

Shall Protestants Adopt the Confessional?

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THE suggestion of a Protestant confessional appears periodically. Some recognize that the practice as conducted by the Roman Catholic Church has been of benefit to certain parishioners and wonder why Protestants can not benefit by it also. Immediately upon any mention of the confessional there comes to the mind of the Protestant the fact that the abuses of the confessional had an important causal connection with the beginnings of the Reformation, and he naturally remembers these abuses rather than any good which has been or may be derived from it. There is no doubt that, even surrounded as it is in the Roman Catholic Church by all the safeguards, it is still at times corrupt; but that is only saying that Roman Catholics as well as Protestants are human. To the average Protestant, the confessional is typical of the worst in Catholicism.

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the talented pastor of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, and Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary, has again suggested that Protestants adopt the confessional. There are several reasons why this should appeal to him. He is probably

the most outstanding preacher of any denomination in America. His enemies in trying to destroy him only succeeded in advertising him, and fortunately his ability made the advertising of permanent value. This talent for preaching and the nationwide advertising which he received gave him his well-deserved reputation. As a consequence, hundreds overflow his church every Sunday, and thousands — the number can only be roughly estimated — hear him weekly over the radio.

DR. FOSDICK is sought not only on account of his reputation as a preacher, but because of his broad sympathies and well balanced judgment, and people by the hundreds desire to pour out their troubles to him. Many who succeed in seeing him and talking with him undoubtedly are helped, and when he considers the great numbers he cannot see on account of lack of time, he naturally asks the question, Why not a Protestant confessional so that every troubled person can go to his own pastor and find rest to his soul by relieving his mind of sin and sorrow and perplexity?

Well, why not? I suppose we all admit that if we could have a man of the character, judgment, and sympathy of Dr. Fosdick to whom to go, a Protestant confessional would be most helpful; but think of the thousands of Protestant clergymen who are lacking in the elements essential to a confessor. In Roman Catholicism the priest as a confessor stands not for himself but for the Church, and a person confesses to the Church; in addition, the confessor is surrounded by forms and rules which make the office as near fool-proof and knave-proof as it is possible for human ingenuity to make it. Among Protestants the minister as confessor would himself have to assume responsibility and we would go to him because of his personal qualities. He would be entirely without obligatory forms or rules and the conditions would result in trouble and error and, probably, scandal.

IT MIGHT be thought that a Protestant confessional would but formalize what is now going on in an informal and irregular manner in practically all our Protestant churches. Here, again, we are generalizing from Dr. Fosdick's experience. Undoubtedly Protestant ministers, the members of whose congregations have confidence in their integrity and ability, do have their parishioners appeal to them for advice and comfort, but probably in the case of a majority of our Protestant clergymen anything like a confession is rarely, if ever, heard; and this is well. To establish a Protestant confessional, to be adopted in a general way, would be to invite disaster in the majority of cases. The

ministers who are worthy of receiving the confidence of their fellows are now being consulted; the others would better not be encouraged to ask for confidences.

IT MAY be, however, that Dr. Fosdick's principal reason for suggesting the adoption of a Protestant confessional is his acquaintance with and belief in mental hygiene, and the psychoanalytic principles upon which it is founded. Very early in the development of this new branch of mental science Dr. Fosdick received an insight into its principles and practices through his friendship with the late Dr. Thomas Salmon, the first medical director of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, and has since been much interested in the subject. Undoubtedly this has helped him much in dealing with some of the cases which were presented to him. It may be worth while for us to inquire just how close the relationship between psychoanalysis and the confessional really is, especially in the light of the emphasis which is now being given to the former by modern psychiatrists. This may help in our decision concerning the wisdom of establishing a Protestant confessional, for if science is adopting the principle of the confessional the church must not lag behind.

When one becomes acquainted with the art of psychoanalysis, especially in its early history, he is immediately struck with its similarity to the confessional of the Roman Catholic Church. It was then known as "the cathartic method" because the innermost secrets of the life were poured out, and a cure resulted. The likeness, however, is more apparent

than real. It is true that the confessional probably has value from the standpoint of mental hygiene, but what value it has is principally preventive rather than curative. That it has been retained so many centuries, even in changed form, is some index of its worth, whether or not this has always been of a mental character.

IN JAMES V: 14, 15, we find the only reference to confession to men made in the New Testament. It is as follows: "Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sin, it shall be forgiven him. Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." At first the penitent confessed to a company of believers, later to religious leaders, and only in the Thirteenth Century secret auricular confession became a law of the Church. Now the priest hears the confession, absolves from sin and its consequences, and imposes a penance. I John 1: 9, says: "If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The connection between confession and healing, indicated in the quotation from James given above, seems to link it somewhat closely to psychoanalysis. There is no doubt but that confession and the absolution which follows do relieve inner tension and provide a mental peace which is beneficial. They heal the divided self

or the mental conflict caused by moral lapses and secret and questionable desires in a life which is endeavoring to conform to certain moral standards. William James put it in this way: "For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness. If he has not actually got rid of it, he at least no longer smears it over with a hypocritical show of virtue—he lives at least upon a basis of veracity." Dejerine (*The Psychoneuroses and Their Treatment by Psychotherapy*, p. 300) says: "They were profound psychologists who instituted confession as an important religious practice," and Stekel (*The Depths of the Soul: Psychoanalytic Studies*, p. 23) writes: "The tremendous power of the Roman Catholic Church is even today due to the fact that it enables its members to confess their most secret sufferings from time to time and to be absolved. Dr. Muthmann calls attention to the fact that suicides are most frequent in Protestant countries, and least frequent among Roman Catholic peoples, and he thinks this to be attributed to the influence of the confessional, one of the greatest blessings of numberless people." What is true of suicide is probably also true of religious mania.

WHILE it has been charged that Protestants when they wish to unburden themselves eschew the church and consult a lawyer or a physician, this is not always so. Even if the Protestant believes that religious confession is a private matter between himself and God, he does not always restrict his confession to Divinity, and not infrequently a

weekly prayer meeting has become a confessional in which all present participate. A certain religious movement which has recently received considerable publicity has as one of its principal tenets full and free confession within the group.

As already noted, the chief psychological value of the confessional is preventive and not curative. The confessional may prevent the forming of complexes, but unfortunately most of the detrimental complexes have their origin in early life, before the time for first confessional. The first impulse of a wrong doer is to repress the evil and drive it from his consciousness and, if possible, from memory. This he is not often able to do, especially in adult life. Only a small proportion of repressions actually result in complexes. Even if not many complexes are prevented, the returns in present peace are probably worth while and are the chief value of the confessional.

MANY mental and physical troubles are caused by complexes and phobias which are not of a religious character and would not naturally be included in the religious confession. A fear of a certain disease might not cause that disease but in turn might be the cause of a mental trouble much worse. That would not naturally be presented in a religious confession. In fact some sects, such as Christian Scientists, claim a better result by ignoring such fears than by confessing them. However that may be, the fact remains that confession would touch but a small portion of the causes of complexes because of its dealing with moral and religious conditions only.

More important than that, though, is the fact that the complexes are unconscious and are unknown to the patient's regular waking consciousness. It is to the discovery and revealing of these that the analyst's most skilful technique is directed. Neither the penitent nor the priest can deal with them for they cannot be confessed. They are not only consciously unknown, but the mental mechanism of the patient keeps them stubbornly repressed, until they are drawn from him by insistent and ingenious methods.

IN ADDITION to the fact that in the confessional the examination is superficial and does not probe deeply, the ideals underlying the two processes are very different. The confessional focuses attention upon guilt and how it may be removed; psychoanalysis emphasizes the primary hidden origin and how it may be revealed. In psychoanalysis there is practically no such thing as guilt; that is the criticism of it which moralists are continually making. The acts which the Church calls sin, the analyst resolves into some unfortunate experience in early life for which the patient can not be held responsible, regardless of the apparent responsibility of his resultant act in later years. On the other hand, the confessor can not and does not delve into the hidden recesses of the mind to find the origin—he takes the deed at face value, judges the guilt according to the confession, and imposes penance.

There seems to be little doubt that at times there is a great deal of rationalization heard in the confessional. Innumerable excuses are

presented for not living a good life — the clergy are incompetent, society is incorrectly organized, and many similar statements are made. All such rationalizations and insincerities effectively abort the essential aim of the psychoanalyst, which is to lay bare and eradicate the evil which is being confessed, together with its causes and ramifications. At times the penitent accepts the penance rather than make a genuine confession, and to him the penance removes the necessity of a plenary confession and the assumption of the consequent guilt. The debt is paid; the penitent escaped lightly, to be sure, but it is over with and that is the penitent's good fortune. That in itself prevents the disclosure of hidden experiences for which the analyst is searching, which is so important for the success of his method. Of course, if the confessional worked out ideally that would be one thing, but we are dealing with imperfect individuals or there would be no need of confessionals.

EVEN if the confessional and the analysis were the same, the minister or the priest has neither the time nor the training for this work. The analysis of a single person takes months and perhaps years. Frequent confessions taking up difficult themes and the answering of specific questions are utterly opposed to the method which analysts now use. Trained analysts are rare, and perhaps not a dozen clergymen in this country have even an elementary training in this complicated technique. On this account psychoanalysis can never take the place of the confessional, nor can psychoanalytic

methods be used in the confessional. Different from the confessional, psychoanalysis is curative rather than preventive.

There are two questions of technique which are important to consider in showing the difference between the two methods. One is sublimation and the other is transference. There is a wide difference between the direction given by the confessor and the sublimation which is the ultimate object of the analyst. Sublimation is spontaneous and usually unconsciously motivated; the direction given to the penitent is direct and conscious. The former is positive, the latter is likely to be negative. It is, of course, possible that sublimation may be aided in confession, as it is at times guided in psychoanalysis. No doubt the confessor could profit much by suggestions obtained from the psychoanalytic method, but present practice shows a broad divergence.

TRANSFERENCE is a different matter. This strong emotional reaction is as dangerous if not understood as it is inevitable. Before the analysis has proceeded far the patient exhibits violently pronounced feelings toward the analyst. These may be in the form of either love or hate, and the whole volcanic emotional content of the complex is transferred to the analyst. It is the task of the latter to keep this emotional tone at a certain moderate level until the emotion subsides and the analysis is complete. Not only is this very different from the practices of the confessional, but to introduce a practice which would admit or require such elements would be necessarily fatal.

Thus, when one reaches below the surface, he finds the apparent likeness between the confessional and psychoanalytic practice to be very slight. It is probable that the value of the confessional is not so much in the confession as in the subsequent absolution and penance. The sin is paid for, there is no need to worry over it, the penitent is assured of forgiveness, the whole matter may be dropped, and mental peace results. Whether this is good theology or not we must leave to the theologians, but it is good practical psychology.

ON THE other hand the Protestant may be told that God will forgive his sins, but he has no one to tell him dogmatically and unquestionably that they really are forgiven; no one to impose a penalty on him which he can work off in expiation. God does not speak to him as does the priest; he is left in doubt. If conscientious he may worry, and from this starting point, if nervously and mentally unstable, there may be a direct road to insanity or suicide. Your guilt does not seem so great to others as to you, and someone else will be far more lenient with you than you are with yourself if you are really in earnest about this whole matter of sin and guilt. Of course, if this is purely a formal affair, the penance imposed by the confessor may seem severe. Confession may occasionally relieve the mind of some unpleasant experience which might develop into a complex, but without the absolution and penance the greater part of the value would be lacking.

It is here where a Protestant confessional would be weak. Simply to

sit and hear confessions so as to give a chance for relief of mental tension is not enough, unless one is prepared to go through the whole psychoanalytic programme; or we must go farther and include absolution and penance, which I am not sure the Protestant is willing or prepared to do. Not being able to see into the heart of the penitent, how can any confessor be assured of the contrite spirit which is necessary for forgiveness? No absolution is of any value unless it is positive, and only a life-long training in a theology, such as the Roman Catholic, could assure that. Some kind of a compromise might be concocted, but it seems that it might lack the essential element.

THE value of psychoanalysis to the confessor seems to be confined to two suggestions: in the first place there are certain psychological laws which psychoanalysis has revealed, which may be applied in a general rather than a technical way; and, in the second place, the confessor should have sufficient training to recognize the need of special treatment, so that if an analyst is required he may be recommended or employed. The reasons why a priest or minister should not practice psychoanalysis seem to make it prohibitive.

The possibility of abuses wrapped up in the confessional, such as those against which Luther reacted, and the social and religious dangers, are always present. If we add to these the psychoanalytic pitfalls, a Protestant confessional becomes increasingly undesirable. The present informal relationship between pastor and parishioners seems, after all, to be preferable in most cases.

Our Harassed Children

BY JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

Why not take them out of the experimental laboratory and give them a chance to be themselves?

ONE of the oldest and most successful appeals to our charity — old-fashioned personal charity and new-fashioned organized charity — has always been the case of a poor widow with a large family. How could the unfortunate woman earn her living and take care of her children, too?

Of late it has been obvious to child specialists, neurologists, and psychologists that the lone child of a rich couple was only too well equipped with parents, and that the kindest thing to be done for him was to get him away from their exclusive and terrific devotion and interest. But as there was never an alarming number of only children of multi-millionaires, the poor infants served as warnings in fiction and the drama, and sensible, average people like you and me let it go at that. Our own parents, were their children few or many, sent us to school, to dancing class, or music lesson, and to "play" in our free time. They never bothered very much with what we played; they assumed that we knew our own business best. If we washed our hands before supper and didn't pick up too many unsuitable

manners or words, they let us alone, particularly if we lived in the country or suburbs. As a matter of fact that was one of the reasons for living in the country or the suburbs.

It is quite clear that people of reasonable means and a good, cultured background can't very well turn children out to play in the streets of a big city. It wouldn't be physically safe, without going any further into it. A nurse, a governess, or some older person must supervise whatever roller-skating or dog exercising or game playing goes on in the parks or on broad, less crowded avenues.

Now, nothing could be more reasonable than this, and nothing could be more natural than that the good city schools should see the problems involved and try to coöperate in solving them. Because only rich people can afford to keep a governess for children of school age, and it is clear that one responsible person can look after a group at play as well as after a single child.

So the good city schools offered gymnasiums or playgrounds or various interesting expeditions to their