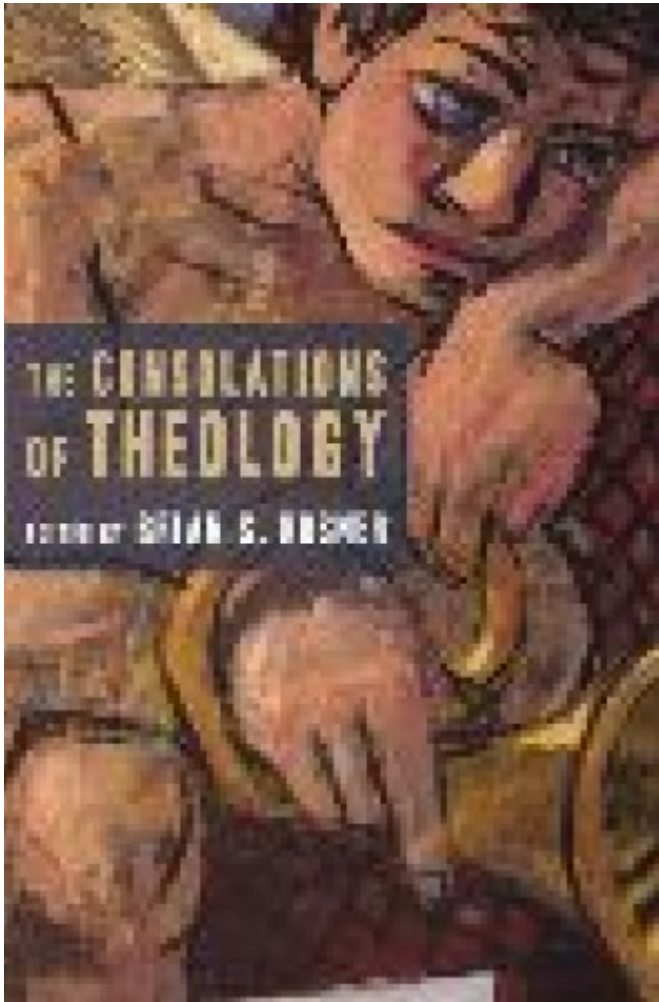


The Consolations of Theology

reviewed by [Charles M. Wood](#) in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Consolations of Theology

Brian S. Rosner, ed.
Eerdmans

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console.” Simone Weil might have granted that St. Francis got it half right in his prayer: Christians should not

seek to be consoled. But neither, in her view, should they seek to console, because consolation tends to interfere with the detachment from self that we need—a detachment that affliction, rightly received, may bring. If consolation seeks to alleviate the sting of loss or hardship, Weil believed, this is an offer we would do well to refuse.

The contributors to this book have no particular stake in consolation thus understood. The preface indicates that the title is adapted from that of Alain de Botton's 2000 best seller, *Consolations of Philosophy*, itself derived from the titles of a string of earlier works going back at least to Boethius in the early sixth century. The intent of the book is simply to explore how theology (or thinking about God) bears upon the theologian's life by examining a handful of influential thinkers' theological reflections on certain existential difficulties with which they were particularly familiar.

This volume is the product of a conference on the consolations of theology that was held in 2006 at Australia's Moore Theological College, where five of its seven contributors teach. After a short prologue on the consolation genre by Gwenfair Walters Adams, the six chapters examine Lactantius on anger (Richard Gibson), Augustine on obsession (Andrew Cameron), Luther on despair (Mark Thompson), Kierkegaard on anxiety (Peter Bolt), Bonhoeffer on disappointment (Brian Rosner) and C. S. Lewis on pain (Robert Banks).

Two features in particular commend this collection of essays. The first is that it gives no support at all to those who would have us think that Christians—or at least *real* Christians—simply are immune from anger, anxiety, disappointment and so forth. It acknowledges that such unwelcome experiences are quite often part of the Christian life (that indeed, sometimes they are brought on precisely by a commitment to lead a Christian life), and that our task is to cope with them in a Christian manner.

What “in a Christian manner” means is at the heart of each essayist's effort. This relates to a second valuable feature of the volume: although the figures studied are all (like their portrayals) male, they are from a wide range of historical eras and contexts, and therefore brought distinctive resources, assumptions and gifts to the challenges they faced. The essayists also differ in their approaches, though their theological differences, located as the writers are within a shared evangelical ethos, are probably less pronounced than those of their subjects. The resulting variety invites the reader to imagine the conversations that might have unfolded among the essayists, and to join in so as to enrich the discussion with new examples and new

insights.