

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 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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Liberal Education

Kevin T. Bauder

When I applied for admission to seminary, part of the application process involved a physical examination. As I talked with the physician about going to seminary, he commented, "Most doctors are highly trained but poorly educated." The distinction was not one that I had heard before, and it puzzled me. When I asked what he meant, he said that members of his profession were taught to perform tasks rather than to respond to ideas. From that physician's comment I learned an important distinction: education is not the same thing as training.

Years later, I heard an erstwhile seminary dean declare, "I want to teach students how to think, not what to think." In principle I agreed with what he said, or at least I thought that I did. The more he talked, however, the more I got the impression that what he really wanted was to induce students to agree with his opinions in opposition to the views of most of the rest of the world. In this context, "how *to* think" actually meant "how *I* think." From that conversation, I learned another important distinction: education is not the same thing as indoctrination.

So what do we mean by being "able to think," and what sort of education inculcates this ability? What we call the "ability to think" consists in the development of general intellectual capacities such as the understanding, reason, or judgment. These are different than the skills that serve a particular vocation or profession (how to draw blood or write a codicil). They are also different from other mental operations such as perception, recollection, or emotion. The sort of education

that seeks to develop these general skills of the mind—the skills that constitute thought—has been traditionally called *liberal education*.

Liberal education and the liberal arts historically involved two branches of study. The *quadrivium* approximated what we think of as “subjects”: arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. The *trivium* focused upon intellectual skills: grammar, logic, and rhetoric.

The trivium constitutes the essence of liberal education. These three skills (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) are the components that we ought to have in mind when we use a phrase like, “How to think, not what to think.” The person who has not mastered these skills will either depend upon someone else to evaluate ideas for him, or else he will operate on the basis of blind prejudice. In the first case he is plainly at the mercy of someone else’s ability. In the second case he is a prime candidate to be manipulated or stampeded. Where other arts and the sciences are related to performing a specific task, the liberal arts equip people to face the issues of life.

Until a century or so ago, a liberal education was considered to be the indispensable foundation for ministerial training. Before a prospective pastor began his theological schooling, it was presumed that he would have mastered grammar (including Greek and Latin), logic, and rhetoric. These skills were felt to be necessary equipment for the study and communication of Scripture. They were prerequisites for admission into seminary.

Many pastors today, however, including the graduates of some seminaries, find themselves poorly educated. They have not mastered the liberal arts. This deficiency is not surprising. While showing justifiable concern for practical training, the Bible institutes and Bible colleges have tended to downplay the importance of liberal education. The average pastoral student in the typical Bible college may be required to take a semester or two of English grammar and composition. He may or may not get a smattering of Greek. He will have one course in biblical interpretation. He will probably take a few courses expounding books of the Bible, during which he might possibly be expected to employ the trivium. He will sit through a couple of semesters of homiletics. If these courses are taught correctly, and if he is interested, he may be able to garner an informal and indirect understanding of elementary grammar and perhaps even rhetoric. He will not, however, master these skills, and he is likely to receive no exposure whatever to logic. This combination of courses is better than nothing, but it constitutes meager preparation in the liberal arts.

Why should anyone care? The answer should be obvious. A pastor’s main task is to do the work of the mind. His calling requires him to interpret texts and bring them to bear upon the issues of life. In other words, a pastor is constantly confronting ideas. He stands as a bridge between the ideas in the world of the Bible and the ideas with which his congregation is, or ought to be, wrestling. In short, a pastor’s main work is to think.

The liberal arts, and the trivium in particular, are the tools of thought. To think is precisely to deploy the skills of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. A person who is not skilled in the liberal arts

cannot think well. Furthermore, a pastor who cannot think well cannot do his job. That is why we should care.

College education certainly is not the only way to master the liberal arts. Not for a moment would I suggest that only college graduates (let alone seminary graduates) are competent thinkers. My point is not that college or seminary education is essential to good thinking.

Nevertheless, if our colleges and seminaries claim to be equipping men for ministry, then they ought to concern themselves with the skills that ministers need. One of those skills is the ability to think well, and good thinking comes with mastery of the liberal arts. The teaching of the trivium ought to be a significant component in the curriculum of any institution that trains men to lead God's people.

If a pastor knows that he is weak in the liberal arts and he wants to improve, then what should he do? The answer, of course, is that he should master them through study and practice. He might pick up courses in the liberal arts at a nearby college. He might begin reading and studying on his own. Both he and his congregation will benefit from the investment. ✂

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. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu.

A Hymne to God the Father

Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

Heare mee, O God!

A broken heart,
Is my best part:
Use still thy rod,
That I may prove
Therein, thy Love.

If thou hadst not
Beene stern to mee,
But left me free,
I had forgot
My selfe and thee.

For sin's so sweet,
As minds ill bent
Rarely repent,

Until they meet
Their punishment.

Who more can crave
Than thou hast done:
That gav'st a Sonne,
To free a slave?
First made of nought;
With All since bought.

Sinne, Death, and Hell,
His glorious Name
Quite overcame,
Yet I rebell,
And slight the same.

But, I'll come in,
Before my losse,
Me farther tosse,
As sure to win
Under his Crosse. ✝

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