

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN

Confession and the Confessional.

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Discussion of the subject "Confession and the Confessional" has occupied considerable space of late in both the religious and the secular press of the country. This has been occasioned, on the one hand, by the declaration of the Archliberal and Modernist Harry Emerson Fosdick in favor of the confessional, and, on the other, by the sensational trial in North Carolina of a young woman on the charge of having murdered her father, on the strength of the revelation made to the civil authorities by an evangelist to whom she had confessed the crime. No doubt, also in our circles interest in this question was aroused by these happenings, and a discussion of it in these columns would therefore seem both timely and appropriate.

Dr. Fosdick's statement in favor of the confessional is quoted as follows in the *Literary Digest* of December 12, 1927:—

"The confessional, which Protestantism threw out the door, is coming back through the window, in utterly new forms, to be sure, with new methods and with an entirely new intellectual explanation appropriate to the Protestant churches, but motived by a real determination to help meet the inward problems of individuals.

"Clergymen are giving different names to this form of activity, such as 'trouble clinics,' 'personal conferences on spiritual problems,' 'the Protestant confessional.' The name makes little difference. What does matter is the renewed awareness in the churches that they are in danger of surrendering to the psychoanalyst that vast field of human needs where the confession of sin and spiritual misery is met with sympathetic and intelligent treatment. To be sure, a wise minister will work with a psychiatrist, not without one; but if the churches substitute any other kind of success for the successful handling of the spiritual aspects of individual problems, they will be vacating their most obvious function."

This statement, in the first place, calls for some correction.

When Fosdick says that "Protestantism threw the confessional out the door," he overlooks the Lutheran Church, which retained both confession and absolution. Luther, "the conservative Reformer," showed his conservatism also in this particular, that, while his radical contemporaries, Zwingli, Carlstadt, Calvin, and others, "threw the confessional out the door," he retained it, only purging it of the abuses to which it had been subjected under popery. In the Romish Church confession of every "mortal" sin to a priest is made a part of the "sacrament of penance" and is inculcated as necessary for salvation. This compulsory character of the act Luther denounced as "making a torture of confession." But he retained private confession before Communion as a salutary and blessed ordinance, particularly on account of the special consolation brought to the individual Christian by the private absolution connected intimately with confession. It is true, however, that private confession and absolution has, in the course of time, fallen largely into disuse also in our Lutheran Church, and that public, or general, confession and absolution has largely taken its place. Perhaps this is to be regretted. But I believe that, while the form has been lost, the substance of the private confessional — that for which Dr. Fosdick pleads — has been largely retained in our Lutheran congregations. Our pastors are still, in a large measure, looked upon as spiritual fathers and advisers by their members and are freely consulted as such in questions of conscience and other spiritual difficulties. And this certainly is a form of "confessional." I am reminded here of a conversation on religious questions between a young pastor of our Synod and several young ladies, in the course of which the pastor also spoke of the habit which his members have of consulting him in matters of conscience and religion, whereupon one of the young ladies, a Presbyterian, remarked that she had never thought of her pastor in the rôle of spiritual adviser; that, while she liked very much to meet him socially, she would never think of going to him with her troubles. I believe this, in a large measure, shows the difference — outside of the pulpit! — between our Lutheran pastors and those of other Protestant churches: Our pastors are, as a rule, real *Seelsorger*, while those of other churches are largely mere social "mixers," as far as intercourse with their people is concerned.

Still I believe that Fosdick's plea for a wider use of the "confessional" may well be heeded also in our circles. For no doubt there is room, much room, for improvement also among us

in this particular. Our people, too, do not, on the whole, appreciate as they should the blessed privilege which they enjoy in going to their pastor as their spiritual father and opening their hearts and pouring out their troubles to him. It is a proverbial axiom that troubles and heartaches, when shared with a friend, are cut in half; and surely it needs no proof that the pastor is, or ought to be, the best friend of his parishioners, to whom any of them ought to feel perfectly safe in communicating their confidences, and on whose judgment and advice they should place the utmost reliance, as well as on his ability to comfort, reassure, correct, or warn them, as the case may be. All this aside from the Scriptural teaching that the pastor, "as a called minister of Christ" and "an ordained servant of the Word," is delegated and authorized "in the stead and by the command of Christ" to absolve sinners and assure them of forgiveness, and that such absolution and assurance, privately and individually given, is of peculiar force and calculated to confer particular comfort. Also in this the Savior has shown His wonderful wisdom and His transcending love for sinners. Certainly, then, we pastors ought to employ every means and utilize every opportunity for encouraging our members in their use of this blessed institution, and we should never grow weary of doing so. Perhaps it will not be amiss, and it may not be unnecessary, to add that we ourselves should not neglect it. That is also one purpose of our pastoral conferences, to exchange confidences, to get advice on difficult questions of conscience, to administer to one another consolation, correction, and, if necessary, also warning and reproof. Also in this particular the apostle's exhortation to the Galatian Christians finds its application: "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ," *i. e.*, the law of love. Gal. 6, 2.

Of course, the Scriptural view of confession and absolution has no appeal for Dr. Fosdick, Liberal and Radical that he is. Quite naturally, therefore, he does not base his plea for the introduction of the confessional into Protestant churches on considerations resting on revealed truth, but merely urges them for utilitarian considerations. Hence we are not surprised to find him advocating, in connection with it, his vagary that "a wise minister will work with a psychiatrist" in the confessional. In the first place, a "wise minister," one who studies human nature and has frequent experience in handling these troublous questions of his parishioners, ought in a short time to become a fairly good "psychiatrist" himself, even though he has not made a special study of the modern sciences

of psychology and psychoanalysis. And, moreover, the great majority of problems submitted to him or calling for his decision are not to be solved by the rules of psychology or psychoanalysis, but by the rules laid down in the Bible. Accordingly, while Dr. Fosdick deserves credit for his keen insight into the needs of the human soul for sharing its troubles with others and for his readiness to recognize this need and to make provision for it in the Church, his plea for the introduction of the confessional, on the other hand, does not flow from regard for Christ's injunction and the dictates of God's Word in general. His recommendation is motivated, not by Biblical, but solely by humanitarian considerations. —

And now for the second phase of the subject, the secrecy, or sanctity, of the confessional, as brought to the front by the North Carolina tragedy. (The theologians call this *sigillum confessionis*, "the seal of the confessional.") The facts in the case are briefly these: A Baptist revivalist, the Rev. Thomas F. Pardue, in a series of services held at Reidsville, N. C., had preached a sermon last spring on "the necessity of confession of sin." Immediately after the service in which this sermon was preached, a young married woman, Mrs. Gatlin, wife of the town's fire chief, went to the evangelist and, no doubt under the mental stress caused by hearing this sermon, confessed to him that she had murdered her father some months before and had hidden his body in a shallow grave in the cellar of their home. The minister thereupon went to the civil authorities and revealed to them the subject-matter of this confession. Upon investigation the body was found in the cellar, and naturally the woman was then indicted on a charge of first-degree murder, as North Carolina has no law guaranteeing the secrecy of the confessional and excusing a Gospel minister from testifying under such circumstances. During the trial the evangelist sought to justify his action of revealing the crime by stating that he felt it his duty to the State to do so, and his counsel endeavored to bolster up this plea with the additional assertion that if the Rev. Pardue had kept the secret to himself and the crime had leaked out in some other way, he would have been held to be an accomplice to the deed. The counsel for defense, on the other hand, affirmed that the minister should have treated the confession as an inviolable secret and that his revelation of it was merely a "publicity stunt." The young woman, in her testimony, claimed that her confession was really "hypothetical"; that she confessed to having committed the crime merely to shield her dead

mother's name, who was the murderess, but who had since died. This testimony was corroborated by that of her sixteen-year-old brother, who claimed to have been an eye-witness to the deed. In his instruction to the jury the judge showed the possibility of three verdicts — first-degree murder, second-degree murder, and not guilty. A verdict of "not guilty" was returned. — Of course, we are here concerned only with the part which the evangelist played in the matter.

Now, what shall we say to the evangelist's action? Two things, it seems to me, mainly call for comment. One is his sermon on "the necessity of confession of sin," which elicited the confession of the crime from the young woman. I have not seen a summary of the sermon and hence cannot say whether it stressed the necessity of confessing sin to a pastor in order to obtain forgiveness for it. If the evangelist spoke in this fashion, he simply preached the old Romish heresy mentioned above. Scripture nowhere makes forgiveness of any sin contingent upon its confession to the "confessor." Confession of our sins to God alone is necessary for that. While confession to the pastor or to any fellow-Christian who enjoys our confidence is often very useful and salutary, the only case in which we must confess our faults to any man is when we have sinned against him directly or given offense to him.

The second point that needs elucidation is the act of the evangelist in revealing the contents of the woman's confession to the authorities. His claim is that in his conscience he felt duty-bound to bring the crime thus confessed to their notice in order to insure its punishment. While he may have been sincere in this conviction, it still remains true that he was wrong in his opinion and that it was based upon a misinformed conscience. Evidently he was laboring under the prevalent view of the Reformed sects, according to which they cannot distinguish between the duties and functions of Church and State. The confession of this crime was made to him as to a functionary of the Church, and his duties as such were performed when he had shown to the woman the enormity of her guilt and, judging her truly penitent, had assured her of the forgiveness of her sin. As pastor, this ended his duty in the matter. If as a citizen he felt a duty toward the State in the matter, he might have urged her to give herself up to the authorities; but he had no right to make the revelation himself. While there is no word of Scripture enjoining this inviolability of the confessional, as little as there is a Scriptural command for private confession to a pastor, this inviolability is based upon an understanding,

expressed or implied, between the confessor and the confessing Christian that the confession is made confidentially. Therefore Luther rightly states that even the confession of a crime by a parishioner dare not be revealed and that a pastor must refuse to bear testimony in court with reference to it, even when called upon to do so. He even went so far as to declare that a certain monk who had allowed himself to be bribed into such a revelation had been justly condemned to death. Even ordinary confidences in every-day intercourse should be considered sacred, and to reveal them betrays a mean spirit. "A talebearer revealeth secrets; but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter." Prov. 11, 13. And in particular, we are not to peddle the private sins and shortcomings of the brother which may come to our notice about the neighborhood. "If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault *between thee and him alone.*" Matt. 18, 15. How much greater, then, is the inviolability of the sacred confidences made in the confessional! — And it may be added: In view of this mutual understanding between pastor and parishioner the latter may and should feel perfectly free and safe in confiding his sins and troubles to the former, and also we pastors need have no hesitancy in encouraging them to make liberal use of this blessed privilege.
