

Pastoral Theology Brief: Comfort for Parents Grieving a Miscarriage or Stillbirth—Following Luther's Lead

John D. Schuetze

In his care of souls, the pastor faces many difficult situations, which like a sword can often pierce his own soul also. Few are as heart-wrenching as ministering to the mother or father who is faced with the death of a miscarried or stillborn child. Like Job, these parents want to know "Why?" In time they will understand that God has his purpose for everything and that this difficult situation also works for their good. But "Why now?" and "Why me?" and "Why this child?" are questions that we as mere mortals cannot answer with certainty. They involve matters that the hidden God has chosen not to reveal.

This does not mean that we have no comfort to offer these grieving parents. However, as we offer them the comfort that God would give, we need to be cautious that we do not go beyond what Scripture allows us to say. We want to offer parents some hope regarding the eternal fate of their child. But how do we do this in a way that is both pastoral and scriptural?

As Lutheran Christians we begin with the means of grace. It is the gospel in Word and Sacrament that works and strengthens faith in the heart. Through these means the Holy Spirit leads us to see that while we are sinners, Christ is the Savior. Through him we have forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life.

The difficulty with using the means of grace to comfort grieving parents in this case is that God has given us no clear means of grace for the unborn. The Lord's Supper is for those who can examine themselves. Baptism is for the born. Possibly God can work faith in the unborn through his Word. He did this with John the Baptist. Yet Luke 1 is a description of what God can do. It is not a promise of what God will do in each case. In fact, when the angel announces the circumstances surrounding John's birth, he tells Zechariah, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while he is still in his mother's womb" ((GWN) (Greek: ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ὅς αὐτοῦ). The angel presents this as something amazing that would set apart John the Baptist as a unique person.

Usually God works through a word that is heard and a language that is communicated. What an unborn child hears in the womb and at what stage that child can comprehend a message remains a mystery. It is true that our faith does not depend on our comprehension. Faith is not a rational, conscious decision of our heart, mind, and will. It is a gift the Holy Spirit can work in our hearts, even at an early age (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15 "from infancy"). Jesus praises the simple, unquestioning trust of a child and assures us that even "little ones" can believe in him (Matthew 18:6). Yet the Lutheran dogmatists stress that God's Word works psychologically—it works through a language that is understood on a mind that can think and reason.¹ It is of course only the Holy Spirit who can convince our heart and mind to believe that which is unreasonable and trust that which appears foolish.

Since the way the Word works on the unborn raises more questions than it answers, it is best not to speak with certainty where God remains silent. We are in danger of saying more than Scripture says when we comfort grieving parents with the assurance that since they attended church and heard the Word, their unborn child did the same and that through this Word the Holy Spirit worked faith in the child's heart. God's Word works in a supernatural manner. It does not work in a magical manner.

Rather than looking to the gospel in the spoken Word as comfort for these struggling parents, we would be wise to direct them to God's grace. Our God is a just God. He takes sin seriously, the sin which all of us have at conception. But he is also a gracious God. He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. He is a God who loves his children and wants them to be with him in heaven. He is a God who not only punishes the children for the sins of the fathers but also blesses the children through the faith of the fathers. We can't take credit for our faith. Nor are we saved because our parents believed. But Christian parents are a blessing of God's grace and God uses that in his

¹ See Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, vol. IV, chapter 76, especially p 13-16.

kingdom plan.

Besides the certainty of God's grace, we also know that God hears and answers our prayers. Christian parents and relatives, as well as Christian pastors and congregations, pray for the spiritual welfare of their children, even before birth. Prayer is not a means of grace. But it is a way in which we draw on God's grace, remembering that while God binds us to the means of grace, he does not bind himself. This is the comfort that Luther gives in his treatise entitled, "Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage."² Written toward the end of his life, this treatise comes from the heart of Luther, the pastor.

Luther begins by addressing the "why" question:

Inasmuch as one cannot and ought not know the hidden judgment of God in such a case—why, after every possible care had been taken, God did not allow the child to be born alive and be baptized—these mothers should calm themselves and have faith that God's will is always better than ours, through it may seem otherwise to us from our human point of view. They should be confident that God is not angry with them or with others who are involved (p 247).

Secondly, Luther directs us to the comfort of Christian prayer:

Because the mother is a believing Christian it is to be hoped that her heartfelt cry and deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer (p 247,248).

Toward the end of the treatise he adds,

See to it that above all else you are a true Christian and that you teach a heartfelt yearning and praying to God in true faith, be it in this or any other trouble. Then do not be dismayed or grieved about your child or yourself, and know that your prayer is pleasing to God and that God will do everything much better than you can comprehend or desire (p 250).

As we comfort Christian parents who have lost a child through miscarriage or stillbirth, we do well to follow Luther's lead. He doesn't direct us to the spoken Word as a means of grace in the unborn's heart. He directs us to the comfort of God's love and the power of prayer. In this way Luther encourages us to draw on the grace that God reveals to us in his Word. Our God is a gracious God. Our gracious God invites us to pray and promises to hear our prayers, including those for our unborn children. On the Last Day we will see fully how he has done all things well, including the way he answered our prayers.

² *Luther's Works*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968, vol. 43, p 243-250.