be spoken aloud either in whole or even in part. A physician of the soul does not require a recital of all remembered sins to enable him to heal the wound of one who has opened to him a particular grief. Neither does the pronouncement of Absolution demand the hearing of the sins committed by a penitent, but simply the assurance of his contrition. Only God knows whether the most elaborate confession is genuine and complete; and the Absolution pronounced by God's minister is only effective in proportion as there is true repentance. Even the

<sup>1</sup> Art. on *Exomologesis* in Cheetham's *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*.

<sup>2</sup> *Eccles. Pol.*, VI, c. 6.

“special confession” contemplated in the “Visitation of the Sick” need not be uttered aloud, as a comment by Bishop Cosin shows.<sup>1</sup> For, in the words of the Lutheran Prayer Book, “the important point is not that the confessor should hear each particular sin, but that a heart and conscience distressed and burdened by sin should be comforted and brought to peace by assurance of Divine forgiveness. For the cardinal point in confession is not our own work, namely our confession, but the work of God, which is the forgiveness of sins.”

#### A PHYSICIAN OF SOULS.

(b) *Absolution* is sacramental in character, in the same way that the Anointing of the Sick is sacramental of the healing of God’s blessing. And both may be necessary in certain urgent cases. For example, I have found the pronouncement of Absolution of real benefit in cases where the physical foulness of disease contracted through sin seemed to necessitate such an outward sign before the penitent could feel clean in the sight of God. But both Absolution and Anointing become harmful if employed save in very exceptional circumstances, for such a practice (again in the words of Hooker) “would make all sores seem incurable unless the priest have a hand in them.” Absolution should be looked upon in the light of a surgical operation, and as such the supposition must be “never again.”

(c) It is *Direction*, or, as it is termed in the Prayer Book—“ghostly counsel and advice”—that is the essential element in the Ministry of Reconciliation; and in it Confession and Absolution play their part as may be necessary. As in the Primitive Church, the Pastor should regard himself as a Physician of Souls, and as such—like Chinese doctors who are said to be remunerated as long as their services are not required—his chief aim will be to build up self-reliant and healthy Christians who themselves know how to crave and obtain the forgiveness of God without his aid. Cases of unquiet consciences he will deal with as a doctor in his consulting-room. Certain of his spiritual patients will need to return to him again; some of them, indeed, with some frequency and over a long period. And occasionally the surgical operation of Absolution may be necessary.

#### THE UNBOSOMING OF CONFIDENCES.

Now such a conception of the Ministry of Reconciliation as a ministry of Soul Healing declares the guiding principle as to the unbosoming of confidences in Confession, and explains the injury and scandal that has resulted from the Confessional. The question as to confidences is simply this—how far, in each case, are they *necessary* or *unnecessary* in order to bring a soul into the assurance of God’s pardon and peace? Where a confidence is *necessary*, then the relief of unburdening the mind is so unutterable that many confuse it with a sense of forgiveness, and it banishes that restraint

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Lib. Cosin’s Works, vol. IV, p. 262.

which, otherwise, is experienced in subsequent and ordinary meetings between penitent and confessor. Also where a confidence is *necessary*, then, whatever its nature, the confessor need never be afraid that its hearing will contaminate his imagination. In such cases his whole personality is so going forth in the effort of helping another, that his inner consciousness is unreceptive. He is giving out not taking in, with the result that the confidence, whatever its character, makes so little impression upon his mind that he is as likely as not to forget what his ear has heard.

But if, on the other hand, a confidence is *unnecessary*—then, whether it is a smoking-room story, or a secret of the Confessional it matters not, an injury is thereby inflicted both on the teller and hearer from which God Himself cannot deliver. In Confession what is unnecessary coarsens the modesty of penitents and weakens their character. It also damages the purity of the Confessor and inclines him to arrogance. Moreover, unnecessary Confession opens the door to sadist perversion ; a possibility it is folly to ignore. The Confessor is liable to like having persons abased before him ; and penitents to like abasing themselves. The Minister to Reconciliation not only requires very earnestly to study the individual personality of those who entrust themselves to his care ; but also to search his own motives and actions before Him Who purchased the flock of God with His own precious blood.

#### PRESENT DAY NEEDS.

(2) *We are now in a position to study the present Distress* which renders our Conference on this subject so imperative. There are four factors which to-day affect the Ministry of Reconciliation—two of them calling upon the clergy to exercise, as never before, a personal ministry among individuals, and the other two making it difficult for them to do so.

(a) On the one hand, the War and its aftermath has strewn the country with spiritual wrecks ; and there are, in consequence, far more who need adjustment (and that of a difficult and drastic character) than was the case twenty years ago. Obviously their cases demand more than the normal and general ministrations which the Church can offer them ; it is specialized and individual treatment that is required.

(b) Then also there is much less reticence among younger people than was customary with our pre-War generation. It is all part of a craving for self-expression into which I need not enter. But the result is that numbers to-day are ready to talk about themselves, and to discuss their most intimate problems—sometimes even in public, but certainly with a sympathetic friend. There are, therefore, patients in plenty for the physician of souls ; and what is more they knock upon his door.

(c) But, on the other hand, parish priests are handicapped both by circumstance and training from rising to meet a great need and a still greater opportunity. What with the rapid growth of population and the decrease in the number of clergy, the pastor is not

known by his people. Before the War, when the minister could and *did* visit his reasonably-sized parish, he knew the individual members of his flock, and was able to speak the word in season as occasion arose; while they, on their part, were ready to consult one whom they regarded as a friend. But to-day, apart from Church congregations, clergy and laity are strangers to each other; and half the problem before us with regard to the Ministry of Reconciliation is how to bring them together into close and personal touch.

(d) Furthermore, there has been the rapid development (again by reason of the War) of the Science of Psychology. Psychology has revealed the importance and urgency of spiritual direction; and, moreover, the futility of any cut-and-dried system of Confession and Absolution in healing the deep wounds of the soul. But it has also shown that in such personal dealings the clergy require a training and instruction which at present they do not possess; and that clumsy ministrations, however well-meaning, may do cruel and grievous mischief to the sensitive and intricate mechanism of human personality.

#### PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS.

(3) With such facts in mind we turn, in the last place, to ascertain *the broad lines along which we should try and meet this Present Distress*. First and foremost, let us beware of any hasty, impulsive, or ill-considered action. A false step at the present juncture, however well-intentioned, might prejudice the future and produce dangerous and even fatal consequences of a far-reaching order. Christendom is still suffering from the results which followed the barbarian irruption into the Roman Empire, and the history of the Dark Ages is a standing warning not to allow the pressure of outside circumstances to override truth, or dictate Church doctrine and practice. It is as great folly to legislate for the normal in times which are abnormal, as for a patient when suffering from jaundice to plan his diet for the rest of his life. We have, therefore, in all we propose concerning the Ministry of Reconciliation, jealousy to keep before our eyes the unchanging ideal of so building up the faith and experience of the children of God, that they may possess direct relationship with their heavenly Father and know of themselves how to approach Him Who alone can read the heart or forgive sins. To this end the chief requisite is to strengthen all the normal ministrations of the Church, such as preaching, Confirmation instruction, and, above all, that pastoral visitation which renders the parish priest the friend and confidant of all his people. Then (and not till then) the next step must be to make it easier for troubled consciences to have access to us, or "to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word." We need to open out what is at present an unknown track, requiring fresh negotiation by any who use it, into a well-defined right of way which all can easily follow. If we will place ourselves in the position of those who would gain from us the help and assurance to which they are entitled, we shall recognise that from their standpoint it may be a daunting experience

to seek us out in our own homes. I am certain that the unwritten law of professional secrecy is scrupulously maintained by the clergy of the Church of England. At the same time, hesitating penitents often dread running the gauntlet (as they imagine) of the curious eyes of the Vicar's wife, or of some neighbour, as they pull the vicarage bell. Sometimes, also, the grief to be opened is of such a character that shrinking souls feel they cannot mention it in the everyday surroundings of a study; though, possibly, they could just screw themselves up to tell it out in the House of God. And, similarly (though I do not myself experience this difficulty) there are clergy who feel more professional and at ease, in dealing with spiritual wounds and sickness, when robed in a cassock and seated in Church.

#### NEED OF INDIVIDUAL TREATMENT.

Although, therefore, the generality of cases can be dealt with by a physician in his own study, as if it were a doctor's consulting-room; yet I would urge that more provision should be made than at present for interviews in church. As the whole purpose of the Ministry of Reconciliation is to adjust, once and for all, lives which have gone wrong; and to bring *permanent* peace and assurance to burdened consciences; I do not suggest that the clergy should be found in church at certain times every week *all through the year*. It would be sufficient if the parish priest showed himself to be specially available, and indeed invited approach, during the season of Lent, and possibly also of Advent. Then, if further interviews were desirable, these could easily be arranged, once the ice was broken. Meanwhile, cathedrals and certain churches might be used as centres where picked clergy could take it in turns to be on duty throughout the year. To such experts difficult cases could be sent; and any might have access to their counsel who wished to remain unknown, or desired some other minister of God's Word than their own clergyman. But the great matter is from first to last for the Minister of Reconciliation to consider himself a physician of souls, and to view with sympathetic imagination the fears and hesitations of those who long to be healed. Everyone that needs our ministrations requires individual treatment; and there is *no official procedure* whether we try to help our people as we sit with them in our own studies, or side by side with them in a pew in the church. If we are clear about principles and the general lines of our practice, God will show us how best to help each one of our cases as we pray over them and number them all before Him one by one.

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