

## ART. II.—THE CHURCH DOCTRINE OF THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN.

The sense of sin is universal. Not only are all men sinners, but all men feel that they are. From the broad, burdened bosom of heathenism arises a deep groan of misery from a sense of sin. Paganism, too, has sought after forgiveness of which it has a shadowy knowledge, and a vague belief. Hence it has its priests, altars, sacrifices, confessions, penances, ablutions, and prayers.

Among the unforgiven in Christian lands the same feeling exists. They may not clearly apprehend it—it may be only the cold, dreary absence of a peaceful sense—it may be the negative satisfaction of those who know of nothing better—even as one whose eyes have always been dim knows of nothing more lovely than that which he sees. As a stupid sinner, he may bear his burden, as a beast does his, regarding it as his fate, or as belonging to his nature. As one who somewhat reflects, he may attribute the shadows of his spirit to another source. As a deceived and blinded sinner, he may ease his spirit by strong delusions, imagining himself to be at rest and happy, even as a madman fancies himself a king, and a drunken man believes himself rich.

Wherever the sense of sin exists, there is also the foreshadowing of the doctrine of forgiveness, even where its blessedness is not enjoyed. What the sin-burdened heart needs, and thus unconsciously longs for, is graciously and clearly proclaimed by the Church: "That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, neither the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but graciously imparts to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never more come into condemnation."

The first thing to be known and kept in mind in regard to

the forgiveness of sins, is that it is a mercy in the Church, and not in the world—a truth known to faith, not to nature; and that it is to be understood and received in the Church, and by those who are in her bosom.

This is indicated by its location in the Creed. It follows the article of the Church, and does not precede it. As in the Creed, so in our faith, we come first to the Church, then into the communion of saints, and so to the forgiveness of sins.

On this point, Olevianus speaks as follows:

"How dost thou understand the possession of the benefits of Christ in this life? I understand it thus: In like manner as there is no salvation to such as are out of the Church, which is the body of Christ, so also all those who are true and living members in the Church have now, and possess true salvation, which salvation we comprehend entire in the forgiveness of sins, as the Apostle Paul, Rom. iv. 7, 8, shows from Psalm xxxii. 1, 2, 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.'"<sup>4</sup>

The sentiment is common—but as it is common so is it false—that the forgiveness of sin is to be obtained outside of and separate from the Church, and without its intervention—and that this boon is to be enjoyed before the Church is entered. Where this idea is held, it is supposed that the forgiveness of sin is a gift from the Holy Ghost direct, and without the medium of the Church. In that case, the Creed ought to run: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the forgiveness of sin." But it does not so run. Nor does it reach the forgiveness of sin, except passing through the intervening articles of the Holy Catholic Church, and the communion of saints.

The Holy Scripture plainly follows the same order; teaching that the remission of sin is to be obtained through the Church, by the intervention of its ministers and sacraments.

Our Saviour remitted sin directly, by a word, without any ministerial or sacramental intervention, because in Him dwelt

<sup>4</sup> Olevianus' Fester Grund Christlicher Lehre, p. 161.

the absolute and undivided power to pardon. Matt. ix. 6. Mark ii. 10. Luke v. 24. He had power on earth to forgive sin. When He left the earth, He made provision for the continued exercise and application of that power on earth—not independent of Him, but from Him. Not at any one's caprice, but by an order of His own institution.

Hence we find that our Saviour, after His resurrection, met His disciples and said to them: "Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." St. John xx. 21-23.

How were they to remit, or retain sin? Not by words spoken, but by acts done. By receiving the penitent into the Church. This is plain from the passages parallel to the one quoted; where we find that our Saviour gives the binding and loosing, the remitting and retaining power to Peter (Matt. xvi. 19), and afterwards to all the disciples (Matt. xviii. 18), defining the way in which it is to be done: namely, "By the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven." By the keys, as a figurative expression, our Saviour teaches His disciples, and through them His ministers, that as one man who has a right to the house, opens the door for another and admits him, so they, having a right to do so because He now appoints them, shall open the Kingdom of Heaven, or the Church, to seeking penitents, admitting them into it, and thus to the remission of sin.

If it be asked what the door is, that admits into the Church, and to the remission of sins, no one can be at a loss for the true answer. "We confess one Baptism for the remission of sins." The very act itself shows it to be a washing, cleansing—a putting away of defilement, and a putting on of Christ. (Gal. iii. 27). "Why tarriest thou?" said Ananias to Paul, "arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." Acts xxii. 16. "Repent," said Peter to the penitents on Pentecost, "and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins." Acts ii. 38. Rom. vi. Eph. v. 26.

Thus only through baptism, as an effect or result of it, are sins remitted. Thus only by entering the Church, and being in the communion of saints do we escape from the curse, and come to the "forgiveness of sins."

We must, however, not deceive ourselves with the idea that by a mere outward submission to baptism, are our sins remitted. Baptism itself must be rightly received. He that would receive the forgiveness of sin in baptism—where alone it is to be found—must not fail to connect with it what Christ has connected with it.

The following conditions must be fulfilled; and if fulfilled, full remission is given in baptism:

1. *Repentance.* This, in the case of adults, is connected with baptism and remission of sin, and must precede both. Luke xxiv. 47. Acts ii. 38. Acts v. 31.

A distinction must be made between the cause and the condition of the remission of sins. The cause is in what God has done, the condition is in what man does, moved thereto by "God's grace. The Reformed Church says with Calvin, that repentance is not the cause of remission of sins."\*

2. *Confession.* "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John i. 9.

3. *Faith.* "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved." Mark xvi. 16. Col. ii. 12.

4. *Purpose to leave sin.* Jesus said unto her, "Go, sin no more." John viii. 11. To the one who had had an infirmity thirty-eight years, and whom He had healed, He said, "Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee." John v. 14. When Simon desired baptism, not as a means of getting free of his evil ways, but only as a power to continue the more successfully in them, it did not

\* Inst. Book III., chap. iv. § 3.

benefit him, but left him as it found him, in the "gall of bitterness, and in the bonds of iniquity." Acts viii. Is. lv. 7.

The want of these hinder remission of sins by baptism, even as the want of sunshine, rain, and a proper soil hinder the life and growth of the planted seed; and when all these are present, baptism remits sin, or Christ, through this sacrament, as surely as the seed grows when all the conditions of growth are at hand.

In baptism, then, God signs and seals to such as receive it in penitence and faith the remission of their past sins. Their hearts are sprinkled from an evil conscience, and their bodies washed with pure water. Heb. x. 22. In baptism, the apostle teaches, the old man is crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be destroyed. Rom. vi. It is a burial with Christ into death; so that a rising with Him to a new life may then begin.

But this newness of life in which we are to walk from baptism (Rom. vi. 4), like all life, is not at once complete, but has its period of infantile feebleness, and is exposed to the infirmities and failings which intervene between "the babe" and the "full age" of a strong man in Christ. (Heb. v. 12-14). Though life reigns germ-like in the new, inward, spiritual man, yet, as the Canaanites, the old inhabitants of the land, and the old enemies of Israel still lingered to vex and war, and even to gain temporary, local victories, and were only at length fully subdued and cast out, so in the outward, old, natural man sin lingers and works, and wars against the new life which is casting it out more and more. The infirmities of nature which remain, the flesh from within, the world from without, and Satan from beneath, trammel and trip, and seduce the spirit into occasional sin. Hence we are still to pray, as in the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our debts."

Thus, then, though in baptism past sin is remitted, there must be provision in the Church for the remission of after sins, and for assuring us that they are remitted that we may enjoy the necessary comfort and peace. This Christ has done in

leaving with His Church the power of the keys, not only to admit the penitent by baptism, but to restore him to pardon and peace when, through temptation, he has fallen from his baptism into sin. It is in immediate connection with the restoration of a fallen brother, that our Saviour assures His apostles, that they are invested with the power of binding and loosing. Matt. xviii. 15-22. He moreover tells them, that "until seventy times seven" times shall remission be granted him on repentance, and what they shall "loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Of this the penitent offender is sweetly assured in their act of pardon.

This power of absolution is always at hand to be exercised. If the Roman Church abused it, the Reformed Church did not therefore cast it away. At certain times, "according to the command of Christ, it is proclaimed and openly witnessed to believers, one and all, that so often as they accept with true faith the promise of the Gospel, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ's merits."\*

Every time a true believer, penitent in view of his past sins, receives the holy supper of the Lord, the Church, through Christ's ministry, by His appointment and authority in that sacrament, most sweetly assures him, that he is "a partaker of the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and all His benefits."† One of these benefits is the remission of sins. Matt. xxvi. 28. "Paul directs that by the use of the Holy Supper we shall show forth the Lord's death till He come. 1 Cor. xi. 26. This wonder of all wonders, that God himself suffers death, to confirm His promises concerning the forgiveness of sins, must be proclaimed, believed, and highly praised. This is truly an assurance above all assurance, a faithfulness above all faithfulness."‡ To receive the Lord's Supper aright, is "to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life."§

\* Quest. 84

† Heid. Cat., quest. 75.

‡ Olevianus' Fester Grund, p. 164.

§ Idem., quest. 76.

For "the Lord's Supper testifies to us, that we have full forgiveness of all our sins by the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself has once accomplished on the cross."\*

This view of the forgiveness of sins, is the only one familiar to the early Reformed theologians. They knew nothing of that conception of this doctrine which makes it a human act, and places the assurance of it in the subjective fancy or feeling alone. In their system of the order of grace, the forgiveness of sins stands just where it does in the order of the Creed—that is, they make it a grace in the Church through sacramental ministries.

Thus Calvin, speaking of the Church, says: "It is also to be remarked, that out of her bosom there can be no hope of remission of sins, or any salvation."†

Calvin teaches that baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Church, and so also of the remission of sin. "For He commands all who believe to be baptized for the remission of sins. Therefore those who have imagined that baptism is nothing more than a mark or sign, by which we profess our religion before men, as soldiers wear the insignia of their sovereign as a mark of their profession, have not considered that which was the principal thing in baptism; which is, that we ought to receive it with this promise, 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.' In this sense we are to understand what is said by Paul, that 'Christ sanctifies and cleanses the Church with the washing of water by blood;' and in another place, that 'according to His mercy He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost;' and by Peter, that 'Baptism doth save us.' For it was not the intention of Paul to signify, that our ablution and salvation are completed by the water, or that water contains in itself the virtue to purify, regenerate and renew; nor did Peter mean that it was the cause of salvation, but only that the knowledge and assurance of it is received in this sacrament."‡

\* *Heid. Cat.*, quest. 80.

† *Inst. Book IV.*, chap. i. 4.

‡ *Inst. Book IV.*, chap. xv. 1, 2.

On the same ground, Calvin also sets forth the perennial or future force and virtue of baptism as the only basis and warrant of perpetual remission of sin in the Church. Thus he says: "Nor must it be supposed, that Baptism is administered only for the time past, so that for sins, into which we fall after baptism, it would be necessary to seek other new remedies of expiation in I know not what other sacraments, as if the virtue of baptism, were become obsolete. In consequence of this error, it happened, in former ages, that some persons would not be baptized except at the close of their life, and almost in the moment of their death, that so they might obtain pardon for their whole life—a preposterous caution, which is frequently censured in the writings of the ancient bishops. But we ought to conclude, that at whatever time we are baptized, we are washed and purified for the whole of life. Whenever we have fallen, therefore, we must recur to the remembrance of baptism, and arm our minds with the consideration of it, that we may be always certified and assured of the remission of our sins."

Calvin further insists, that absolution by the power of the keys, is itself indissolubly connected with baptism, and is in fact the means of its perpetual force or virtue. "I know the common opinion is, that remission of sins, which at our first regeneration we receive by baptism alone, is afterwards obtained by repentance and the benefit of the keys. But the advocates of this opinion have fallen into an error, for want of considering that the power of the keys, of which they speak, is so dependent on baptism, that it cannot by any means be separated from it. It is true, that the sinner receives remission by the ministry of the Church; but not without the preaching of the Gospel. Now, what is the nature of that preaching? That we are cleansed from our sins by the blood of Christ. What sign and testimony of that absolution is there, except baptism? We see, then how this absolution is referred to baptism."\*

To the same effect are the words of Ursinus, setting forth

\* *Inst. Book IV.*, chap. xv. 4.

"*Certain Conclusions of Baptisme.*" He says: "And as the Covenant once made with God, is also afterwards, after sins committed, perpetually firme and of force to the repentant, so also Baptisme being once received, confirmeth and assureth the repentant all their lifetime, of remission of sinnes; and therefore neither ought it to be re-iterated, neither to bee deferred untill the end of our life; as if it so only cleansed men from sinnes, if no sinnes be committed after it is once received."\*

It may be said, and often is said that our forgiveness takes place in the divine mind, and that all we have to do is to seek it by prayer. Both these are true. But the question still comes up, How shall we be *assured* that we are pardoned? Do we say by the Spirit? We answer, yes. But we must also be assured, that what we feel as a sense of pardon, is by the Spirit, and not a feeling or a fancy only. The spirits themselves must be tried whether they be of God. (1 John iv. 1). The Spirit does not operate outside of the Church and independent of it, but in it, and through its word, sacraments and ordinances. These are Christ's institutions, which the Spirit does not set aside, but carry out; in them and by them the Spirit takes of the things of Christ and shows them unto us. John xvi. Thus, when we come as penitents, Christ in His Church, by His ministers, not only authoritatively and by a true and real commission, pronounces to us the words or promises of pardon, but signs and seals them by sacraments, as by divine acts, upon which the heart believes, is assured of pardon in a tangible way, and by a peace which passes all understanding, "the Spirit itself bears witness with"—not to—"our spirit, that we are the children of God." (Rom. viii. 16). Thus the Spirit guides us into truth, not by speaking "of Himself," but by taking of Christ's and showing it unto us. (John xvi. 13-15). It is by the ordinances of Christ, in His Church, that the Spirit verifies to us His own work.

All our acts must be endorsed and met by divine acts. Penitence, prayer, confession, faith, and all experiences under the

\* Dr. Parry's old English translation of Pareus' Ursinus, pp. 425, 426.

operations of grace are our acts; and these can nevermore verify themselves, but must be verified by divine acts. These divine acts are God's sacraments. They are not what we do to Him, but what God does to us. In baptism we are subjects, not actors—recipients, not factors—be baptized of God, not baptize thyself to Him. "Take eat"—not take give. In these divine acts, by the Church as commissioned for that purpose, all that we do is made valid and acknowledged before we can be assured that it is valid for us. Just as any legal paper, deed, must be signed and acknowledged by the State, though rightly drawn, before it is valid.

Without such an act in which our pardon is certified to us, our hearts cannot possess a full and satisfying sense of forgiveness. When a child has offended and grieved its parent, and goes about with penitent and sorrowing heart, the parent may have pardoned it in his own heart, and the child may fancy that it is pardoned; but it cannot be unerringly and comfortably assured of it except by the words and acts of the parent. The words must be heard, the smile, and the approach, as the act of reconciliation, must be seen, before the repenting heart can feel assured that its repentance is accepted by the parent, and the pardon actually given.

A sinner may be penitent for his sins, but until he has received baptism as God's act of remission to him, he has no true assurance of remission; and when, after baptism, he sins through infirmity, he cannot be sure of pardon till his absolution is spoken, signed and sealed by Christ, by means of a divine act through the Church. This truth is beautifully set forth in the parable of the Prodigal Son. He was penitent; and as a penitent returned. He confessed: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." His father even gave him a strong token of welcome: "He had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." Yet was the prodigal's heart full of fear and doubt. He repeated, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more

worthy to be called thy son." But now the father does that to him, which God does to the penitent sinner in the Church, gives him, through his servants, sacramental signs and seals of acceptance and pardon. "The father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry." Luke xv. 11-32.

Here comes a poor penitent who has been far away, and spent all in the world of sin. He thinks, in his misery, of the Church, in which his father dwells. He comes back, but full of fear. "Guilt holds him back and fear alarms." The father sees him, advances toward him with promises and show of mercy. But still the sinner trembles, and fears the wrath which his sins have most justly provoked. He cannot believe and confide, even though he sees smiles where he expected to see frowns; he stands still, even though he sees outstretched arms where he expected to see uplifted hands of warning and wrath. He answers every invitation and promise with the words: "Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and in Thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son." But he hears the Father speak to his servants: Take the poor polluted, but penitent wanderer in sin, wash him in the water of baptism, and thus put My name on him, and bring him into My house. Give him a place among My saints. Make room for him at My table, and let him eat of the body of My beloved Son, and tell him it was broken for him; give him of the cup, and tell him it is the New Testament in His blood, which was shed for him for the remission of sins. Say this to him, as from Me. Thy sins, which were many, are all forgiven thee! Then there is joy in the house. Then there is joy among the angels. Then there is joy in the penitent's own heart. He hears the Father now say: "My son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." He doubts no more, but in the full assurance of hope, begins: "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins."