

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
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Theological
Seminary of
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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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July 11, 2008

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Rationalism and Mysticism

Kevin T. Bauder

Christian theology moves between two poles. On the one hand, it is impelled by the desire to understand God. Understanding implies explanation, and explanation is essentially a matter of giving reasons. This impulse leads us to ask why God is or does thus or so. If we cannot find clear reasons, then we at least seek for careful definitions. We may not be able to say *why* God is Triune, but we at least attempt to formulate as precisely as we can what the Trinity means. This theological pole could be called the *rational* impulse in theology.

At the other pole, theologians constantly bump up against the recognition that God is wholly other. They quickly learn that the predicates that we apply to God cannot be used univocally. Even so basic an assertion as “God exists” has to mean something different than the assertion that “we exist,” for God's being is underived. He alone is self-existent—His being is different than our being.

Faced with the limitations of human understanding and human language, theologians sometimes despair of any rational knowledge of God. For them, theology becomes purely a matter of negation. They cannot meaningfully say what God is. They can only say what He is not. Rational knowledge of God is impossible.

In the place of rational knowledge, these theologians insert personal knowledge. On their understanding, God can be known directly and personally through His communion with the

soul. What the soul learns of God in this encounter can never be verbalized, but it is real knowledge. This pole represents the *mystical* impulse in theology.

Both mysticism and rationalism can move into dangerous territory. Unbridled rationalism may sever itself from the text of Scripture, defining God's person and works according to speculative philosophical categories. In its eagerness to explain *why* God is this or does that, it may actually produce a kind of divine determinism in which the very freedom of God is denied. After all, a comprehensive explanation of why God does a thing is only a small step removed from an assertion that God had to do that thing.

Other rationalists, eager to defend God's freedom, end up denying His nature. After all, if God is bound by His nature, then He does not make truly free choices. As Ockham argued, Christ could have become incarnate as a rock, a tree, or an ass. That He chose to become a man was His voluntary choice, or else He was not free when He made it.

Mysticism may also sever itself from the biblical text. If the true knowledge of God is ineffable and indefinable, then Scripture serves only as a sort of on-ramp to the highway of mystical experience, but it is not itself a revelation of God. The Bible is ultimately unnecessary.

Of course, purely negative theology ultimately contradicts itself. Theologians who say that they cannot know anything about God are actually asserting that they do know at least one thing about God, namely, His unknowability. If these theologians are right, then they necessarily have to be wrong.

The alternative to both pure rationalism and pure mysticism is Biblicism. Biblicists may be rational in that they intend to define and explain God's character and deeds. They may also be mystical insofar as they seek personal communion with God. Biblicists, however, begin with Scripture. They see in biblical revelation a sole and sufficient source of authority for their knowledge of God.

Biblicists do exercise their rational capacities. They discover much reasoning within the text of Scripture itself. Furthermore, they seek to draw sound inferences from explicitly biblical teachings. For Biblicists, the mind is in full play.

Biblicists also respond to the mystical impulse, for at their best they desire personal communion with God. This communion, however, is enabled by and mediated through the text of Scripture. The God with whom they commune is not one whom they find by examining their own souls. He is one who lives and breathes within the pages of Holy Writ.

Left to themselves, both rationalism and mysticism push toward dangerous extremes. While each points up the problem with the other, they cannot be used to balance each other out. Only a proper Biblicism can do that.

For a committed Biblicist both the rational and the mystical impulse can be satisfied. The genuine Biblicist will place both the mind and the heart in play all the time. Biblicists can give full rein to the desire to define and explain, while at the same time giving full rein to the yearning to know God personally. Only within Biblicism do these two impulses not contradict each other.

Biblicists rightly recoil from the extremes to which rationalism and mysticism can lead. Fear of the extremes may tempt them to stifle the mind, the heart, or both. If they are genuine Biblicists, however, this fear is unwarranted. Biblicism itself is what keeps both reason and

mystical communion within their proper spheres. Loyalty to Scripture will restrain, discipline, and inform both impulses. ✕

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.

My Sins, My Saviour!

John S. B. Monsell (1811-1875)

My sins, my sins, my Saviour!
They take such hold on me,
I am not able to look up,
Save only, Christ, on Thee;
In Thee is all forgiveness,
In Thee abundant grace,
My shadow and my sunshine
The brightness of Thy face.

My sins, my sins, my Saviour!
How sad on Thee they fall;
Seen through Thy gentle patience,
I ten-fold feel them all;
I know they are forgiven,
But still, their pain to me
Is all the grief and anguish
They laid, my Lord, on Thee.

My sins, my sins, my Saviour!
Their guilt I never knew
Till with Thee in the desert
I near Thy passion drew;
Till with Thee in the garden
I heard Thy pleading pray'r,
And saw the sweat-drops bloody
That told Thy sorrow there.

Therefore my songs, my Saviour,
E'en in this time of woe,
Shall tell of all Thy goodness
To suffering man below;
Thy goodness and Thy favor,
Whose presence from above
Rejoice those hearts, my Saviour,
That live in Thee alone. ✠

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