The Doubtful Cure?

By The Rev. R. J. Coates, M.A.

THE Rev. Eric James, Chaplain of Trinity College, Cambridge, has written a small book entitled, *The Double Cure*,[1] subtitle, " How to Receive Forgiveness ". Although it is only slight in compass it has a great aim. It is hoped that it will overcome the doubts and misgivings which hold back Evangelical churchmen from the help available to them in " Sacramental Confession ". The Bishop of Coventry writes an introduction highly commending it, and a brief but very favourable comment from the Rev. Professor C. F. D. Moule is added. He writes, " Admirable. I find its directness and simplicity very searching, and I cannot well imagine a better introduction to the subject." Mr. James is convinced that there is no other way " of receiving forgiveness which so assists one to a fuller vision of Christ ; to a deeper self-knowledge and penitence ; steadily deals with one's habits at their roots ; points one to continuous growth in Christ ; draws one to receive yet more and more of the benefits of Christ's Cross and Passion ". Bishop Bardsley implies in his introduction that opposition to the practice of confession is based on prejudice, a prejudice which he once shared. But until he made confession to a priest, he says, he never really experienced peace. When at last that day came he rose up from confession with a load off his back, able to look the world in the face again. Since that time confession has become central in his teaching.

We must treat this book as a serious attempt to persuade Evangelicals to adopt a practice which they have consistently refused to adopt. Can it be that there are great spiritual benefits to be received from the practice, and is it prejudice alone, based upon misconception, which keeps Evangelical churchmen from receiving spiritual good? Mr. James has adopted the title, " The Double Cure," a phrase from the famous hymn of Toplady, " Rock of Ages," because he believes that the use of confession helps to break the power of sin in the life of the penitent. He seems to imply that it is possible to be forgiven and yet to continue in sin. Toplady teaches that Christ's Atonement by the Water and the Blood, cleanses from the guilt of sin and delivers from the power of sin. The Atonement is " The Double Cure ". Forgiveness is never imparted without the power to live the new life.

Mr. James is anxious to distinguish between what he calls the Anglican use of confession and the Roman use. The features of the Anglican use are that it is (i) voluntary ; (ii) that the confession is made in the open church and not in a confession box; (iii) that the penance appointed is not a punishment but a sort of " thank you " to God. He cannot expect Evangelicals to accept this new conception of the confessional without considering seriously, as he does not attempt to do, the total effects of the practice in the Unreformed

[1] *The Double Cure, by Eric James. Hodder & Stoughton. pp.* 39. 2/6 (*paper*).

Church over a long period. Also, when we find him using Roman Catholic arguments as the basis of his teaching, we find great difficulty in distinguishing his confessional from that of the Roman Church. The only difference seems to be that his use is rather anæmic when compared with the full-blooded Roman doctrine.

The book is characterized by confused theology. Confession is spoken of as "Sacramental", and he writes of "this sacrament". He asks, "But why is it called a sacrament? It is 'An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace', as are Baptism and Holy Communion, both instituted by Our Lord Himself, but it is 'of the Gospel' in a very real sense, for it brings each of us to the foot of Christ's Cross." We cannot help wondering what is the "outward and visible sign" in this so-called sacrament. We know the straits into which Roman Catholic theologians are forced in their endeavours to uphold the sacramental status of the practice, some even holding that the sins of the penitent are the matter of the sacrament. Mr. James believes firmly that the confessional is the supreme way of receiving forgiveness of sins. He does admit, of course, that we can receive forgiveness in the ordinary services of the Church, such as Morning and Evening Prayer, or Holy Communion. But he does not seem to set much value upon the Evangelical effectiveness of these services in comparison with this sacrament in which the priest preaches to a congregation of one person, so that the penitent can be assured that through his words Christ speaks to him from the Cross. Of course, you may not feel very different after absolution in this manner, "But it has to be said emphatically that absolution is an act on God's part, not feeling on our part. He absolves from the Cross." This last qualification rather negatives the emotional appeal of the Bishop of Coventry in the introduction, that he never really felt forgiven until he adopted the confessional. Many go often, and apparently never feel forgiven. The Roman Church quite clearly teaches that the spiritual benefit of Holy Communion, despite the mystery of transubstantiation, is only the remission of venial sin. This is a direct consequence of the teaching that the remission of mortal sin after Baptism is confined to the sacrament of penance (the confessional). Mr. James comes very near to this position in his lauding of the practice of confession.

We are told that the practice of confession goes back to the New Testament, and both the Bishop and Mr. James seem to base the practice theologically on the power of absolution committed to the Church by our Lord as recorded in John xx. 22, 23. "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And He breathed on them and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." Mr. James seems to be aware that these words were spoken to the whole company of the disciples, including men and women, and not just to the Apostles, but both he and the Bishop seem to think that the use of the words in our Ordinal implies the system of confession. The Roman Church bases her argument for the confessional on this passage, and makes the indicative form of absolution, "I absolve thee, etc.," the essential form in the sacrament. Arch-

bishop Cranmer retained, " Receive ye the Holy Ghost," etc., in the Ordinal, because it is scriptural but, of course, the words are not essential to ordination. Bishop Dowden, the learned liturgiologist, said many years ago, " I need not tell those whom I address a fact so well known to everyone with the slightest tincture of liturgical learning, that the words, ' Receive ye the Holy Ghost ; whose sins ye remit,' etc., are no essentials of ordination. No early form of ordination is found to possess them. I will not occupy time in the discussion (very interesting from an antiquarian point of view) whether it was eight hundred or nine hundred years that had elapsed from the time of Christ before this form first makes its appearance. It is certain they appear for the first time (so far as our knowledge goes) when, as regards ecclesiastical learning, the Church had fallen very low. But the English Reformers (although their knowledge of antiquity is quite astonishing, considering the age in which they lived) appear to have been ignorant that this element in the pre-Reformation Pontificals was not primitive ; and was, in fact, comparatively modern." (*Further Studies in the Prayer Book.*) We can say likewise that the indicative form of absolution was unknown for a similar period in the history of the Church. Private confession to a priest only became compulsory in the Roman Church in 1215 A.D. Those who find such great comfort now in an indicative form spoken by the priest, which the Bishop of Coventry calls, " The royal words of pardon," ought to be grateful that they did not live in the primitive ages of Christianity, as they could not then have had such soothing experiences. Any student of the development of the sacrament of penance knows that the practice of private confession as a regular feature of the Church's life developed very gradually and was comparatively late. Mr. James will need to use more convincing arguments to persuade Evangelicals that sacramental confession has either the support of history or the sanction of the New Testament.

He seems to be as much at fault when he tells us that the great Reformers, Latimer and Cranmer recommended those who would be helped by the sacrament to resort to it. He also states that Hooker maintained it, and says that it was only in the eighteenth century that it fell into disuse in the Church of England ; the great opposition which greeted its revival in the middle of the nineteenth century was irrational because its use had only temporarily decayed during one hundred years. Of course, Latimer and Cranmer exhorted people who were in trouble about their sins, and who could not find peace, to resort to some godly minister that they might find the benefit of absolution from the Word of God. This truly Anglican practice of confession is one to which no Evangelical would object. In fact, it is one which Evangelicals use more perhaps than anybody else. It is quite in keeping with the exhortation in the Communion Office that any who cannot find peace in their self-examination and private seeking of God should resort to some godly minister and open their grief, but such confession is exceptional. Indeed, it may never happen in any given individual's life. It is particular, relating to some specific sin or sins, and is not general. The absolution is Evangelical, as it is by the application of God's Word and the promises of the Gospel, such

as the comfortable words, etc., that the penitent is brought peace, and is then given counsel and advice. The English Reformers and their successors removed the doctrine and practice of the confessional from the Anglican formularies and Prayer Book. It is rather pathetic to find Mr. James appealing to the service of the Visitation of the Sick to uphold his doctrine of confession and absolution. Our Prayer Book teaching in that service is quite clear and quite consistent with the practice of the Reformers. If the sick man has a conscience troubled with any weighty matter, he is exhorted to confess that which is troubling him, and it is called a special confession of sins. The priest can use the form of absolution following, if the penitent humbly and heartily desires it. How can anyone, who pretends to deal honestly with our Church of England teaching, use this method of dealing with a very sick man in distress of soul, to support the practice of confession as a sacrament of the Gospel and as a general practice for all within the Church? "Rome," as Hooker plainly puts it, "would make our sins seem incurable unless the priest have a hand in them. We labour to instruct men in such sort, that every soul which is wounded with sin may learn the way how to cure itself" (*Eccles. Pol.* VI. vi. 2). That is the unswerving judgment of the Reformers in their later writings.

Mr. James makes great use of the Parable of the Prodigal Son to support his teaching that the confessional is the best way for bringing us to true repentance. Like all who press many details of a parable into use, his exegesis can be made very contradictory and inconsistent if thoroughly applied. The only comment we would make is, that the father seemed to cut short the son's brief general confession, and forgot to appoint him a penance, although the elder son probably thought he ought to have done so.

The chief grounds upon which Mr. James makes his appeal to Evangelicals is apparently that the practice of confession has great spiritual benefits. We do not deny that for some people sometimes confession of some sins to man is necessary, but we see no virtue and much damage in the development of the habit of confessing all your sins to another fellow-sinner, even though he should have the commission of Christ as a minister of the Gospel. The wise experience and counsel which every priest is supposed to have is rather hard to discover in a young man at the age of twenty-four, and yet a man, even at that age, may be able to quieten a troubled conscience, if he is well acquainted with the Word of God. The Exhortation in Holy Communion implies that the ordinary man or woman likewise can be well enough informed in the Truth of God's Word to know the way of peace and salvation without resort to a minister of the Gospel, except in very exceptional circumstances. To press upon everybody the necessity of sacramental confession is unscriptural, not in accordance with the teaching of our Church, and dangerous for the spiritual life. It is like teaching the healthy to walk with crutches. We all know there are those for whom the confessional is a continual snare. They love to go and talk about themselves to one with a sympathetic ear. There are multitudes of others—and the history of the practice in the Church of Rome shows it beyond shadow of doubt—who accept the

perfunctory practice of the confessional which is inevitable, as an easy way to get rid of their partial discomfort about sin. Then, there is the very real danger to the confessors who make their minds and souls the moral dustbins of the parish. It was not without grounds that St. Alphonsus Liguori said that there were more priests in Hell due to the confessional than to any other cause. We cannot but continue to refuse the plea which Mr. James makes that the revival of the confessional will be an aid to the spiritual life. The so-called "Double Cure" is a doubtful cure, and we would recommend to Mr. James, the Bishop of Coventry, and Professor Moule, consideration of the wise and weighty utterance put forth by the Convocation of the Province of Canterbury in 1873 on the subject of confession and absolution. The passage of time has not altered its cogency. "In the matter of Confession the Church of England holds fast those principles which are set forth in Holy Scripture, which were professed by the Primitive Church, and which were re-affirmed at the English Reformation. The Church of England, in the Twenty-fifth Article, affirms that penance is not to be counted for a Sacrament of the Gospel; and, as judged by her formularies, knows no such words as 'sacramental confession'. Grounding her doctrines on Holy Scripture, she distinctly declares the full and entire forgiveness of sins, through the blood of Jesus Christ, to those who bewail their own sinfulness, confess themselves to Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life, and turn with true faith unto Him. It is the desire of the Church that by this way and means all her children should find peace. In this spirit the forms of Confession and Absolution are set forth in her public services. Yet, for the relief of the troubled consciences, she has made special provision in two exceptional cases. (1) In the case of those who cannot quiet their own consciences previous to receiving the Holy Communion, but require further comfort or counsel, the minister is directed to say, 'Let him come to me, or to some other discreet and learned minister of God's Word, and open his grief, that by the ministry of God's Holy Word he may receive the benefit of Absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice'. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that for such a case no form of Absolution has been prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer; and further, the Rubric in the first Prayer Book of 1549, which sanctions a particular form of Absolution, has been withdrawn from all subsequent editions of the said Book.

(2) In the order of the Visitation of the Sick, it is directed that the sick man may be moved to make a special confession of his sins if he feels his conscience troubled with any weighty matter, but in such case Absolution is to be given when the sick man shall humbly and heartily desire it. The special provision, however, does not authorize the ministers of the Church to require from any who may repair to them, to open their grief in a particular or detailed examination of all their sins, or to require private confession as a condition previous to receiving the Holy Communion, or to enjoin or even encourage any practice of habitual confession to a priest, or to teach that such practice of habitual confession, or the being subject to what has been termed the 'direction' of a priest, is a condition of attaining to the highest spiritual life."