

SOLEMN QUESTIONS

FOR

MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

BY A CLERGYMAN.

PART I.

The First Leading Doctrine of the Church of England-Service, is a View of our Character before God.

THE church-service opens with very suitable portions of Scripture, to excite the attention of the people to divine worship; and then proceeds to an exhortation, in which they are earnestly entreated “to acknowledge and confess their manifold sins and wickedness; and not to dissemble nor cloke them before the face of Almighty God; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart;” and, agreeably to this exhortation, the whole congregation fall upon their knees, and make their humble confession to Almighty God, in the most solemn expressions of self-condemnation and unworthiness that language can employ. And this confession of sins is uniformly pursued through every part of the service; so that the character in which every such individual is supposed to appear before God, is that of a self-condemned sinner.

In the general confession, we declare, that “we have erred and strayed from God’s way like lost sheep; that we have followed too much the devices and desires of our hearts; have offended against his holy laws; have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and done those things which we ought not to have done; and that there is no health in us;” and under this sense of our sin and unworthiness, we beg of God to be merciful to us, “miserable offenders.” In like manner in the Communion Service, we declare, “we bewail our manifold

sins and wickedness; that we do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; that the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them intolerable." Indeed, what are all those responses, in which we confess our sins, and implore God "to be merciful to us miserable sinners," but so many proofs that this is the leading character in which our church considers the subject? For surely, if these expressions mean any thing, they mean that all the congregation, as well minister as people, come under the character of self-condemned sinners before God; and sinners in whom there is no health, no power of self-deliverance; and they are not only sinners, but miserable sinners, who bewail their sins; to whom the remembrance of them is grievous, and the burden intolerable," and who cry out, under an afflicting sense of the chain they feel, for deliverance and salvation.

I would now desire my reader to pause one moment, and propose to himself those solemn questions which naturally arise out of the first view of our subject: and that I may not offend, I shall bring my own heart under the examination, as that with which I have a right to make free.

I will consider myself, then, as entering upon public worship, and having called the attention of the people, by reading one or more of the portions of Scripture appointed for that purpose; I exhort them "to acknowledge and confess their manifold sins and wickedness;" and under these solemn impressions, as the leader in prayer, I draw near the mercy-seat, advancing, as it were, a step before the people (for this is all along understood) and begin that solemn prayer of humiliation just noticed, in which I have earnestly besought the congregation to follow me.

Suppose an uninterested person were to come into the assembly, and were to ask me, "Pray, Sir, are you in jest or in earnest in all this?" What should I answer him? Doth the reader shudder at the bare possibility, that the thing remains doubtful? Well

then may I?—But yet, am not I in jest, if my tongue agree not with the sentiments of my heart? Am I not in jest, if I profess myself to be a miserable sinner, while yet I never felt any misery in sin, or any desire of deliverance from it? Am I not in jest to tell God “that there is no health in me;” that is, no health of soul, not the smallest degree of goodness to recommend me to his mercy, and yet fancy myself a very worthy character, and one justly entitled to his divine favour? In short, am I not in jest, not only while reading the prayers, but going through the whole of the church-service, to speak of “the burden of sin as intolerable,” which I never felt; of “being heartily sorry for my misdoings,” for which I never truly sorrowed in heart; and of “earnestly repenting of manifold sins and wickedness,” unconcerned all the while how many, or how aggravated those manifold sins are, and unconscious what earnest repentance (which is the gift of God alone) means?

I pause over an examination so infinitely interesting, involving, as it doth, such important consequences; and, under an awful sense of his inspection, who “trieth the heart and searcheth the reins,” I would very earnestly desire to arrive at some certain decision on this great point. It cannot be a matter difficult to attain; if examined only by the corresponding conduct:—For example, if I am really sincere in my conviction of the important truths before mentioned, and do from my heart believe in the doctrine of the fallen state of human nature,—all my preaching, as well as my conduct in the world, will agree with it. Confessing, while in the desk, myself and people to be helpless sinners before God, I shall not in the pulpit cry up the moral rectitude of human nature; nor, in defiance of my own declarations and the testimony of Scripture, contend that man is able to help himself; and exhort the congregation to do that of themselves which, just before, we all declared we are incapable of doing. Neither shall I profess in the church, before God, that I am miserable by reason of

sin; and in the world, before men, manifest that I am happy in the enjoyment of it.

Nor let the reader who is not of the sacred order imagine, that this inquiry is uninteresting to him; for if there be no union between the heart and the tongue in seasons of devotion, it is evident that we cannot come within the description of those "who worship God in spirit and in truth." After the outline I have sketched for my own examination, suffer me, my dear reader, to add, that your sincerity before God may be ascertained by a similar standard: for if you express sorrow for sin which you never felt; and a misery in sin which you never knew; if you cry out under a consciousness of having broke God's commandments, "Lord have mercy upon me, and incline my heart to keep this law," and yet rise from your knees perfectly unconscious of your guilt and danger, and unconcerned whether you obtain the mercy you implore or not; if in the common service of the church you uniformly confess yourself to be a sinner, and in the ordinary walk of life as uniformly "thank God you are not as other men are; if in the dedication of yourself to God you profess to present yourself "a living sacrifice, as your reasonable service," and desire that "henceforth" you may be enabled "to walk in newness of life;" and yet out of the church are found walking "in the vanity of your mind,"—the prophet Isaiah hath exactly drawn your character when he saith, "He feedeth on ashes; a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?" Isaiah xlv. 20.

PART II.

In all the Offices of the Church of England, Salvation is uniformly set forth as the Effect of the Sole Merit, Righteousness, and Death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It has been shewn, from undeniable evidence, that the first leading object in the established worship, is to impress upon the mind a true sense of the sinful,

fallen, helpless state of man. The next design, which is as steadily followed up in every part of the service, is so direct to the person and offices of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the only restorer of our fallen nature. There is a beautiful order in this method of worship, which, though perhaps overlooked by many, is worthy the observation of all. The church, having first aimed to impress the congregation with a deep sense of the sins and miseries of nature, then endeavours to lead the heart which is wounded by sin to the means of recovery; and having awakened the recollection to a view that in ourselves we have no help, to point to him who alone can say unto the soul, "I am thy salvation."

That this is a leading point in all the church-services, when speaking of the person and offices of the Lord Jesus Christ, will appear from the slightest view.

In the office of *Baptism*, having been first reminded that all men are conceived and born in sin; and that our Saviour Christ saith, "None can enter into the kingdom of God except he be regenerated and born anew of water and the Holy Ghost," the congregation are desired to "call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant that, which by nature we cannot have?" and what this is, the whole service is careful to inform us; namely, the being washed from our sins in the blood of Christ, and regenerated by the Holy Ghost; for which purpose, as one of the prayers strongly expresses it, "The most dearly beloved Son of God, Jesus Christ, did shed out of his most precious side both water and blood."

In the Catechism, the same leading truth is kept up. In speaking of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, we are taught that "the inward and spiritual grace" of the former is, "a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness; because, being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are thereby made the children of grace;" and the latter, being for "the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ, and of the benefits which we receive thereby,"

the inward part, or thing signified is, "the body and blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper."

Whenever the forgiveness of sins is spoken of, and held forth to the penitent, it is proclaimed "according to the promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord." Almost every prayer concludes with this as the leading idea, that the salvation of sinners is in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. In the *Te Deum* we call upon the Redeemer, under his most gracious character, "as the everlasting Son of the Father, who, when he took upon him to deliver man, and had overcome the sharpness of death, did open the kingdom of Heaven to all believers." And in the contemplation of this rich mercy, "we therefore pray him to help his servants whom he hath redeemed with his most precious blood." In the *Litany*, we implore "the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, to grant us his peace: not to remember our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers, neither to take vengeance of our sins, but to spare his people whom he hath redeemed with his most precious blood; and not to be angry with us for ever." And still following up the same petition, we call upon him "to deliver us by his cross and passion, his glorious resurrection and ascension, and by the coming of the Holy Ghost.

In the exhortation to the most comfortable ordinance of the body and blood of Christ, it is expressly said "to be received in remembrance of his meritorious cross and passion, whereby alone we obtain remission of sins, and are made partakers of the kingdom of Heaven." And the whole design of that refreshing service is directed to this one end; that, as "the Lord Jesus Christ, when suffering death upon the cross for our redemption, by the one oblation of himself once offered, made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world,"—the faithful communicants desire "so to eat the flesh of Christ, and drink his blood, that their sinful bodies may be made clean by his body,

and their souls washed through his most precious blood." And, in the last office, for the burial of the dead, salvation through the merits and death of the Lord Jesus Christ is uniformly held forth. The ashes of true believers are committed to the dust of the earth, "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be like his glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself."

The inquiry under this article in our church-service, is, Do we, or do we not, accept this great doctrine of the church, agreeably to the liturgy, and our uniform profession of it in our services and prayers? Pause, my brother, of what character soever you may be, pause a moment over the important question.

Am I a minister of the Church of England? If then I am sincere in my profession, that I am seeking salvation only through the merits, righteousness, and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, I shall be continually holding him up to my people in his person and offices under this interesting character. I shall be continually directing sinners to him "as the Alpha and Omega, the Author and Finisher of Salvation." And my determination will be, like that of the great apostle, "to know nothing among men but Christ Jesus, and him crucified." What is the fact concerning this department of my ministry? Do I thus preach Christ? Is his adorable name the chief topic of every discourse, and, to endear him to sinners, the sole object of my preaching? In short, is it the uniform labour of every sermon to manifest that "there is salvation in no other, neither is there any other name under Heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved?" If so, there will be an happy correspondence between my preaching and the doctrine of the established church in all its departments: and this leading point of seeking salvation through Christ, will appear uppermost in all my ministrations: "My speech and my preaching," like that of the apostles, will not be "with enticing words

of man's wisdom;" for this is to preach self, and not Christ Jesus the Lord." I shall not declaim on the moral excellence of human nature, while our church prayers, with one voice, continually declare we have no health, no excellence in us; neither shall I recommend that human strength be exerted in acts of moral virtue to procure our salvation, while the same form of worship solemnly assures us, that in "God alone is our help found." This would be indeed to preach "Moses, as of old time;" but it would not be to preach "the Lord Jesus Christ." And while I am careful to follow the doctrine and liturgy of the church, in holding up the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of sinners, I shall never direct the congregation to seek salvation partly by their own works and partly by his; for this is a mongrel religion, unknown in Scripture. It is not the doctrine of the law; for that pronounces a curse upon "every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." Gal. iii. 10. Neither is it the gospel; for that expressly says, "we are saved by grace, through faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast." Ephes. ii. 3, 9.

I pause,—to examine both the fact and its solemn consequence. Awful as it is, to behold the deceitfulness of the human heart, in its duplicity between man and man, in the common circumstances of life, yet, when that duplicity is exercised in matters of an eternal moment towards the infinite Majesty of Heaven, it puts on a more malignant, a more dangerous form. The fallacious reasonings of the human heart may amuse and satisfy my mind in a light and inconsiderate hour: but the time is approaching when it will appear that there can be but one standard of truth; and that the estimate of it is not to be formed by the caprice of men, but by the word of God. If, therefore, I am sincere, I must preach Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life." And as the church in all her offices, homilies, articles, liturgy, uniformly holds forth salva-

tion, through the alone merits, righteousness, and death of the Lord Jesus, my preaching will carry with it a complete correspondence; that, as the apostle says, "seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 2 Cor. iv. 1, 2.

But while I desire the Lord to "try me, and search the ground of my heart" on this great point, I would very affectionately desire the reader, though he be not of the sacred order, not to let the question pass unexamined by him, as though it concerned only the minister of the sanctuary. Every member of the established church is most highly interested, to know whether his outward profession in creeds and prayers corresponds with his inward conviction and sincere belief before God;—for to profess, in all the different parts of the liturgy, as is evidently done, that I am seeking salvation only through the merits and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet, in actions, to prove that I am seeking it in another way; to address the Redeemer by prayer, as the Lamb of God, who alone taketh away the sins of the world, and to manifest disapprobation of that preaching, which declares that there is salvation in no other; to declare before God continually, in every renewed attendance on the church, that I am a miserable sinner, in whom there is no health; and, in the same moment, to desire that my righteousness may be accepted as a mean of salvation, in conjunction with the righteousness of Christ,—what is all this but deception of the mind, and in the most sacred concerns manifesting that, though "we draw nigh to God with our mouth, our hearts are far from him?"

PART III.

Another leading Doctrine of the Church of England-Service, is, that of the blessed Spirit's Work in the Heart, in "taking of the Things of Jesus, to shew them unto his People." John xvi. 14, 15.

As the finishing of the whole, the church directs to *the blessed Spirit's work in the heart*, as that alone which can render the whole plan of redemption effectual, by a *personal* application of the Saviour's merits to the sinner's necessities: and as this becomes so highly important, the church is careful in all her services, to keep a constant and unremitting attention to this great office of the Holy Spirit, that both minister and people may implore his aid, and desire to be under the direction of his gracious influence.

This is obvious, as a prominent feature through the whole church service, where almost every office begins with a prayer similar in effect, if not in words, to the order for morning and evening prayer daily throughout the year; That "the Lord would open our lips, that our mouth might shew forth his praise; that God would make speed to save us; and the Lord make haste to help us." Surely it can require no particular proof, that the leading point, uniformly kept up through all our worship, is, that from Him "all Holy desires, all good councils, and all just works do proceed;" and that, as one of the prayers expresses it, "because, through the frailty of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without him," we earnestly beg, above all things, "the aids of his grace, that he would make clean our hearts within us, and take not his Holy Spirit from us."

Indeed, as the application of Christ and his benefits to the soul is the grand object for which all the ordinances of worship are appointed, and all this it is the office of the Holy Spirit to perform, it is not to be wondered at that the church should so earnestly study to inculcate the vast importance of this principle on the minds of the minister and congregation. For the one cannot preach profitably, neither the other hear

to any saving purpose, but from his blessed teaching. It is the Spirit's work to "convince of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment." John xvi. 8. It is his peculiar office to glorify the Lord Jesus in "taking of his things to shew them to his people." John xvi. 14. No grace can be first awakened in the soul, but from his quickening. Ephes. ii. 1. No grace called forth into exercise, but from his power. Phil. ii. 13, 15. Not a promise can the soul plead, but of the Spirit's shewing. John xvi. 15. Nor an argument in prayer, but of the Spirit's framing. Rom. viii. 26. And although the Lord Jesus stands revealed in the Scripture, as "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption," yet he is not so to us, unless made so by the blessed Spirit's agency. 1 Cor. i. 30.

An inquiry more interesting, both to the minister and people, cannot be proposed, than what this view of the importance of the Holy Ghost's work on the heart occasions; whether the one be careful to hold up in all his ministrations the indispensable necessity of the Spirit's teaching; and the other to implore the *hearing ear* and the *seeing eye*; without which the ministry of men and angels will be but as *sounding brass*, or a *tinkling cymbal*.

Surely, it is a solemn question, Whether it be our uniform study and desire to come under the Divine teachings, both before we engage in our solemn services, during the season that we are in the exercise of worship, hearing or reading the word, and after our religious duties are ended; or whether we come before the High and Lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, with heedlessness of character, as "the horse rusheth into the battle?"

If my reader be of the clergy, I would very earnestly and affectionately recommend to him these solemn considerations. For if it be your province, O man of God, to minister in holy things; and if you are really desirous not to labour in vain, nor spend your strength for nought, you will seek in every ministration the

direction and influence of the Holy Ghost; without which you will most assuredly be unsuccessful. You cannot have a better standard to ascertain your ministerial character by, than that you undertake nothing but in the Spirit's strength; go forth in nothing but by his commission; and depend upon nothing but his blessing. And if my reader be of the laity, similar observations will as readily answer to his own mind those solemn questions in which he is equally interested, as to his private and personal concern respecting the Spirit's work in the heart. The soul that is really and truly taught of God, cannot but know that the Spirit's influence is essential to the properly performing of every good word and work. It is He who must first awaken to a sense of sin, and to a knowledge of want in the soul; it is He who can alone quicken the soul from dead works to serve the living and true God; and it is his blessed office to begin, carry on, and complete the work of grace, until Christ be fully formed in the heart, the hope of glory.

O Lord! diffuse on every one the rich anointings of thine Holy Spirit, that we may rejoice in the fulness of that finished salvation which is in Christ Jesus the Lord, to the glory of God the Father!