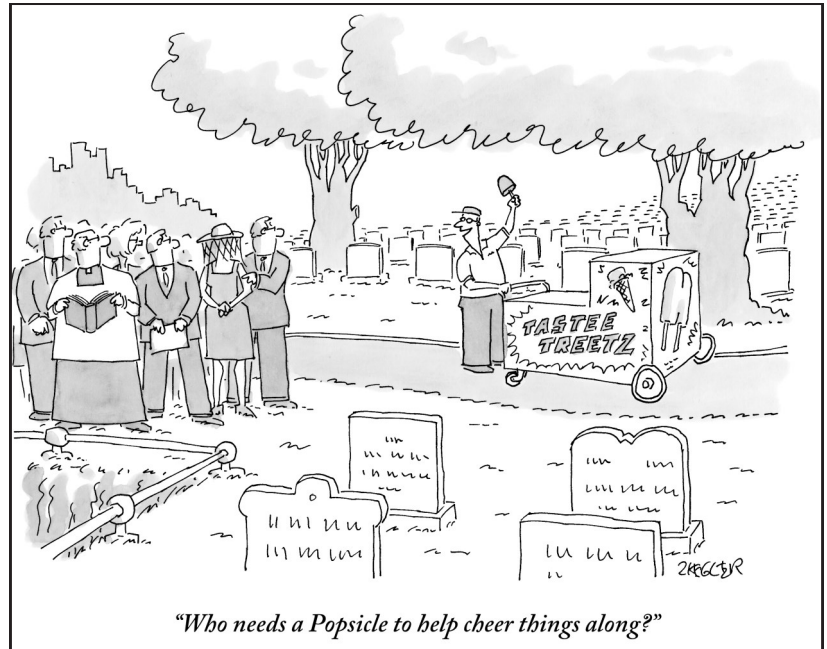


Consolation prize. We all know what that is. It's something you get when you can't get what you really want. Like, maybe you don't deserve it. Didn't earn it. So you get a "consolation prize," which is supposed to keep you from crying too much.

I worry about the word "consolation," which has often denoted what Jesus Christ does for humanity, yet now is associated with feeble efforts just to make people feel better when nothing can be done for them.



Cartoon from *The New Yorker*, reprinted with permission

Reflecting on this problem in terminology, I turned to the internet. At www.urbandictionary.com I found the following illustration, to which I have added the emphasis. (I will return to this story in the end.)

*A consolation prize is like when you ask a girl out and she says no but she wants to remain good friends. The girl feels like he is **not good enough** for a romantic relationship just a platonic friendship.*

*This usually occurs between **friends**; the guy and the girl start as friends. However the guy starts to like her romantically and wants their friendship to develop into a relationship. When he lets his feelings be known to her, she turns him down but honestly tells him she wants him as a friend. At this point the guy needs to do some soul searching and figure out if they can go back to the way things were or they go their separate ways. Sometimes girls will say this to a guy they don't know well as a subtle cue to go away. However this most often happens between friends and has the ability to destroy friendships. The guy has had his pride **hurt** and is left resentful and bitter and feels like he has been made a fool of by the girl who he thought so much of.*

*The girl is left **hurt** as well, since she feels guilty about hurting him and possibly losing a close friend. However she can quickly get annoyed at him if she thinks he's being immature or trying to **guilt** trip her into a relationship by acting depressed. It's an awkward situation and requires much tact and patience for things to **turn out alright**.*

John Doe 1: I asked Jane Doe out yesterday."

John Doe 2: How did that go?"

John Doe 1: I got the consolation prize . . . she wants to be friends."

*John Doe 2: **Ouch**, sorry man."*

Reformers like Luther had a rather different notion of "consolation" or they wouldn't have said things like "For this **consolation** is a new and spiritual life." And "[t]he proper work of God is to make alive and **console**." And "the gospel . . . is, strictly speaking, nothing else than a proclamation of **comfort** and a joyous message which does not rebuke nor terrify but **comforts** consciences against the terror of the law, directs them solely to Christ's merit, and lifts them up again

through the delightful proclamation of the grace and favor of God, won through Christ's merit." (The German word *Trost* is alternatively translated "consolation" or "comfort." In the Kolb & Wengert edition of *The Book of Concord* when you look up "consolation" in the index you are told to "see Comfort.")

Can we save the term "consolation"? Shifting to "comfort" doesn't satisfy me. Sure, we like to be consoled. But we'd rather win. Who would sing a Hymn of Praise that goes "This is the feast of the **consolation prize** of our God, alleluia!"?

Our Lutheran confessions are full of references to "consolation." One key passage which employs the word is in article 4 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, where Philip Melancthon sets out to defend "the most important topic of Christian teaching (justification), which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need."

You can't be around Ed Schroeder very long without hearing him refer to this as the "double dipstick" with which our teaching is checked: 1) magnifying Christ and 2) giving consolation to troubled consciences. That is to say, properly evangelical teaching and proclamation will lift up Christ (not ourselves); and will give consolation (as opposed to striking fear).

Yet, I confess, during my thirty-eight years of ministry I have generally avoided the word "consolation." Except at funerals, where you can't avoid it, because the liturgies I have used since 1978 open with these words of 2 Corinthians 1:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

But that passage does not make the Revised Common Lectionary, so we only hear it at funerals. When bad has already come to worse. Can we rescue the word?

Does it imply that our Lord is incapable of doing anything **real** about our situation, so he pats us on the back? Is consolation a bad thing, which "destroys friendships" (as in the story) or merely mitigates what it cannot solve?

Outside of ministry, I myself use the word "consolation" in disparaging and discouraging ways. For example, I might characterize a feeble "silver lining" as "small consolation," which is to say that it in no way makes up for what has been lost. If you lose your wallet but find a quarter in the parking lot, that is "small consolation." If I were killed in an accident but someone would get my left cornea, that would be small consolation to my wife.

I don't think I can revive the word in this little essay, but I want to bring the issue to the surface in the context of what we try to accomplish in the Crossings Community. To quote from our web page, www.crossings.org,

Crossings is a worldwide network of Christian lay people and clergy who share a commitment to the proper use of the Law/Gospel distinction both in the interpretation of Scripture and in the living out of Christian vocation in the world, believing that it is the key to understanding what God is doing in the world. We seek to apply this distinction in our lives and ministries.

We interest ourselves in the great divide between ways of being the church and doing ministry which fall on opposite sides of that "continental divide." Where the Gospel is preached in its truth and purity and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel, there is the church, according to the Augsburg Confession Article 7. But how do we know what that means? By these two tests: Is Christ being lifted up? Are sinners being "consoled"?

Scripture is where this all comes from. The Greek word *paraklesis* is the source of the reformers' teaching on this subject. I'll let you do the concordance study, and I'll just mention that "paraclete" is the word, sometimes translated "comforter," for the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit's work in us, the "proper" work of God, is not as simple as a pat on the back after

a loss. The **prize** which **consolation** is, is not just a matter of “wiping away every tear,” although that is a part of the promise. Truly to console is to restore one’s trust, one’s faith in God. And trust is restored by giving people promises that are not lies, but the truth. Telling them “You’ll feel better soon” when they won’t or when you don’t know they will, is what gives consolation a bad name.

If you look closer at the 2 Corinthians “funeral” passage, you will notice that the promise (of God in Christ) pertains to “**every** affliction.” “The blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised,” etc., which is suggestive but not all-inclusive. The depressed rejoice, the infertile have babies, the losers win, the list could go on and on. The work of God by which the world is “consoled” is as varied as the troubles which ruin us. Beginning with the promise of the forgiveness of sins, but never ending there. This is no **small** consolation, but the greatest possible!

Suitcase in hand, my missionary friend bound for the Orient watched as the traveler in front of him abused the baggage handler at the curbside check-in. My friend sympathized with the man who was being cursed out by a “very important person,” but there wasn’t much he could do except be patient.

When it came his turn to be served, as Mr. Big strode off to the terminal—doubtless to First Class—my friend observed how the baggage handler got silent revenge. He tore off the proper tags from the abuser’s luggage, and sent those suitcases not to London but to Qatar, where they doubtless would make their way to the “lost luggage” room.

Not a perfect analogy, I know, but I am concerned that the word “consolation” is like a suitcase that winds up in the wrong corner of people’s minds when we use it theologically. Consolation is not a pat on the shoulder by which Christians are directed to forget about their troubles and look on the bright side of things. Chris-

tians should not walk around complaining, “Well, I can’t complain.” Christ died to raise us up. Bring us back to living.

It makes a great difference how we sum up our faith in words. For example, I read a letter to the editor of *The Lutheran* a few years ago in which a gentleman “helpfully” boiled it all down to Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” That, he confidently asserted, is “what it’s all about.” The editors thought so much of his punch line that they drew attention to it with a pull quote.



Well, no. It’s actually **not** all about our being good, if by “it” you mean Christian faith. And it’s also not all about whether we “love one another.” Or even about whether we “do unto others as they have done unto us.” It’s not all about what we do, or how we feel. Jesus said to the man in one case, “Go home and tell people what God has done for you,” not “Go home and tell people what you have done for God.”

It’s not all about us, and what we have done. One easy litmus test for such statements is to ask whether they offer the consolation we are promised in Christ. Those summaries of the law do the opposite. They lift up an extremely high (and true!) standard of behavior, which none of us meets. They do not magnify Christ, they minify us. (Of course, I’m not talking about those of you who meet those standards. Those who are well have no need of a physician!)

There are many ways of summing up what the Word of God is all about, and what preaching is all about, but—whether you use the word “consolation” or not—they are all subject to the old test of whether they achieve what the reformers were talking about when they used the code “magnify Christ” and “console sinners.” When preaching and teaching fail these tests, be wary.

Now, the Crossings Community is not a denomination, not a church, not a party, not even a movement. We're just theological people who help one another remember what the Gospel, the church, and ministry are all about. Our conferences are not caucuses at which we discuss resolutions to bring to assemblies so we can take over a denomination. What we do at conferences is the same thing we try to do with our text studies and Thursday Theology—make sure suitcases go to their proper destination. Because it doesn't matter how vibrant or successful churches are, and it does not matter how impressive one's sermon is, if the "double dipstick" comes out dry, like back in 1982 when I failed to check the oil in my brand new Camry for about ten thousand miles, and finally got around to it. I shudder to recollect.

Google's tool ("Ngram") which counts the frequency of a word in publications tells me that use of the word "consolation" has declined about seventy-five percent in the last two hundred years. I don't care. Other words will arise to do what *Trost* did for the Germans and *paraklesis* for early Christians. What we need to watch out for is not the words, but the Word. By wresting Gospel from the pericopes we are fed each week, and by paying attention to the sense in the order of our worship, we get that which God wants to do for us in Christ—forgiveness of our sins, new life, freedom from all bonds, a generous spirit, and unity with one another.

Smalcald Articles, Article 4, "Concerning the Gospel," is one of those places where "consolation" crops up. Let me quote it in full. Towards the end, it backs me up on the need for the kind of community we enjoy:

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the Gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of

the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18: "Where two or three are gathered . . ." (emphasis added)

Mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. This is the character of our community, and we welcome your participation and support in that spirit.

In conclusion, let me apply what I have been saying about Crossings to the story I pulled from the internet.

On July 14, most of us will hear the story of the Good Samaritan in church. Doubtless, the preacher will preach about it. But will Christ be magnified? And will the congregation be offered consolation? Or will the congregation be told to do more and try harder to resemble Jesus? That is the issue. That is where caring about the law/Gospel distinction meets the road.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ ought to apply to John Doe 1 and 2 and Jane Doe. They all hurt, in the end. Although they want things to turn out alright, they don't. All the "tact and patience" that are supposed to make things turn out all right, will only help people cope with a world in which people do not love and serve one another freely, because we have left the God who created such a world and turned to gods which serve our needs. Tact and patience alone won't save them from their underlying problem. They are the man who went down to Jericho and fell among thieves, except the thieves are less obvious.

Does Jesus Christ have anything to offer them? If they had gone to Jesus and told him their story, would he have walked by on the other side? Would he have said something like "Ouch. Sorry, man"?

No. Jesus was and is the good Samaritan. He would have pointed out to them that, **to the extent that their lives have no better purpose than each of them getting what they want and no better way of achieving that than through the negotiation of compromises to their respective desires**, they are blind/lost/lame/bereft. Because, in their social dealings, for each of them it is all about what they want, and not what they want to give, they are doomed. They are going to get beat up and beat up, and eventually they will die.

But Jesus himself has been let down, like them, and for their sake, and worse. He has given them his own body on the cross, and the words “ouch sorry man” spoken from his cross are more than sympathy, they tell a story. Turned down by the ones he loved, the Son of Man has become the Sorry Man, taken into himself the Ouch, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” He died so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but “for the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:12), “for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:4), and “forever” (John 6:58). **That** is the kind of consolation that takes you to the inn and pays your bill and guarantees the rest.

True, Jesus laid down the law at the end of the parable: “Go and do likewise.” But if we are to make our preaching do the “proper work” of the Holy Spirit, we will point out that, slyly, within the parable he also outlined to his listeners the story of his own self-giving love for them and for all people, and he invited them to receive the life he was offering, simply by faith. On their shattered egos he poured the oil of forgiveness, put them on his donkey, and so forth.

John Doe 1 and John Doe 2 and Jane Doe need a consolation which will lift them into a life that is more than reruns of the sitcom *Friends*. And guess what. What a friend we have in Jesus.

Marcus Felde



Crossings President Steven Kuhl will introduce and speak at the upcoming conference.

Ask Steve.....

Tell us about the upcoming Crossings conference

So glad you asked! Crossings will be hosting its Fifth International Conference—and we would not only like to see you there but we ask you to help us spread the word to colleagues and friends.

The Conference title is **The One for All and All in One: Proclaiming “Christ Alone” in the Age of Pluralism.** It will

take place January 26-29, 2014 at our traditional location, Our Lady of the Snows Retreat and Conference Center in Belleview, IL, just a fifteen minute drive from downtown St. Louis. As in the past we will begin with a pre-conference day that will provide hands-on workshops for practicing the Crossings Method for interpreting Scripture (introductory and advanced), and a general introduction to the Conference theme, entitled “A Survey on How Christians Are Variousy Understanding Religious Diversity.” You may register on our website at www.crossings.org.

Conference participants will wrestle with a fundamental issue that confronts the church today in its mission of outreach in societies with rich religious diversity: How to conceive of, encourage, and carry out the Christian art of evangelism, while being good neighbors with those of other or no religious conviction?

“Pluralism” has become one of the catchwords for describing religious and cultural “diversity” in our globalized age—and it has made a deep impression on the modern mind. Significantly, it refers to more than the mere fact of “diversity.” Pluralism is itself a distinct, diverse, and flexible theological outlook that seeks to interpret and manage the variety of religious traditions that co-exist. (See Martin Marty’s “Pluralisms” in *The Annals* of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 2007) It does this by way of a reductionism that inappropriately harmonizes their respective messages of salvation, minimizes their substantial differences with regard to God and the world, and relativizes their shared concern for deep truth. Ultimately, it reduces all religious traditions to some expression of the law or will of God that is amenable to reason and accomplishable in principle.

To be sure, the immediate concerns that give rise to Pluralism is undeniable: 1) the public, pervasive lack of confidence and consensus on “revealed” religion and traditional

2014 Conference Speakers



William Burrows
(left) Missiologist, Past-President of American Society of Missiology, and former editor of Orbis Books
Jerome Burce
(right) Pastor, former missionary, Crossings writer



Jukka Kaariainen
(left) Prof. of Systematic Theology, China Lutheran Seminary, Taiwan
S. John Roth
(right) Bishop of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod



cultural assumptions that has thrown individuals back onto themselves; and 2) the need to eliminate the subsequent, religiously-induced violence and intolerance that has been so destructive to human society, locally and globally. Given the proximity to which the religions cohabit today, it is incumbent for all religious traditions to address their relationship with competing worldviews and religious outlooks in a constructive way. Nevertheless, Pluralism's answer to this concern suffers for at least two reasons: 1) in the last analysis it is simply another religious tradition among many, not a definitive interpretation of the fact of religious diversity and 2) rather than supporting the necessity of a religiously-grounded worldview, it ultimately contributes to religious confusion, feeding the rise of the "Nones."

By contrast, "sola" ("alone") is the catchword of the Christian faith and its vision of salvation. Indeed, three solas comprise the core of the Christian faith: Salvation is by grace alone, Christ alone and faith alone. Conspicuously absent in this list is the divine law, the very thing that Pluralism identifies as the common core of religion. Could it be that Christianity, by Pluralism's definition, isn't really a "religion" at all? Could this be why Bonhoeffer was exploring the idea of a "religionless Christianity"? Could it be that the distinction between law and gospel is, therefore, the key to understanding the relation between Christianity and the other religions? I think so...

To be sure, the Christian faith is not antinomian or religionless in the sense that it is lawless in its worldview. On the contrary, it gives full credit to the law as a word of God that exposes and condemns human sinfulness. However, it is ultimately "law-eliminating" in the sense that the law ends up obsolete, having no role to play in the plan of salvation; the gospel of Christ alone saves. As such, the Christian faith is as equally focused on "problem identifying-and-solving" as is Pluralism, including the problems of religious violence and intolerance identified above that concern Pluralism. However, unlike Pluralism, Christianity's diagnosis goes deeper (death as God's lawful judgment on sinners) and its prognosis goes higher (life as God's promise to sinners by grace, by Christ, by faith).

The root "religious" problem of humanity, therefore, is a universal problem because it is a problem with God's lawful assessment of humanity. This problem is *universal* because there is *one* God we all have to deal with; this problem is a *God* problem because it exposes an inherent conflict between God and humanity that is at the core of reality itself, evidenced by the fact that we cannot live without either being judged or rendering judgment in our day-to-day experience. Christian theology calls this experience of judgment the "law of God" or, more ominously, "the wrath of God" (cf. Rom. 2-3).



Martin Lohrmann (above)
Pastor, Crossings board, author, .webmaster, theology teacher
Philip Kuehnert (below),
Pastor, chaplain, and Pastoral Counselor



Ralph Klein (below)
Christ Seminary-Seminex Prof. of Old Testament, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



In so far as the various religions are a response to the divine law that permeates human experience, they certainly do have a constructive or instructive role to play in a Christian understanding of the world. As a species of law, the religions can in theory serve both, the first function of the law (to restrain sinners) and the second function of the law (to expose and condemn sinners). What they cannot do is supply the remedy sinners need. That remedy is supplied by Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone, apart from the law or religion so conceived by Pluralism. At best, the law or religion can show the need for salvation, but God alone satisfies that need through Christ alone. Therefore, Christ alone is the universal answer to religion's question, as the conference title asserts.

Presentations:

- Evaluating Today's Pluralist Impulse through the Lens of Law and Gospel (*Steven Kuhl*)
- Responding to Religious Pluralism in the Mission Field (*Jukka Kaariainen*)
- Responses to Religious Diversity in the Old Testament (*Ralph Klein*)
- Responses to Religious Diversity in the New Testament (*S. John Roth*)
- Living the Great Commission in a Pluralistic Age (*William Burrows*)
- Responses to Religious Diversity in the Reformation Tradition (*Martin Lohrmann*)
- The Christian Chaplain in a Pluralistic Society (*Philip Kuehnert*)

Recommended Reading for the conference may be found at our web site, www.crossings.org/conference.