

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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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.

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

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May 11, 2007  
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—Kevin T. Bauder

## Musings about Accreditation

Kevin T. Bauder

A couple of recent incidents have brought the topic of accreditation to the front of my mind. One is a report of a Bible college that has been priding itself to its students and constituents for having achieved accreditation with a national accrediting agency rather than a regional one, as if the national agency were somehow superior to the regionals. The second is a polemic by a former fundamentalist who insists that only regional accreditation is really accreditation. These two attitudes are about equally wrong.

Let's clear up some misconceptions about accreditation. First, accreditation is no guarantee of quality. Every competent educator knows of second-and-third-rate schools that have gained status as accredited institutions. On the other hand, there are good, credible schools that, for whatever reason, have never pursued accreditation. The point is simply that accreditation should not be the only criterion to decide whether a school offers a good education.

Still, accreditation does have a value. It represents an attempt on the part of colleges and graduate schools to hold one another accountable. Each accrediting association defines the standards that it regards as minimal for credibility. Some of the standards are academic, some are financial, some are administrative and organizational. In order to obtain accreditation, an institution has to open itself up to inspection by representatives of peer institutions. These

examiners present their findings to the decision-making body of the association (usually called a “commission”), which makes a final decision about whether or not the school will receive accreditation.

At one time, some Christian institutions were afraid that pursuing accreditation would require them to surrender their doctrinal and moral distinctives. In a few cases that concern was warranted. For example, some theological accreditors used to entertain a good bit of hostility toward conservative doctrine.

Happily, that day has passed. I am not suggesting that no problems ever arise, but these are far fewer than they used to be. The major accrediting organizations are not willing to challenge a school’s theological perspective. Conservative, Christian schools are now accredited by all of the regional associations, by the Association for Theological Schools, and, of course, by the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Seminaries. Several fundamentalist colleges have sought and secured regional accreditation.

Not all accrediting agencies are useful. Anybody can put together an organization and say that it grants accreditation. In fact, several diploma mills have done exactly that. In other words, some accrediting associations are as bogus as the schools they claim to approve.

So who accredits the accreditors? The answer is, the Council on Higher Education in America. CHEA is the organization recognized by the United States Department of Education to evaluate and approve the various accrediting associations. The member schools of these associations are listed in a book that is published annually by the department of education. If a school has legitimate accreditation, its name will be listed in the book.

Even among the CHEA organizations, however, all agencies are not created equal. For colleges, regional accreditation is considered to be the gold standard. While colleges can receive accreditation from specialized, national organizations, regional accreditation raises the fewest questions and opens the most doors.

For seminaries, the standard accrediting agency is the Association of Theological Schools. Most seminaries also hold regional accreditation, and some hold accreditation with other organizations. The ATS has established the norms that are recognized as standard even by other accrediting associations.

Bible colleges are a special case. For years, Bible colleges have been accredited by a specific national agency, which used to be known as the American Association of Bible Colleges. Because the needs of Bible colleges are different from those of liberal arts colleges and universities, the AABC was to them what the regional accreditors were to most schools. Recently, the AABC has expanded its scope to include seminaries and has renamed itself the Association for Biblical Higher Education. Many Bible colleges now hold both regional and ABHE accreditation.

A relative newcomer (as accrediting agencies go) is the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, or TRACS. Like the other agencies that we have discussed, TRACS is a member of CHEA and is approved by the United States Department of Education. It was established during the Reagan administration by schools that were sympathetic to young-earth creationism. At that time, some prejudice existed against those schools. They were seeking a legitimate way to gain accreditation without having to fight for their distinctive beliefs.

In the pecking order of accrediting associations, TRACS sometimes fails to get the respect that other organizations do. Partly this is because it is the new kid on the block. Partly it is because TRACS has always committed itself to an unpopular idea (young-earth creationism). Partly it is because the philosophy of TRACS is what could be called “developmental.”

Most accrediting associations are not interested in weaker institutions. TRACS has the opposite mentality: it will take schools that are weak but credible, and work with them to bring them into a position of strength. This means that the standards for accreditation may be applied more loosely at the beginning of the process, then slowly tightened up as the institution accustoms itself to the process. Sometimes, this developmental philosophy is viewed as a flaw by other associations.

This developmental philosophy, however, makes TRACS an ideal choice for colleges and seminaries that are stable and credible, but that have never worked with an accrediting association before. TRACS provides a warm environment for learning to create things like assessment plans and self-studies. Even if a school eventually wants to get regional accreditation, TRACS can provide help in learning to navigate the accreditation process.

On the one hand, there is a pecking order among accrediting agencies, and the regional associations remain at the top of that order. On the other hand, it is far from true to suggest that regional accreditation is the only accreditation worth having. It is good news that most fundamentalist colleges and seminaries have moved toward accreditation of some sort. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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## Psalm 130. *'Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord'*

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)

From depth of sin and from a deep despair,  
From depth of death, from depth of heart's sorrow,  
From this deep cave of darkness' deep repair,  
Thee have I call'd, O Lord, to be my borow.  
Thou in my voice, O Lord, perceive and hear  
My heart, my hope, my plaint, my overthrow,  
My will to rise; and let by grant appear  
That to my voice thine ears do well entend.  
No place so far that to thee it is not near;

No depth so deep that thou ne may'st extend  
Thine ear thereto. Hear then my woeful plaint.  
For, Lord, if thou do observe what men offend  
And put thy native mercy in restraint,  
If just exaction demand recompense,  
Who may endure, O Lord? Who shall not faint  
At such account? Dread, and not reverence  
Should so reign large. But thou seeks rather love,  
For in thy hand is mercy's residence,  
By hope whereof thou dost our heartès move.  
I in thee, Lord, have set my confidence;  
My soul such trust doth evermore approve.  
Thy holy word of eterne excellence,  
Thy mercy's promise that is always just,  
Have been my stay, my pillar and pretence.  
My soul in God hath more desirous trust  
Than hath the watchman looking for the day,  
By the relief to quench of sleep the thrust.  
Let Israel trust unto the Lord always,  
For grace and favour are his property;  
Plenteous ransom shall come with him, I say,  
And shall redeem all our iniquity. ✠

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Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | [Contact Us](#)  
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | [www.centralseminary.edu](http://www.centralseminary.edu)