

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

✠ ✠ ✠
March 11, 2005
✠ ✠ ✠

The Christian and Fantastic Literature

Part Four

Pilgrim's Progress

Fantasy as a literary form is not in and of itself wrong. In fact, the Bible itself employs fantastic elements. While fantasy can be used wrongly, it can also be a powerful tool to isolate and highlight moral realities. In fact, one particular book proves that reading fantasy may be a genuinely edifying experience.

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan is one of the best known fantasies in the world. It is also one of the most serious. Bunyan wrote this story while he was imprisoned in the Bedford Gaol for his convictions. The book is a picture of the Christian life, written in the form of an allegory. Bunyan's choice of allegory is particularly important because it allows him to depict characters and events that correspond one-for-one with various aspects of the life of faith. Therefore, the story can be evaluated both for its vision of Christianity and for its use of fantasy.

Bunyan was a master story-teller who understood the capacity of fantasy to capture the imagination. He scatters fantastic elements throughout the book. Captain Beelzebub and his demonic troops fire upon pilgrims from their castle. Apollyon battles against Christian with fiery darts, and when he is defeated he flies away on dragon wings. Hobgoblins, satyrs, and dragons inhabit the valley of the shadow of death. Hobgoblins again beset Christian as he crosses the river to reach the Celestial City. A fiend whispers blasphemies in Christian's ear.

Madame Bubble the witch controls the Enchanted Ground and especially the Arbor. Giants appear in many places throughout the narrative: Pope, Pagan, Grim, Slay-good, Maul, and of course Despair in his Doubting Castle.

These fantastic elements are not merely devices to grip the attention. Bunyan chooses them for specific reasons. For example, Despair is depicted as a giant because despair seems insurmountable and truly enormous in real life. Most of Bunyan's characters are chosen with similar deliberation. The story would be weakened without them.

Bunyan had a knack for creating memorable characters and images, even when they were not fantastic. No one who reads the story can forget the wiles of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman or the malice of Lord Hategood. The man in the iron cage and the man with the muck-rake are images that fasten enduring spiritual lessons in the mind. Bunyan's view of the Law becomes clear as Mt. Sinai looms over the desperate Christian and as Moses batters Faithful to the ground. Speaking of Faithful, what better pictures of Christian encouragement and camaraderie could be found than he and Hopeful?

John Bunyan has become the most successful writer of fantastic fiction in history. His invented world is both memorable and meaningful. More than three centuries after his death, people still relish *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is a wonderful work of literature.

The irony is that Bunyan was not particularly interested in authoring a literary masterpiece. His interests were theology and devotion. Fantasy and allegory were merely the tools with which he hoped to plant spiritual seed in human souls. He intended *Pilgrim's Progress* to be partly an evangelistic tract and partly an enchiridion for the Christian life. His allegory is about the life of faith. The story opens with Christian's experience of conviction as he feels the weight of his burden of sin. He leaves the City of Destruction, falling afoul of many distractions on his way to the cross. At the cross his burden falls away and tumbles into the empty tomb, never again to be seen. Along the way he encounters both tempters who would lead him astray and helpers (such as Evangelist) who keep him on the right path.

For Bunyan, salvation could never be gained through works of the law. The turning point of the story is the cross: that is where God removes Christian's burden of sin. But in *Pilgrim's Progress*, salvation is not a matter of mere profession, either. At the cross, Christian is given a "roll" that he is to present at the gate of the Celestial City. Without it he cannot gain admittance. Elsewhere, Christian identifies this roll as his "evidence," and when he loses it he is obligated to retrace his steps and to retrieve it. Clearly Christian is not saved by his "evidence," but neither is he saved without it.

The bulk of the story narrates the trials and consolations, the failures and triumphs that Christian encounters on his way to the Celestial City. Bunyan clearly understood the dynamics of the life of faith. He knew the shape in which temptations could present themselves, and he knew how to counsel those who were tempted. He grasped the devastating consequences that sin could bring into the life of the believer—but he also knew the paths that led to restoration.

Bunyan's view of the Christian life is substantially correct. He genuinely shows his readers how to live the life of faith. His story still has much benefit for the believer after more than three hundred years. It is a truly edifying work, a masterpiece of Christian instruction.

Pilgrim's Progress meets all the criteria for excellence in fantasy. The fantastic elements are carefully chosen and highly memorable. The author has something genuinely important to say. What he says is true and useful.

Some fantasies are better, and some are worse. Some are appropriate for Christians, and some are hurtful to spiritual wellbeing. The better ones are actually worth recommending. *Pilgrim's Progress* is even better than that. This is one fantasy that should be required reading for every Christian. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | Contact Us
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | www.centalseminary.edu