Luther's Insights into Grief: His Pastoral Letters

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Abstract: R.A. Hughes, *Lament, Death and Destiny* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) suggests that Luther, believing in divine providence, teaches that grief and lament are not only negative but actually blasphemous. He speaks of Luther saying that 'humans should not complain to God, when afflicted'. The paper will examine Luther's letters to bereaved friends. It discovers that the reformer actually encourages righteous lament in times of pain and desolation; that is, lament that stems from a pure heart, disposed to rest in God's unfailing love, even at such times. It concludes with some pastoral insights gleaned from Luther's letters.

In his remarkable work on Luther as a comforter, Neil Leroux underlines that 'the "rhetorical situation" of consoling a bereaved person, particularly through a single letter, is a complicated and delicate matter'. Subsequently, he suggests several persistent themes in the reformer's pastoral letters:

- God, who knows better than we do, has taken the loved one;
- God created us as feeling, loving creatures, who will naturally grieve over loss;
- God, Christ and the Word are the best consolers;
- A faithful death is better than a miserable life;
- There is a need for moderation in grief.[1]

The following short essay develops and qualifies these, and others. What does Luther say of grief, how does he respond to bereavement, and what consolation does he offer?

Luther's letters to the grieving

To Bartholomew von Staremberg, 1524

Late in 1524 Luther wrote to Bartholomew von Staremberg, whose wife Magdalene had just died.[2] The reformer seems not to have known von Staremberg personally as he begins the letter explaining that a mutual friend had urged him to write 'moved by Christian concern and loyalty'. Luther demonstrates some reticence, asking if the recipient might receive the letter 'kindly', and 'in good part'—discerning the potential of arousing his anger, perhaps. On his part, he admits to second-hand knowledge of the situation, but that he had been assured that the recipient's wife had been remarkable for her 'love and fidelity'. However, Luther has heard that von Staremberg 'has been trying hard to help her soul with services and good works, particularly with Masses and vigils' and it is this issue in particular that he wishes to address.

After the introductory material Luther makes two careful, but direct, requests. First, he suggests that von Staremberg 'should cheerfully give God what is his,' that he should try to accept the situation, as awful as it clearly is. The following paragraph allows us to see Luther's argument and persuasion at this point.

> Let me remind you of what Job says: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; as it seemed good to the Lord, so hath he done.' You should sing the same song to a dear and faithful God who gave you a dear and faithful wife and has now taken her away. She was his before he gave her; she was his after he had given her; and she is still his . . . now that he has taken her away. Although it hurts us when he takes

[1] Neil Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter. Writings on Death* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 183-84, 188.
[2] To Bartholomew von Staremberg, Sept. 1, 1524: *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (trans. Theodore Tappert: Vancouver: Regent College, 2003—hereafter, *Letters*), 53-55 (*WA* 18.1-7).

> his own from us, his good will should be a greater comfort to us than all his gifts, for God is immeasurably better than all his gifts. . . . Although we cannot perceive God's will as well as we can perceive a wife, we can apprehend his will by faith. Accordingly you should cheerfully give God what is his and accept this just exchange . . . whereby instead of a dear, tender wife you have a dear, tender will of God—and, what is more, God himself. How blessed and rich we would be if we could engage in such an exchange with God! We could do so, in fact, if we knew how to, for God confronts us with the opportunity daily, but we cannot ask him.

It is worth making four brief observations at this early juncture.

First, we notice that the reformer begins with an appropriate quotation from Scripture—Job 1.21. This characteristically grounds his advice in the truth of God, allowing him to rest on that authority as he encourages someone to face the continuing pain of loss. This is almost invariably Luther's way of pastoral support: to lay a biblical foundation upon which he intends to build his advice.

Second, having shifted attention to the Word of God it is natural that he then centres God, himself, within this terrible situation. Though von Staremberg acutely feels the loss, Luther reminds him that God is still at the centre of his world—in life *and* in death, in gain *and* in loss, in joy *and* in sorrow. So, though Luther acknowledges the hurt, he encourages the recipient to see that everything in life, including his wife, is a gift from a loving God. However, God gives and he takes—he has that right—but he himself remains to comfort in sorrow and in loss.

Third, Luther characteristically introduces the subject of faith. Those newly bereaved see a loving God in the situation only by the exercise of faith, not by sight. This appears to be his intention: 'Although we cannot perceive God's will as well as we can perceive a wife, we can apprehend his will by faith.' Behind this lies the typically reformational thought that reality is perceived by faith, not by sight alone. As human beings it is easier to be certain of the being and existence of our spouse whom we see, hear and touch every day, than to be certain of the being and existence of God whom we do not. It is absolutely necessary that we apprehend reality in a different way. Faith alone maintains the certainty of a *loving* God, even in situations of pain.

Fourth, Luther suggests that we would be better at this in the more acute problems that we face in times of grief if we practised sacrificing ourselves daily to God's will at other, more routine times.

Luther's first request, then, is that the recipient accepts the situation of loss. His second request is that he should 'discontinue the Masses and vigils and daily prayers for her soul'. The second is clearly a consequence of the first being accomplished—if he accedes to the situation, then he will find no need for the religious rituals with which, in his fear, he seems so obsessed. Luther is not against prayer! But he assures him that it is enough to pray just once or twice for her, being certain that God answers prayer. Again, he underlines this by quoting from the Word, 'If you ask anything in my name I will do it' (John 14.12-14). To pray too often about the same issue, says Luther, shows we don't believe that God answers prayer and, also, it will annoy God. Von Staremberg must set his sights differently. More forcefully, Luther condemns Masses and vigils themselves as 'unchristian practices which greatly anger God'. 'Such vigils,' he says, 'are a mockery of God . . . a useless mummery.'

This short early letter is both forceful and compassionate. The reformer seeks to move von Staremberg from the position in which bereavement has placed him, to realise even *in the situation* that God continues with him in love and gentleness, to recognise that he needs to let go of the deceased, to release her into the Lord's loving and eternal care, and to move on, however painfully, himself.

To Ambrose Berndt, 1532

Martin Luther knew Ambrose Berndt. He had been a student at Wittenberg, matriculating in 1528. Unfortunately, Berndt's first wife had died in childbirth and her newly born son had died with her. Into this unimaginable and depressing situation Luther writes words of comfort to the grieving

husband.[3] One remarkable characteristic of this letter is the degree to which Luther acknowledges the grief of the bereaved: 'I am not so inhuman,' he says, 'that I cannot appreciate how deeply the death of Margaret distresses you.' He understands that this distress is grounded in 'the great and godly affection which binds a husband to his wife' and that it 'is so strong that it cannot easily be shaken off'. His conclusion is that 'No hurt as painful as this can befall a man in his domestic life.' The reformer assures Berndt that this sorrow is *not* displeasing to God; 'since it is an expression of what God has assuredly implanted in you . . . Nor would I account you a man, to say nothing of a good husband, if you could at once throw off your grief.' So, grief and distress are natural for a husband at the death of his wife; partly, because they have grown close in affection for each other, and, partly, because God creates in them mutual love. The reformer recognises that the loss is very great indeed—almost insurmountable. However, Luther encourages the young man to hold his grief in check in order to insure that it does not become contrary to the will of God. It is necessary, he says, 'to put a limit to one's sorrow and grief'.

Luther reminds Berndt that Margaret had been faithful to her calling and her duties throughout her life, and even at the point of death. She had died in childbirth, 'that is, in the performance of her God-given duty'. It would be simplistic to read this as a misogynist evaluation of her death. Luther is really concerned here, not so much with duty *per se*, as with authentic faith and commitment on the wife's part: '[S]he did this,' he continues, 'with a resolute spirit and a firm faith in Christ. Knowing that she was facing death, she confessed him again and again, called upon Christ alone, and, offering herself wholly to God, was resigned to his will.'[4] Berndt is to remember this wonderful example of faith, to be comforted that his wife was a true believer in Christ, even in the painful realisation of her own death.

Furthermore, the reformer suggests to his friend that 'If you compare physical with spiritual gifts, you will certainly come to the conclusion that spiritual gifts are greater than physical ones.' Again, this implies the division between that which we so tenaciously cling to as reality and that which is spiritual. Our preoccupation with the physical, as somehow ultimate, damages our ability to see the Lord's spiritual gifts in our lives—and, indeed, to see our lives as spiritual gifts. A few last encouragements further this idea: 'Occupy yourself with these thoughts unceasingly and control your grief as much as you can. Comfort yourself with the Word of God, the pre-eminent consolation.' Luther commends that he '[P]ray that our common Father may allow you and all of us to die in faith in Jesus Christ.'

To John Reineck, 1536

Luther knew John Reineck, from Mansfeld—they had been friends from their school-days. He had just lost his wife when the reformer wrote to him a heartfelt letter, part of which follows.

> How should we conduct ourselves in such a situation? God has so ordered and limited our life here that we may learn and exercise the knowledge of his very good will so that we may test and discover whether we love and esteem his will more than ourselves and everything that he had given us to have and love on earth. And although the inscrutable goodness of the divine will is hidden (as is God himself) from the old Adam as something so great and profound that man finds no pleasure in it, but only grief and lamentation, we nevertheless have his holy and sure Word which reveals to us this hidden will of his and gladdens the heart of the believer.[5]

The rhetorical question appears to highlight the questioning agony of those who lose loved ones to death. We notice, though, that the question is not, 'What should we *believe* in such a situation?' but, 'What should we *do*?' Luther wants Reineck to maintain the faith. There is that implicit acknowledgement that those suffering acute loss are tempted to change how they *behave* in their grief. There is an acknowledgement that we feel that God is against us in such a situation: he speaks of 'the inscrutable goodness of the divine will [being] hidden (as is God himself)'. Naturally, there

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[3] To Ambrose Berndt, 1532: *Letters*, 62-63 (*WA Br* 6.279-81).
[4] To Ambrose Berndt, 1532: *Letters*, 63 (*WA Br* 6.281).
[5] To John Reineck, April 18, 1536: *Letters*, 69-70 (*WA Br* 7.399-400).

is no pleasure in it, 'only grief and lamentation'. A little later he says that 'the old Adam is reluctant and unwilling to act like Job'—and Luther evidently has in mind Job's patience.

But, again, we find that Luther's encouragement to the bereaved Reineck is to set his mind and heart on that which he has retained, rather than on that which he has lost. He encourages him to rest in the 'holy and sure Word' of God, hoping that this will gladden his heart, that he might 'find more pleasure in God's grace and Fatherly will than you will have pain from your loss'. Luther knows, from experience, that it is often in the Word that we find God's fatherly grace—not in the circumstances of suffering.

To Conrad Cordatus, 1530

Conrad Cordatus was one of the pastors in the city of Zwickau. Luther was distressed to learn of his son's death, for only three months previously to this letter the reformer had written to congratulate him on the birth of this very child.[6] The reformer comes straight to the point, immediately turning the recipient's attention to Jesus Christ, whilst acknowledging the pain of his loss: 'May Christ comfort you in this sorrow and affliction of yours. Who else can soothe such a grief?' The rhetorical question implies the lack of any other possible balm. Noticeably, in attempting to acknowledge Cordatus' pain, the reformer refers to the death of his own daughter, Elizabeth, two years earlier, at the age of only seven months: 'I can easily believe what you write, for I too have had experience of such a calamity, which comes to a father's heart sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even to the marrow, etc.'

Luther encourages the grieving father, '[I]t is not to be marvelled at if he, who is more truly and properly a father than you were, preferred for his own glory that your son—nay, rather, *his* son—should be with him rather than with you, for he is safer there than here.' It is questionable whether speaking in this way to a newly bereaved father is wise, of course, but the final words remind us that the times in which they lived *were* precarious. However, Luther himself recognises that this way of approach so early on in the grieving process may be questionable, for he says, 'But all this is vain, a story that falls on deaf ears, when your grief is so new. I therefore yield to your sorrow.' Before he concludes, the reformer implies that grief can be a snare and can bring men (and women, presumably) into sin: 'Greater and better men than we are have given way to grief and are not blamed for it.' Luther believes that 'these agonies' may prove the power of the Word and of faith; he encourages Cordatus to suffer 'in glorious and trusting innocence—that is, with a good conscience'.

Finally, he writes, acknowledging the recipient's wife for the first time, 'Greet the companion of your sorrow, and rejoice the while in the living Christ more than you grieve over your son who is dead—nay, who is alive but has been taken from you.' And, in a touching personal conclusion, he says, 'My Katie and our whole household send you greeting.'

Luther's approach to those who grieve

1. *Recognition of the trial*

Luther recognises what grieving and hurting people are going through—he acknowledges their painful trial. He does not fight shy of commenting directly on this. Rhetorically, his purpose is clearly to gain a hearing for his later comfort and advice; but, pastorally, he wishes recipients to realise that he knows something of what they are experiencing; he empathises with them in their hurt.

This is a favourite strategy. This explicit and, at times, very personal acknowledgement is a constant refrain in the majority of Luther's letters of comfort. For example, when John Zink died, the reformer writes to the sorrow-stricken father that 'It is only natural that your son's death and the

[6] To Conrad Cordatus, April 2, 1530: *Letters*, 59-61 (*WA Br* 5.273-274).

report of it should distress and grieve you and your dear wife.'[7] And, sometimes, the reformer employs exaggerated language to make his point more graphic, for he knows that the situation warrants striking, over-stated language to reflect the tumultuous feelings involved. Generally, on the death of spouses, for example, he says, 'Our God is the greatest breaker of marriages.'[8] On the death of a wife he remarks to the husband, 'This is more than suffering and dying; it is being buried and descending into hell.'[9] And beneath it all he often assures the sufferers that he experiences something of their pain: 'I assure you that I am deeply grieved for your sake . . . your loss moves me deeply.'[10]

Martin Luther has the boldness to acknowledge the trials of others explicitly and this allows him to talk into their lives at the sharp end of their grief and agony.

2. *God's inscrutable kindness*

Luther contends that God is intimately involved in the midst of suffering and that ultimately he is *for* those who suffer, not *against* them in their pain. This crucial, reformational understanding of a personal and involved God is central to Luther's pastoral agenda. He needs to assure those who suffer that God is still on their side as he has always been, as it were, despite the very human (and fallen) propensity to accuse God in times of despair. His grace is greater than his judgement. He, alone, can heal the wounds that he has inflicted.

This becomes something of a refrain in the reformer's letters. For example, on the death of her husband, Luther turns the widow's attention to the divine fatherhood, exhorting her to 'learn to trust alone in the true Father who is in heaven'. Luther encourages those suffering bereavement to 'know that God's mercy is greater than [their] tragedy'.[11] We notice that Luther's intention, here, is not merely to suggest the presence and reality of a heavenly Father, but, also, to suggest that he will be present in grace to end this pain, to allow peace and some sort of comfort—that is the nature of fatherly love, after all—though critically that seems impossible to believe in the present moment of loss.

3. *Christ is identified with suffering believers*

Luther seeks to show that the Father's love is secured and exercised through Jesus Christ and he does this in a variety of ways. Luther writes to Lawrence Zoch, for instance, who has recently lost his wife, and in a surprising way, perhaps, he discerns in the young man's experience of grief a type of Christ's.[12] Luther equates the experiences of Christ and the believer in suffering (though he is quick to point out that Christ's suffering was far worse).[13] This, fundamentally, is encouragement to look to the future, to the end of the dreadful experience, to see beyond that which feels like forsakenness (or, like punishment), and to see that there will be a kind of resurrection from acute suffering that will eventually occur by God's grace.

4. *Christ has overcome death*

At one point in his encouragement to prince Joachim of Anhalt he makes the profound but simple statement that Jesus 'became incarnate to comfort'.[14] In other correspondence, he shows what he means by this crucial phrase. In a letter to his mother, for instance, he almost preaches the idea in the following words.

> You know the real basis and foundation of your salvation, on which you must rest your confidence in this and all troubles, namely Jesus Christ. . . . He says, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.' If he

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7 To Thomas Zink, April 22, 1532: *Letters*, 64-65 (*WA Br* 6.300-302). See letter to John Reineck, *Letters*, 69.
8 Table talk, July 1539: *Letters*, 73 (*WA Tr* 4, n°4709).
9 To Lawrence Zoch, November 3, 1532: *Letters*, 66 (*WA Br* 6.302).
10 To Wolf Heinze, Sept. 11, 1543: *Letters*, 77 (*WA Br* 10.394-95).
11 To Queen Mary of Hungary, November 1, 1526: *Letters*, 57-58; Table Talk, Spring 1532: *Letters*, 63 (*WA Tr* 2.1361).
12 To Lawrence Zoch, Nov. 3, 1532: *Letters*, 65-67 (*WA Br* 6.382, 383).
13 See letter to Queen Mary of Hungary, Nov. 1, 1526: *Letters*, 58 (*WA* 19.553).
14 To Prince Joachim of Anhalt, Dec. 25, 1535: *Letters*, 98 (*WA Br* 7.335).

> has overcome the world, surely he has overcome the prince of this world with all his power. And what is his power but death? . . . But now that death and sin are overcome, we may joyfully and cheerfully listen to the sweet words, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.' . . . He is the Conqueror, the true Hero, who in these words, 'Be of good cheer,' gives me the benefit of his victory. I shall cling to him. To these words and comfort I shall hold fast.[15]

The repeated refrain, 'Be of good cheer,' speaks to one who is suffering, anchored as it is in the gospel statement that Jesus Christ, 'the Conqueror, the true Hero,' has overcome the world, Satan and death. And he has done this for his people—'[He] gives me the benefit of his victory'—Jesus 'became incarnate to comfort'. This thought spoke powerfully to his father, John Luther, on his death-bed.

> Let your heart be strong and at ease in your trouble, for we have yonder a true mediator with God, Jesus Christ, who has overcome death and sin for us and now sits in heaven with all his angels, looking down on us and awaiting us.[16]

The encouragement to pray for the Lord's help is implicit in the reformer's words. Ultimately, Luther desires that those who are suffering grasp the point that they are objects of infinite and unconditional love—the love of God in Christ.

5. *Grief is to be moderately expressed*

Luther knew grief first hand. The death of his father, for example, caused him to despair. He writes to his friend Philip Melanchthon, that 'This death has cast me into deep mourning' and speaks of 'so deep a wound in my heart that I have scarcely ever held death in such low esteem'.[17] And the death of his beloved daughter, Magdalene, 1542, at the age of fourteen, caused him deep grief that would last for many years.[18] Indeed, he alludes to this grief three years later in a letter of comfort to Andrew Osiander, saying, 'I know from the death of my own dearest child how great must be your grief. It may appear strange, but I am still mourning the death of my dear Magdalene.' He adds, 'and I am not able to forget her,' by which he clearly means that he is unable to move from that locus of acute grief.[19]

So, from his own experience of grief and the pain of loss the reformer knows that grief has to be expressed. 'It is quite inconceivable that you should not be mourning,' he says to a couple who have just lost their son.[20] To Catherine Metzler, who had recently lost her son, he writes, 'It is natural and right that you should grieve.' He adds this reason, 'For God has not created us to be without feeling or to be like stones or sticks, but it is his will that we should mourn and bewail our dead. Otherwise it would appear that we had no love.'[21] Inasmuch as love for our family members is a God-given, created aspect to our make-up as human beings, pain and grief is a natural consequence to their loss.

However, the reformer is insistent that grief be expressed in moderation. The reason lies succinctly in a brief comment, written to a father whose adult son had just died: 'I do not blame you for [grieving], for all of us, and I in particular, are stricken with sorrow,' he says. Then he adds this interesting and insightful instruction, 'Grieve in a way, therefore, as to console yourselves.'[22] Grief is natural and right, it is even in its way consoling, but it must not be excessive, for Luther is

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15 To Mrs John Luther, May 20, 1531: *Letters*, 33-36 (34) (*WA Br* 6.103-104).

16 To John Luther, Feb. 15, 1530: *Letters*, 29-32 (31) (*WA Br* 5.238-41). See Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther. Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 169-70.

17 To Melanchthon, June, 1530: *Letters*, 30 (*WA Br* 5.351).

18 Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling. Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 195-96, reminds us that when Magdalene died Katherine wept openly. 'Luther wrestled with his pain, even urging the neighbors who accompanied her body to the grave not to express undue sympathy toward him.'

19 To Andrew Osiander, June 3, 1545: *Letters*, 80-81 (80), (*WA Br* 11.113-14).

20 To Mr and Mrs Matthias Knudsen, Oct. 21, 1531: *Letters*, 61-62 (61) (*WA Br* 6.212-13).

21 To Catherine Metzler, July 3, 1539: *Letters*, 72-73 (*WA Br* 8.484-85). See letter to Wolf Heinze, Sept. 11, 1543: *Letters*, 77 (*WA Br* 10.394-95); letter to Casper Heydenreich, April 24, 1545: *Letters*, 79-80 (*WA Br* 75-76).

22 To Thomas Zink, April 22, 1532: *Letters*, 65 (*WA Br* 6.302).

worried that excessive grief will lead the believer further away from coming to a place of acceptance—however difficult that may be—and, therefore, of consolation and genuine comfort.

In writing to the parents of John Knudsen Luther quotes Ecclesiasticus 22.11, 'Weep for the dead, for light hath failed him; but do not mourn much, for he hath found rest.' He adds that they (the parents), when they have 'mourned and wept moderately, should be comforted again'.[23] His longing for those who mourn is that they might find a point of peace. This is his pastoral purpose, to lead people beyond the current situation—as harsh and awful as it presently is—and to enable them to move forward for themselves. To the grieving Andrew Osiander Luther makes the following fascinating remark:

> [Y]ou must yield up your dear Isaac as a burnt offering and for a sweet-smelling savor to God—not your daughter or your wife [who had just passed away], for these live and are blessed in the Lord, but the natural and strong affection which asserts itself too powerfully in us.[24]

The allusion to Abraham's near offering of his son Isaac (Gen. 22) is significant as the reformer often employs that passage to demonstrate the painfulness of death and loss.[25] But we notice, too, that, here, Luther says that it is the emotion of grief that is to be sacrificed or given up because it is too powerful in us; it is too assertive and too destructive. Grief must give way to comfort; those who mourn 'should be comforted again'—and, ultimately, this is a matter of faith.

6. *The importance of faith*

Generally speaking, Luther knows that painful parting and grief are able to push us in one of two very different directions. This is clear from a comment he makes to his students sitting around the table: 'God both loves and hates our afflictions. He loves them when they provoke us to prayer. He hates them when we are driven to despair by them.'[26] Sufferers must not be driven to despair by their circumstances, for despair indicates a loss of confidence and trust in God as gracious Father. It is this strong, rooted faith that is our victory.[27]

The flesh fails people in distress—it complains about the situation, apprehending only through what it senses or through its own weak and insufficient understanding. Luther wants those suffering to reach a point of peace through the grace of God. Then 'after mourning for a season, we shall enter into joy unspeakable'.[28] This is the hope that the reformer puts before those who presently suffer, that they might finally know the joy of entering heaven where their loved ones await them. In the meantime, though, they are encouraged to moderate their grief, to be thankful that those for whom they grieve are safe and at peace in Christ,[29] to comfort themselves 'with the knowledge of eternal salvation'.[30] The question for Luther is whether our faith is authentic and whether through faith, we can discern and trust God in traumatic and sorrowful days in the way that we can in joyful ones.

Reflections

1. The first matter that might usefully be addressed is the involvement that Luther allows God in the situation. He insists that God is central to the circumstance of grief—actively involved because he takes the deceased, Father to the one who has passed away and to the one who is left, the one who ultimately shows mercy and grace. Luther stresses the centrality of Christ—Luther asks Cordatus, for instance, 'Who else can soothe your grief?' Pastorally, this is a difficult road to take. The juxtaposition of pain and trust is a difficult balance in the traumatic event of bereavement. Luther

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[23] To Mr and Mrs Matthias Knudsen, October 21, 1531: *Letters*, 61 (*WA Br* 6.212).
[24] To Andrew Osiander, June 3, 1545: *Letters*, 81 (*WA Br* 11.114).
[25] See *Comm. Gen.* 22, *LW* 4.91-186 (*WA* 43.200-270).
[26] See Table Talk, Dec. 1531: *Letters*, 87.
[27] To John Ruehel, June 9, 1534: *Letters*, 38 (*WA Br* 7.82).
[28] To Justus Jonas, December 26, 1542: *Letters*, 76 (*WA Br* 10.228).
[29] To Mr and Mrs Matthias Knudsen, October 21, 1531: *Letters*, 61 (*WA Br* 6.212). See Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling*, 195.
[30] To George Hoesel, Dec. 13, 1544: *Letters*, 79 (*WA Br* 10.699).

realizes this problem. So why does he insist on this theme? Luther is convinced that everything that happens is in the control of God.

This poses obvious problems for theodicy, but Luther speaks *from* theological understanding *towards* a situation, *from* doctrine *to* practice, not the other way around. The divine centrality in times of crisis and hurt is important, pastorally. He never refuses to separate sorrow from providence for he knows that if someone suffering makes that severance they face the danger of unbelief, of ingratitude, of angering the Lord and of falling away.

2. The second matter that we might comment on, then, is the matter of grief, itself. Luther does not shy away from expressing his own grief. Luther encourages the expression of grief from others—certainly, that is the implication of his letters. Luther sees grief as natural, as a consequence of the divinely-given familial situation. Fellowship, closeness, the *alter Christus* situation in which families live by faith, are the background to the agony of grief being felt and expressed. Indeed, for Luther, familial affections are heightened in believers. However, and this is important, Luther insists that grief be expressed carefully, or moderately. This has a theological basis for it clearly derives from his understanding of providence and God's intimate control of everything. But it, also, derives from a pastoral appreciation of those who grieve. Luther wants grief to be checked because of the natural propensity of fallen and sinful human beings in extremity to go against the will of God. But we saw, also, that Luther looks beyond that to the time of comfort and he longs for those who suffer to reach that point, exhorting them to 'leave room for consolation'.

3. The third matter is that of faith. Luther underlines the significance of faith in situations of suffering. Genuine faith, in the midst of the terrible situation, is able to discern reality from non-reality; the spiritual from the merely physical; the eternal from the temporal. It does not deny the situation; but it sees it through a different lens. Faith focuses on God and takes hold of Christ. Luther encourages sufferers to realise Christ's identification with them. He looks to the resurrection, at which time those who have been taken will be recovered because Jesus Christ has overcome death once and for all. In the meantime, faith trusts God the Father and is encouraged to look at what has been retained, not so much on what (or who) has been lost. Faith enables the struggling Christian to be further transformed into the image of Christ.

So Luther, the writer of pastoral letters, encourages his recipients to maintain their faith and their Christian practice. He certainly does not deny grief. On the contrary, he seems to encourage it as part of the personal psychological process through which these believers are going.