

Lancelot Andrewes' Teaching on Confession

By Marianne Dorman

ANDREWES RESTORED Auricular Confession to its rightful place in the sacramental life of the English Church. Although sacramental confession was disliked by Puritans, yet confession of sin was not, as their diaries acted as their confessional, evident in these words of the Puritan Richard Rogers. It was "to know mine own heart better, where I know that much is to be gotten in understanding of it, and to be acquainted with the divers corners of it and what sin I am most in daunger of and what dilig[ence] and means I use against sin and how I go under any affliction."¹ This is what Andrewes sarcastically referred to as "bosom confession".

It would seem from the emphasis that Andrewes gave to sacramental confession in his sermons, lectures and Prayer Book notes that he regarded it as an essential part in the life of a Christian. The importance he attached to it was also evident in his insistence that Hooker's teaching on Auricular Confession be included in the publication of Book Six of *Ecclesiastical Polity*. Like Andrewes, Hooker was both a penitent and a confessor, evident in those words "such wounds must be searched to the very bottom" in man and revealed to God before his priest. "We labour to instruct men in such sort, that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself." However Hooker never insisted that Auricular Confession was absolutely necessary for every one, but it was available for all who needed it.² Andrewes did not insist either, but yet there was always a pleading that men should, which is not there in Hooker. This was the reason for his reviving the office of confessor to the prebend stall of St. Pancras at St. Paul's Cathedral in the 1590's. It was also the motive in an Ash Wednesday sermon when he suggested to his contemporaries that they follow the "discipline of repentance" of the early Christians who during Lent were "open penitents in public" but now "in private". The true penitent will "confess humbly his sins before Thee, and ... crave pardon for them" and be thankful that God opened his eyes to sin. He always maintained that "it is a perfect signe of an humble and a good mind, when one can say from his heart, let me bear the shame and punishment of my sinne."³

In his teaching on Confession Andrewes adopted both Western and Eastern approaches, the former in the Petrine sense of the "keys" unbinding sin, and the latter in being delivered from the "disease" of sin. Both were evident in a sermon on Confession and Absolution preached at Whitehall in 1600 when he took as his text those words from St. John's Gospel of the first Easter day, "Whose soever sins ye remit etc." Here Andrewes insisted that "the remission of sins is an article of faith, no less than the

¹ M. M. Knappen, *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries*, (Chicago, 1933), p.62.

² R. Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, (6:vi.2,18).

³ Andrewes, *Apos. Sacra*, pp. 302, 312; Andrewes, Vol. 1, p. 393.

resurrection of the body”, as being absolved from sin is “in very deed a resurrection”. Indeed he suggested that there was something “special” in this commission of remitting or retaining sins, as it was the only commission given by Christ after His resurrection.⁴ The rest had all been given before His death: preaching, baptizing, and celebrating the Eucharist. The power to absolve sin, essentially a “divine work”, was “granted to the Apostles” because they had “their sending from God the Father, their inspiring from God the Holy Ghost, [and] their commission from God the Son”. Thus their commission was rooted in Christ’s own commission by the Father when He was sent to earth and was sealed by the Holy Spirit to free the “captives” from prison, (St. Luke Ch.4). Accordingly what the Apostles remit “in the person of Christ by the instinct of the Holy Ghost” here on earth, “He that sent them will certainly make good and effectual from heaven”.⁵

In this sermon Andrewes dared to use the term “key”, a word with definite Popish overtones, to convey the release from sin. He explained that sin is a prison, and freedom from it could only come from unlocking sins.

The very term of ‘the keys’—wherein it was promised, and wherein it is most usually delivered—the terms of opening and shutting, seem to have relation as it were to the prison gate. The terms of binding and loosing, as it were, to the fetters or bands. And these here of letting forth or still detaining, all and every of them seem to have an evident relation to the prisoner’s estate, as if sin were a prison, and the case of sinners like theirs that are shut up.⁶

In this releasing of sin Andrewes emphasised that this “power of remitting sin is ... in God alone. And in Christ our Saviour, by means of the union of the Godhead and manhood into one person”. That is why “the Son of Man hath power to forgive sins upon earth.” In characteristic style he once again maintained that God could have used this power in any way He wished but had chosen Christ’s commissioning His Apostles to remit or retain sins, as He wanted to make them His co-workers. He who had “ordained Himself a body, would work by bodily things; and having taken the nature of man upon Him, would honour the nature He had so taken.” This commission to the Apostles they have passed on to their successors, and therefore it was wrong for any to suppose that this commission became extinct when the Apostles died. “God forbid but we should ascribe as much to God at the least, that neither He would ordain a power superfluous or more than needed, or else it being needful would appropriate it unto one age, and leave all other destitute of it.” By “committing this power” to his priests, “God doth not deprive or bereave Himself of it” but proceeds through the Church by “His own ordinance” to work together with them. Yet priests “have their parts in this work, and cannot be excluded; no more in this than in the other acts and parts of their function.” To deny priests this

⁴ Andrewes overlooks the commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel by the risen Lord to baptize in the name of the blessed Trinity.

⁵ Andrewes, Vol. 5, pp. 83-5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

function would “wring the keys out of their hands to whom Christ hath given them, ... and make void this clause of *Remiseritis*.” Andrewes insisted that the priest’s “ministry of reconciliation” is certainly not “an idle and fruitless ceremony” but part of his whole pastoral ministry. He also stressed that this commission is strictly a priestly function, given at his Ordination, and therefore is not a layman’s. Although God may inspire some laymen for other duties, this office lies in “the sending” by Christ who commissioned it. Therefore the laity must be “willing to have [their] sins remitted by God, and willing ... to remit [their] sinning” now as this remitting or retaining of sin must always be in the “present tense”. There can never be a putting off of confession and living out the fruits of repentance.⁷

In a vein similar to Andrewes, Cosin preached on the “power of the keys” at the consecration of Bishop White in 1629, when he declared that the “solemn deriving of a sacred and ghostly power upon the persons of the holy Apostles, for the use and benefit of Christ’s Church ever after” is called by us “the Power of the Keys”. It is those keys that “are committed to the custody of a priest in his ordination, to bind a sinful and to loose a penitent soul.”⁸

In his 1616 Pentecostal sermon, Andrewes again emphasised that the power of forgiving or remitting was in the office. “He that is a sinner himself, may remit sins for all that, and save others he may, though himself be not saved.” Hence he admonished those “fanatical spirits in our days, that teach in corners” like Donatists⁹ of the past that if one is not “inwardly holy” then one “cannot be the means of holiness to another”. Almost twenty years before he had preached similarly at Cripplegate when he stated it is “not hee that holds the Cole, but it is the Cole itselfe that takes away sinne; and so long as the thing is the same wherewith wee are touched, it skills not who doth hold it.”¹⁰

In his Prayer Book notes Andrewes stressed the importance of the priest reading the second exhortation to his people at the Eucharist so that they could understand the gravity of sin, and the benefit received from using the sacrament of confession. “It is most expedient that this be read to induce the people that they bethink themselves of the absolute benefitt of absolution by their penitent confession.” Another reason for reading the exhortation was to demonstrate that the English Church “willingly retain the doctrine of Confession” and to counter “the slander of the Jesuits” who preach “that wee absolve not”.¹¹

Andrewes’ teaching on sacramental confession was often reiterated in the 1630’s. Sylvester Adams of Peterhouse, Cambridge in June 1637 had taken the same text as

⁷ Ibid., pp. 90, 92-3, 101-2.

⁸ Cosin, Vol. 1, p.87ff.

⁹ Donatists believed that the Church was for holy people only, and therefore mortal sinners were excluded. They were also schismatics in the early Church as they broke away from the Catholic Church over the readmittance of the apostatised into the Church.

¹⁰ Andrewes, *Apos. Sacra*, p. 519; Andrewes, Vol. 3, pp. 277-8.

¹¹ Ibid., Vol. 11, p. 155; Ms. 943, p. 67.

Andrewes did in 1600 when he preached at Great St. Mary's. He not only advocated that auricular confession was beneficial for the soul but it was also necessary for salvation which, he believed, was the teaching of the early Fathers. Sparrow was another who believed in the necessity of confessing one's sins to a priest in order for the penitent to be assured of pardon.¹²

This importance of sacramental confession was also evident in Visitation Articles. Andrewes' appropriate article in 1625 was identical to Overall's in 1619:

Whether doth your Minister before the severall times of the administration of the Lords Supper, admonish and exhort his Parishioners, if they have their consciences troubled and disquieted, to resort unto him, or some other learned Minister, and open his grief, that he may receive such ghostly counsell and comfort, as his conscience may be relieved, and by the minister he may receive the benefit of absolution, to the quiet of his conscience, and avoiding of the scruple, and if any man confesse his secret and hidden sinnes beeing sicke or whole to the minister, for the unburthening of his conscience, and receiving such spirituall consolation, doth or hath the said minister at any time revealed and made knowne to any person whatsoever, any crime or offence so committed to his trust and secresy contrarie to the 113 canon.¹³

¹² C. H Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge*, 5 vols (Cambridge, 1842-1855), Vol. 3, pp. 287-8; B.L. Harl. Ms. 7019, fol. 60.

¹³ Andrewes, Vol. 11, p. 131; K. Fincham, *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Early Stuart Church* (Church of England Record Society, Vol. 1, 1993), p. 164.