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Stillborn Funeral Liturgies in Theological Perspective

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STILLBIRTH - A PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

I attend two funeral services. Both are traumatic. One is for a baby who died a few weeks after birth. The other is for a miscarriage. Both evidently require great sensitivity on the part of those involved in offering pastoral care to the bereaved. The person leading the service for the deceased baby spoke of the baby as having had "person status". My medical and legal background gave me an assurance that this was appropriate. During the service, I also learned that the baby had been baptized. This enabled the person leading the service to speak with a measure of assurance that this deceased *person* was 'saved', as he/she has gone to be *with* God. However, I could not detect these two notes of assurance in the funeral for the miscarriage. I understood that the miscarriage could not have received the benefits of baptism as it could not have been baptised, but I also reflected that even if baptism could have been administered it would not have been appropriate to have done so if there were no *person* there to have received it.

I attend a third funeral service. It is as traumatic as the other two. It is for a stillborn. The person conducting this service also assured the congregation that the deceased *was* "a person". However, despite the parents' intention to have the child baptized, they could not do so in the event; the *person* was not baptised. This left me wondering what had happened to *this* child. Was he or she 'saved', for example, or not?

The stillborn presents a complex pastoral case, arising, to some extent, from the pincer-like convergence upon it of two major theological problems. The one is the origin of the 'person' and the other is the 'means of salvation', and, linked to both, is the matter of whether or not only 'persons' can be 'saved'. If the stillborn was not a person, then arguably there would not have been anything there to 'save'. If the stillborn was a person, then he or she might, or might not, be considered as having been saved.

THE STILLBORN - A PERSON?

Within the broad presupposition that a person's coming into existence equates with the coming into existence of a human individual, a human being, a living soul and, even, a human life, opinion varies widely over when this actually takes place. Fertilization, implantation, quickening, viability, birth, independent life and even rationality have each had their advocates. Some believe that 'personhood' *develops*, others that it is defined principally in terms of *relationship*. Whilst the U.K. Still-birth (Definition) Act reduced the minimal gestational age by which stillbirth is defined from 28 to 24 weeks, it also amended the 'age of viability' (i.e. the capacity of the baby to survive *ex utero*).¹ This means that a miscarriage of 23 weeks' gestation, for example, is not accorded the legal status given to a stillborn. The latter must be registered for birth and death, whereas the former need not be. In the estimation of the law of the U.K., therefore, the stillborn has conferred upon it 'favours' generally reserved for those almost universally defined as 'persons'. Hence, the general impression this law creates is that a person is believed to be in existence from the age of viability onwards. However, that the threshold of viability has dropped from 28 to 24 weeks in the UK in the last few years, and that there is some plasticity in the definitions of 'stillbirth' and 'viability' within the international medical community, shows that this definition, which

suggests that the stage at which a person becomes a person and is accorded legal status, is subject to both temporal and geographic variation.

Christian denominations have traditionally pitched the moment of when a person comes into being at a phase earlier than that of viability. However, the recent proliferation of specifically stillborn, as opposed to more general 'pre- and perinatal' (i.e. miscarriage *and* children dying near the time of birth), funeral liturgies, suggests that in some measure the Church agrees, or acquiesces, with the present law - otherwise, why would it distinguish between stillbirth and miscarriage? A question arises as to whether or not there are any clear theological grounds for its making this distinction. Some denominations have, in fact, designed funeral liturgies for use specifically with a miscarriage and some use the same liturgy for either miscarriage or stillbirth - which is logical if they believe that personhood begins at fertilisation, implantation or quickening. By and large, the stillborn funeral liturgies give the clear impression that the deceased was a person; only one registers any doubt about this and that only implicitly.² Hence, as most of the denominations seem to work from the premise that the stillborn was a person, then logically, by definition, he/she would appear to be subject to matters of personal salvation.

As a means to bringing appropriate and effective pastoral care to families grieving over the event of stillbirth, many of the major Christian denominations (in the West) have sought to produce their own stillborn funeral liturgies and, in so doing, have had to come to terms with the two matters of 'personhood' and 'salvation'. It is logical to consider that such liturgies represent the theological views of the denominations having produced them and that they be taken as referents of a denomination's *theological* view of the stillborn. The liturgies give an impression as to whether or not a denomination considers the stillborn to have been both a person *and* saved, or otherwise.

THE STILLBORN - SAVED? (FUNERAL LITURGIES IN DENOMINATIONAL PERSPECTIVE)

Denominations have tended to relate personal salvation to baptism and, by tradition, have framed their beliefs regarding the means of salvation in their baptismal liturgies. These liturgies can be used, therefore, to ascertain the general view of baptism a denomination holds with regards to its place in salvation. Although some denominations see baptism and salvation as having no contemporary connection, the majority, through their liturgies, variously convey that baptism

- 1) signifies,
- 2) signifies and seals,
- 3) effects or
- 4) influences, salvation.

Whilst each of these groups of baptismal liturgies can be used with adults, Baptist denominations restrict the use of their baptismal liturgies to use with believers only. As Baptist denominations believe that baptism *signifies* salvation, through the evidence of a profession

of faith on the part of the one being baptized, so the baptism of infants for them is meaningless, as infants can neither profess nor even possess faith. Baptists tend to believe that a person cannot be saved if they do not have faith and that, therefore, baptism ought not be performed where faith is not in evidence. The logical outcome of this, for those giving no evidence of faith, is that they are not saved. However, Baptist stillborn liturgies give the general impression that the stillborn was a person and, rather anomalously perhaps, also give the impression that the bereaved can entertain considerable hope in the personal salvation of the stillborn. That this is so, makes it difficult to square with the logical consequence of the baptismal liturgies. A possible solution to the tension is to presume the salvation of most, or all infants, until an age when they are able to *reject* the way of salvation. Baptism then becomes appropriate for those only who later embrace the way of salvation, coming to faith as believers.

The Reformed denominations tend to see baptism as *signifying and sealing* salvation. These denominations have traditionally believed in the continuation of the covenant.³ Hence, children born to at least one believing parent are taken to be within the covenant. As they are considered being within the covenant, so they rightly receive the covenant sign of baptism. Where a stillborn child is concerned, therefore, the crucial factor in deciding the likelihood of his/her salvation stems from whether or not one of the parents was a believer, rather than from whether or not he/she was baptized. This clearly implies that an infant born within the covenant can have greater hopes of salvation than a child who was not born within the covenant. The stillborn funeral liturgies express this hope. In practice, however, the fact that baptism is given to many babies 'outside of the covenant' shows an inconsistent presentation of the what 'covenant' means, or it communicates the idea that most or all babies are, in fact, within the covenant, regardless of whether or not their parents are.

These positions logically contrast with those denominations which believe that baptism *effects* salvation. One of the major denominations holding to this view is consistent in offering little hope for the salvation of the stillborn *or* miscarried child (believing that personhood starts at fertilisation⁴). Nevertheless, the salvation of such a child is not beyond all hope, as it can be 'entrusted' to the mercy of God, for in matters of salvation, ultimately, God is taken to be sovereign. Other denominations, however, are less evidently consistent. Some hold out considerable hope for the salvation of the stillborn, even though they have not been baptized. Such denominations emphasize that whilst God has ordained baptism as the means to effecting salvation, we cannot conclude that this is the only means by which he saves. However, they do not make plain the grounds upon which he might otherwise save, unless, of course, salvation is taken to be universal.

It is less straightforward to project what a denomination believes for the stillborn when it is held that baptism, in

some way, *influences* salvation. It is logical to infer that the more baptism is believed to influence salvation, the less likely it will be that a given stillborn will be saved. Even so, as most of the stillborn funeral liturgies stemming from this group of denominations extend considerable hope for the salvation of a given stillborn, then this logically suggests that for them the salvific influence of baptism is, ultimately, quite negligible.

STILLBORN FUNERAL LITURGIES IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

On the one hand, each denomination's baptismal liturgy shows that something of salvific virtue rests in either the baptism which leads to faith or the faith which warrants the sign of baptism. These two conditions logically argue that the stillborn is unlikely to be saved. On the other hand, each denomination's stillborn funeral liturgy expresses some hope in the salvation of a given stillborn, although some denominations are more guarded about this than others. That the hope of salvation is generally extended to the stillborn, points to a variation in the principles operating between, and influencing the content of, the baptismal and funeral liturgies.

Whilst some of the denominations lay some store on the traditions of the Church, all of the denominations confess Scripture to be an authority for their belief and practice. Some confess it to be their sole authority. Furthermore, whilst some ground their practice of baptism on that of the patristic age, each has some support for the claim that theirs was the practice of the apostolic age. In other words, what the Scriptures teach about baptism is critical to them.

All but one of the stillborn and child funeral liturgies extend greater hope for the *stillborn* than their baptismal liturgies logically allow. Hence, if it can be demonstrated that this hope finds clear precedent in Scripture, then it can be argued that the tension lies within Scripture itself; and the tension in the liturgies simply reflects this. Part of the problem, however, lies in the fact that there is no clear mention of the stillborn anywhere in Scripture. Formulators of the funeral liturgies, therefore, have been led to use verses which combine the subjects of both children and death and, due to the nature of the funeral service, the passages which speak of death have to be used in such a way that they extend pastoral support and comfort. Their focus, therefore, tends to be upon God's mercy, his care, his being able to comfort the grieving and his working all things together for good to those who love him. Hence, within these constraints, the passages which speak of death, tend to relate to the death of believers, as only these offer comfort. Therefore, when texts relating to the death of believers are incorporated alongside texts relating to children, the impression created is that deceased children, including the stillborn, are regarded as deceased believers. There are, of course, very few passages in Scripture which *combine* the subjects of children and death (and salvation), and this explains why these liturgies are generally at theological variance

with the baptismal liturgies, which find plenty of clear precedent in Scripture.

Of the seventy or more different biblical passages (that is, single verses or a number of them) recommended for inclusion in the liturgies by the various denominations, most have only pastoral implications. About one third of these have *possible* reference to the spiritual status of the stillborn, but when considered in their Biblical context, even with a broad interpretation, few have anything apparent (and very few, if any, anything certain) to say about the status of the stillborn. For example, whilst it cannot be said with certainty that a passage like Psalm 23 has *nothing* of theological significance to say about the stillborn, the context of the psalm would suggest that it has not, and passages which speak directly about 'children', when considered in context, are seen to refer mainly to believers. It is really only the conglomerate of verses depicting Jesus welcoming the little children to himself which purport theological significance for children - and not all are agreed on this. Apart from *these* passages, there is very little from Scripture which can be marshalled as providing evidence supportive of infant salvation. Thus, the tension apparent between the baptismal and the stillborn funeral liturgies is not obviously due to a tension inherent in Scripture. The tension is found, rather, to lie in the profound pastoral demands brought about by the event of stillbirth itself. These, primarily, influence and shape the content of the funeral liturgies. In other words, the source of the liturgy is the event itself, and Scripture is 'imported' to try and meet the demands, whereas Scripture itself (and to a variable extent the traditions arising from it) remains *the* source of the baptismal liturgies. Hence, Scripture is not used consistently in the two sets of liturgy.

The Churches, therefore, face the difficult task of providing pastoral support through liturgies which inevitably have theological content. This content is often biblical but is used very tenuously, as far as the stillborn is concerned, when its original context is taken into account. This raises the question as to whether or not it is possible to construct a theological framework which brings effective pastoral care to the bereaved and yet which, at least for the sake of consistency, uses Scripture (as the baptismal liturgies might claim to do) in context.

Stillborn funeral liturgies clearly utilize apposite, consistent and contextual passages of Scripture in seeking to bring 'direct' comfort to the bereaved. But the dilemma for persons trying to be consistent within the theological bounds of their own denomination's beliefs hinges upon the two issues of when a person is believed to come into existence and the means by which persons are believed to be saved. It is the former of these two issues upon which Scripture seems to be silent.

CONCLUSIONS

The arbitrary definition of 'viability' leaves the definitions of both 'miscarriage' and 'stillborn' similarly

arbitrary. Hence, denominational adoption of specifically stillborn funeral liturgies subjects the foetus to a somewhat arbitrary theological definition. There are no clear Scriptural grounds for making a theological distinction between foetuses of 28 and 24 weeks' gestation. Hence, contemporary medical opinion seems to be shaping Scriptural and, therefore, theological and liturgical definition. In this, the Church is no longer determining its anthropology.

The baptismal liturgies indicate a denomination's belief regarding both the means and necessity of salvation. It is salvation from the consequences of both 'original' and 'personal' (i.e. deliberate) sin that the Church has traditionally considered necessary. As neither the stillborn nor the miscarriage have sinned deliberately, the salvation needful is that only which delivers from 'original' sin, and this condition Scripture quite clearly teaches incorporates the whole of humanity, including foetuses. Therefore, any hope that a denomination might have for the salvation of the stillborn, incapable of receiving baptism or exercising faith, must fit within a theological framework which harmonises an understanding of election, the covenant and the extent of Christ's atonement. The recent re-emergence of interest in Romans 5:12-20 might serve to shed new light on this theological complex.

With their high prioritizing of pastoral sensitivity, stillborn funeral liturgies tend to emphasise a God who is all-loving. The baptismal liturgies, however, by their general reference to the need for baptism, or faith, point to God as being one who requires people to meet certain conditions. Logically, therefore, he is the one to judge, according to his own pre-determined standards, whether or not these conditions are met. Both emphases are clearly taught in Scripture, but in addition to them, Scripture also emphasises that God is to be trusted as the one who knows what will ultimately be for the good of those who love him. Indeed, it is the exercise of trust and faith, which pleases God and which, according to Scripture, constitutes *worship* of him, and this, by definition, is 'liturgy'. When we are confronted by what seem to us to be inscrutable mysteries and irrevocable doubts and fears, the consistent emphasis within Scripture is to exercise trust and belief in the continuing goodness and sovereign purposes of an all-loving, all-just, all-seeing and all-powerful God.

REFERENCES

¹ See M.J.Whittle and J.M.Connor (eds.), 'Termination of Pregnancy for Fetal Abnormality: A Practical Guide', *Prenatal Diagnosis and Obstetric Practice* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989; second edn., 1995)

² That is, the Anglican Church. See *Commentary on the Funeral Service for a Child dying near the time of birth.* (London, The Central Board of Finance of the Church of England, 1989)

³ As, e.g., J.Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. IV, ch XVI, and *Westminster Confession*, ch. XXVII.

⁴ Such is the confessional stance of the Eastern Orthodox Church: cf., e.g., V.H.Protopapas, 'Abortion, Oikonomia, and the "Hard Cases"', *The Christian Activist* (A Journal of Orthodox Opinion, New York, 1995, vol. 5.) and *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, tr. W.A.Jurgens (Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1979), quoting Basil.

For Further Reading

H.Blocher	<i>Original sin: illuminating the riddle</i>	IVP, 1997
J.G.Davies (ed.)	<i>A New Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship</i>	SCM, 1986
C. Jones et al (eds.)	<i>The Study of Liturgy</i>	SPCK, 1992
Oliver O'Donovan	<i>Begotten or Made?</i>	OUP, 1984
Max Thurian (ed.)	<i>Churches Respond to B.E.M.</i>	WCC., 1986-1988
B.B.Warfield	<i>Studies in Theology</i>	Banner of Truth, 1988 edn.
M.J.Whittle et al (eds.)	<i>Prenatal Diagnosis and Obstetric Practice</i>	Blackwell, 1995; 2nd edn.

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