

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.”

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What Does God's Love Imply?

One of the objections often raised against the twin doctrines of unconditional election and efficacious calling is that these teachings violate the greatness of God's love. The objection begins with the premise (true, I think) that God loves all people infinitely, that He does not wish anyone to perish, but that He wishes all people to come to repentance. The second premise of this argument is that God must do all that He can do in order to secure the salvation of those whom He loves. Therefore, if God can somehow guarantee that people will be saved by electing them unconditionally and calling them efficaciously, then He is obligated to do so. If God should choose not to do this for some persons, then His love must be called into question. Since we cannot question the love of God (so the argument goes), we must reject the notion that God can elect unconditionally or call efficaciously.

This argument is powerful, but we must ask where it gets its power. We must also subject it to a biblical evaluation. What matters is not how powerful the argument seems, but how biblical it is.

The purpose of this essay is not to defend unconditional election or efficacious calling. Those teachings may be false or they may be true. Even if they should be true, however, I do not plan to vindicate their truth here and now. We are not going to look at any of the arguments for these doctrines. We are going to examine the objection against them that they are incompatible with God's love.

The core of this argument is that a loving God must do all that He can do to ensure the salvation of those whom he loves. This is the unexamined assumption of the argument. It is

indispensable to the argument. This assumption is what gives the argument its power.

This means that the argument is not a *biblical* argument at all. True, it does begin with a biblical premise (that God loves all people), but it depends for its effectiveness upon a *philosophical* assumption. That assumption is that a loving God must do all that He can do, that whatever He does for someone He must do for everyone, that He must neglect nothing that He could do in order to gain the salvation of those whom He loves.

I will offer three biblical examples in response to this philosophical assumption. The first example is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Never was a sinner more opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, yet everything changed on the road to Damascus. What made the difference? A personal, visible, audible, face to face encounter with the risen and glorified Christ.

If Christ appeared personally to Saul, He *could* appear to others in the same way. Surely many people would find His appearance just as persuasive as Saul did. And yet Jesus does *not* appear to them, even though He could. In other words, our Lord does *not* do all that He *could* do in order to get people to believe. He does not consider Himself obligated to do for all what He did for one.

The second example is Cornelius in Acts 10. In this pivotal episode, an angel appears to Cornelius and tells him to send for Peter who, says the angel, will tell him how to be saved. As Cornelius' messengers are on their way to Joppa, the Lord also sends a vision (three times!) to Peter in order to get him to go to Cornelius.

Would evangelism not be more effective if the Lord would first send an angel to each person whom He intended us to reach? Would we not reach greater numbers if the Lord would show us by revelation which people were ready to receive Him? We know that He can do such things—He did them for Cornelius. But He does not do them. He does not do for all what He did for some. He does not do all that He could do in order to induce every person to believe.

We could try to respond to this example by noting that God knows in advance who will believe and who will not. Perhaps God knows that only Paul will respond to the direct appearance of Christ or that only Cornelius will respond to an angel. We could argue that God does not waste such activities on people whom He knows will not respond. Even though He could repeat them, He has no reason to do so.

This response, however, fails to account for the fact that God sometimes does not do all that He could do, even though He knows that people would respond if He did. This is demonstrated by a third example. It is the example of Jesus' judgment upon Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum.

In Matthew 11:20-24, Jesus announces woe upon these cities because they have refused to repent, even in the face of Jesus' signs, wonders, and preaching. Jesus states that other cities could have received such revelation and would have responded. He mentions Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom by name. If Jesus had done His works in those cities, they would have repented—even Sodom would have remained!

Jesus *could* have done His wonders in Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. He knew that these wonders would have brought those cities to repentance. But He did not do the very things that He knew would have moved those cities to believe.

The Bible teaches that God loves all human beings. He does not wish any of them to perish, and He does wish for all to come to repentance. These are teachings that the Bible itself affirms in so many words. What the Bible does not affirm is that this loving God is obligated to do all that He can do to secure the repentance of those whom He loves. The Bible does not teach that what God does for one, He must do for all. These seem like reasonable inferences until we test them against the Bible itself. The Bible itself shows a God Who, for reasons known only to Himself, sometimes chooses to do more for some than He does for others. ✖

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.

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