



An Understanding of Mutual Conversation and Consolation And Other Practices that Complement this Means of Grace By The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D.

What is Mutual Conversation and Consolation?

According to Martin Luther's listing in the *Smalcald Articles*, Mutual Conversation and Consolation of the Brothers and Sisters is a form of the gospel alongside: Preaching/Proclamation; Baptism; Holy Communion; Confession and Forgiveness

Mutual Conversation and Consolation is connected with Confession and Forgiveness, and finds its particular focus in formats where Christians convey to each other the Gospel's Word of forgiveness of sins.

Mutual Conversation and Consolation is distinct from Individual and Corporate Confession and Forgiveness in that these latter practices are public, follow liturgical rites, and employ the Office of the Keys by an ordained minister.

Mutual Conversation and Consolation is a more fluid and informal expression of God's grace and mercy in Christ.

What does Mutual Conversation and Consolation look like in concrete practice? To show its pragmatic nature, in the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther cites Matthew 18:15-20, especially verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Still, Mutual Conversation and Consolation can be a challenge to nail down, as Luther does not explicitly define it. One might say that we can recognize an experience as Mutual Conversation and Consolation by its effects.

That is to say, like each means of grace, God uses Mutual Conversation and Consolation as a vehicle to communicate the realities of the Gospel, namely:

- Awareness of the claims of the Law on us via truth-telling with love
- God's love in claiming us even amidst our sin
- Forgiveness of sins
- Grace-filled awareness of our justification by grace
- Bringing us to faith and/or renewed faith

When we experience such qualities and effects in conversation, then we might conclude that such is an occasion of Mutual Conversation and Consolation.

Mutual Conversation and Conversation can also bear significant spiritual fruit, namely:

- Reconciliation among individuals and groups
- Healing and catharsis
- Freedom and liberation
- A Spirit of thanksgiving and appreciation
- Dimensions of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)

Mutual Conversation and Consolation and its Spirit are *not*:

- Just any nice conversation or interaction that happens among us
- Occasion solely for complaint (though heartfelt lament can be expressed in Mutual Conversation)
- Given to cynicism
- Given to stoking fears
- Given to perpetuating and increasing anger
- The occasion for manipulation and abuse
- The occasion for deception, half-truths and illusory hope
- The arena for destructively conflicted power struggles
- The occasion for diabolical activity masquerading as gospel or religious or spiritual discourse

Alas, too much discourse in society, and even in the church, embodies many of the above qualities. Mutual Conversation and Consolation is thus counter-cultural in our day.

In short, Mutual Conversation and Consolation is when Gospel happens, when the grace-filled Good News of our forgiveness is spoken and experienced in our conversational encounters.

Mutual Conversation and Consolation can happen:

- At home in families, with spouse and partner, children, siblings
- At work
- At school
- At play
- In the neighborhood
- In church!
- In surprising, chance encounters

Practices that Complement Mutual Conversation and Consolation

The gospel and its means of grace give birth to varieties of rites and other faith practices that find orbit around the core means and their practices and rites. The sacrament of baptism, for example, has related satellite rites such as Thanksgiving for Baptism, Affirmation of Baptism, Affirmation of Christian Vocation, and so on. Likewise, proclamation of the Gospel is not limited to traditional monologue sermons, but can occur in a variety of media and formats, such as drama and musical offerings. In a similar vein, many faith practices can emerge as effects of Mutual Conversation and Consolation, complementing, reinforcing, and growing out of this means of grace in a continuum of corollary practices, namely:

- Devotional Bible Studies
- *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading) groups
- Discernment Groups and Formats
- Small group ministries
- Support groups
- 12 Step Programs
- Individual Spiritual Direction
- Group Spiritual Direction
- Life/Vocational Coaching
- Pastoral Counseling and Psychotherapy
- Faith Mentoring
- Prayer Partners
- Prayer Groups
- Worship and Sermon Discussion Groups
- Retreats
- Quiet Days
- *Koinonia* or Fellowship Events
- Visitation and Pastoral Care
- Correspondence
- Social Media Ministries
- Art and Music Groups
- Congregational Council and other Meetings
- And any number of spontaneous, informal encounters where Gospel breaks out

It is also true that some of the practices listed above can serve as programmatic formats that give occasion for the experience of Mutual Conversation and Consolation in its particularity understood in relation to Confession and Forgiveness.

Exploring the Key Words

Going more deeply, Mutual Conversation and Consolation is ***mutual***:

- From the Latin, *mutuus*, reciprocal, interchangeable, lent, borrowed, mutual, or exchangeable
- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: directed by each toward the other or the others; having the same feelings one for the other; shared in common; characterized by intimacy
- Qualities of mutuality:
 - We, as it were, lend ourselves or give ourselves over to our brothers and sisters in Christ to be used as a vehicle for God's amazing grace
 - We do so with a spirit of openness to the possibility of our being changed by the encounter
 - Mutuality implies and relates to:
 - Respectfulness
 - Reciprocity
 - Communality
 - Companionship
 - Accompaniment
 - The bonds of affection
 - An egalitarian and democratic spirit
 - An even playing field
 - When relational encounters involve some inevitable hierarchies, a spirit of servant leadership is the norm, and the ones with authority, in keeping with Benedictine spirituality, will listen to the wisdom of even the youngest and least experienced members of the community
 - Mutuality is in keeping with the experience of Church in a Lutheran key:
 - Synods and Synodality: being on the road together
 - The interdependent ecclesiology of the ELCA
- Mutuality in conversation involves honoring the members which comprise the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-31)

Mutual Conversation and Conversation is ***conversational***:

- From the Latin, *conversari*, to keep company (*com* + *panis*, to share bread with) or associate with, from *con* (with) + *versare/vertere* (to turn)
- Merriam-Webster: oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas
- Oxford: spoken exchange of news and ideas between people
- Qualities of good conversation:
 - Expansiveness and comprehensiveness, covering a wide range of topics, human experiences, thoughts, feelings, memories, hopes and dreams, joy and sadness, etc.
 - Results in an experience of good news
 - We keep each other company, an antidote to loneliness and isolation
 - We share bread with our conversation partners, sacramentally and otherwise
 - The capacity to experience conversion, a change of mind, as an effect and outcome of conversation
 - Balance between speaking and listening
 - Comfort with silence, not as a void nor occasion for anxiety, but as a celebration of wordless communication in the presence of another

- Results in the profound human (and sacred) experience of being and feeling heard
- Deep and truthful communication
- Sharing in common (cf. mutuality)
- Communion with each other
- Vulnerability
- Authenticity
- Openness
- A willingness to be challenged
- An experience of feeling and being
 - Acknowledged
 - Affirmed
 - Confirmed
 - Loved
- Attending to each other
- Willingness to see and be seen by the other in the fullness of our humanity
- We offer our real presence to each other, even as God in Christ offers Real Presence to us
- The Road to Emmaus story reflects qualities of good, if not to say, transformative conversation (cf. Luke 24:13-35)

Mutual Conversation and Consolation is ***consoling***.

- From the Latin, *consolari*, comfort, reassure, encourage; *con* (with) + *solari* (soothe)
- From Merriam-Webster: to comfort, to alleviate grief, sense of loss, trouble
- Qualities of consolation:
 - Mutual up-building
 - Comfort
 - Reassurance
 - Relief
 - Encouragement
 - Hopefulness
 - Bringing the light of day to the darkness of our lives
 - Bringing the light of truth to arenas otherwise characterized by darkness and deception
- Paul's address to the church at Corinth speaks to consolation focused in Christ available to us in times of suffering and affliction (2 Corinthians 1:3-11)

Mutual Conversation and Consolation takes place among ***brothers and sisters***

Who are our brothers and sisters?

- All the baptized in the church
- Those who may be drawn to baptism
- All of God's children among other faith traditions
- Our neighbors expansively understood in the Good Samaritan story (Luke 10:25-37)
- Strangers to whom we show hospitality, as in entertaining angels without knowing it (cf. Hebrews 13:1-2)
- The least of these our brothers and sisters (cf. Matthew 25:31-40)

God at Work in Biblical Conversations

For your own individual and communal growth in having faith-edifying conversations, here are biblical stories that proclaim God's Word and Good News in conversational encounters that you may further study and engage with each other:

- Abraham and Sarah consoling each other in their sojourn and in hope for an heir (cf. Luther's observation in his lectures on Genesis)
- Conversations amidst Last Supper narratives (Matthew 26:20-35; Mark 14:17-31; Luke 22:7-38)
- The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-37)
- Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56)
- Angel's appearance to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-20)
- The Presentation and interactions with Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:22-38)
- Mary, Martha and Jesus (Luke 10:38-42)
- Jesus and Zacheaus (Luke 19:1-10)
- Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- Call of Philip and Nathanael (John 1:43-51)
- Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:7-26)
- Fellowship/*koinonia* among believers (Acts 2:42)
- Philip and Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39)
- Jacob wrestles (Genesis 32:22-32)
- Joseph reveals himself to his brothers (Genesis 45:1-15, 16-28)
- Joseph forgives his brothers (Genesis 50:15-21)
- Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:6 – 18)
- Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-18)
- Friendship of David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:1-17)
- Nathan condemns David (2 Samuel 12:1-15)
- Job's three friends (Job 2:11-13 and ff.)
- Aspects of prophetic literature – comforting the afflicted, but also afflicting the comfortable? For example, Isaiah 40:1-11
- Generally speaking, features of New Testament epistles, which themselves express in written form dialogue between the author and particular faith communities or individuals



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