



President Robert Bugbee

A Place for Comfort

If you read the New Testament faithfully, you will see that the early Christian congregations were not perfect places. Beautiful things happened in them, to be sure. Painful disappointments were there, too, however. Some people lied to the apostles about their giving to the church. Others were proud due to spiritual “wisdom” they thought set them above everybody else. Still others left the faith because they were too in love with the world.

So the early Christians had to struggle. Pastors like Paul and Barnabas told believers to expect it. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said (Acts 14:22). Jesus’ followers faced pressure from a hostile world around them; no surprise there. They had to endure discord within the church family, as the Bible makes clear. Then there’s also the struggle going on inside you between temptations to sin and your desire to go the Lord’s way through faith in Jesus.

Struggles wear you down. They dishearten. This means the church is full of people who need comfort badly. Sometimes you are one of them; I certainly am. You can be sure that there are others in your church family in the same situation. Our churches ought to be places where men and women find comfort.

What is comfort, anyway? In the Bible’s way of figuring, it’s not a sleeping pill or some magical formula that suddenly—poof!—makes trouble go away. It isn’t an easy word somebody speaks to make you numb, so you don’t feel struggles anymore. Years ago on *The Lutheran Hour* I recall Dr. Oswald

Hoffmann describing comfort like this: to strengthen greatly. He meant that comfort supports you—like one of those old-fashioned stretch bandages—so you hold together, have more stamina, can keep functioning.

Jesus’ apostles spoke this strong brand of comfort into the early churches they planted. They didn’t offer a fairy-tale promise to fix every problem in five minutes or less. They did pump fresh encouragement and strength to face the struggles in the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Any worthwhile comfort you offer a believing friend in the body of Christ can never really come from you. Scripture calls our Lord “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). This is comfort the faithless world does not know. It runs deeper than the typical pep-talks telling you to “keep a stiff upper lip” or that “things will turn out okay.” The fact is my capacity to stay strong falls flat sometimes. I imagine you are like me in having lived through struggles that did not end very well.

God’s comfort is rooted in Jesus and what He has done for you. He died to win your pardon. He was raised again to open heaven’s kingdom to you. In Jesus you have God’s pledge your prayers are being heard, and that He gives you power to cope... even if a given sorrow does not end well, or even if you have to endure a struggle that drags on without end. “He Who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all... how will He not also, together with Him, graciously

give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). One of those things God gives is help when you’re up against it.

The Christian church ought to be a place where people receive comfort for their wounds, whether pressures from the world around, bitter disappointments that surface even within the church, and the struggles you feel with personal sin and weakness inside. Comfort comes when Christ’s Good News is faithfully preached, and when people feast on His body and blood at the Lord’s Table. Comfort is also a powerful treasure you can share with other believers when you take a serious interest in them, stand by them when they’re struggling, and speak to them the same comfort God has brought you in Christ.

You don’t need me to point out that our Canadian society has changed. It doesn’t affirm biblical Christianity much anymore. Many believers in Christ will quite likely not survive in the faith unless they live by Word and prayer. Local churches that hope to endure in the changing world around us will need to be ever more nurturing places where their people receive the kind of comfort you can only get from Jesus.

Armed with that God-given comfort, the early Christians coped. Their world wasn’t easy on them. They weren’t spared discord in their churches. They also felt the wearying struggle with sin inside, just as you do. But the comfort Christ brings carried them. That comfort, like a heartbeat, can be alive and real as you turn it loose and aim it at someone who needs it right now.