

# 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."

May 22, 2009

### 'Nuff Said

Kevin T. Bauder

Joel Carpenter is the Provost of Calvin Seminary. He is also the author of *Revive Us Again*, an excellent volume detailing the history of the "middle years" of fundamentalism, the period from the 1930s to the 1960s. Carpenter grew up as a fundamentalist, and he understands something about the way that fundamentalists do business.

At one point in his history, Carpenter offers a long quotation from a sermon by John R. Rice. The temper of the sermon (or at least that part of it) was pugilistic and bellicose. The content was an expression of Rice's prejudices, some of which were more correct than others, but none of which was firmly grounded in the text of Scripture. Carpenter points out that one of the major problems with fundamentalism was its inability to deal with such idiosyncratic and aggressive leadership.

Several years ago, I discussed this problem with Carpenter. I pointed out that he had placed fundamentalists in a pretty difficult position. If we did not challenge leadership such as that of Rice, then we were too complacent. If we did challenge it, however, and a fight ensued, then Carpenter was ready to spank us for being schismatic. I suggested that this was a no-win situation.

Carpenter's response was that there are plenty of intermediate steps between tolerance of an evil and outright separation. For instance, he said, you can admonish a brother but not

withdraw fellowship from him. What Carpenter found distressing was the unwillingness of fundamentalists to attempt these intermediate measures.

I think that Carpenter was not entirely correct. Fundamentalists have indeed attempted intermediate measures. Let me cite two examples.

As early as the 1930s, leaders of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches were attempting intermediate measures with the “Texas Tornado,” J. Frank Norris. Norris’s expressed philosophy of ministry was to “pick a fight,” because people would always come out to see a good fracas. The GARBC leadership attempted quietly to distance itself from Norris’s tactics. When Norris made this more difficult, the Regular Baptist leaders (Ketcham in particular) attempted gentle public disagreement. Norris, however, would have none of it. True to form, he picked a fight—this time with the GARBC. That fight lasted for well over a decade.

Similarly, the leadership of the American Council of Christian Churches attempted intermediate measures with Carl McIntire beginning about 1963. Among other things, McIntire was publishing statements that could be construed as racist, and the ACCC wanted nothing to do with it. When McIntire saw his putative authority being challenged, however, he adopted a rule-or-ruin mentality. The ugly story climaxed in 1970 when McIntire strode to the podium during a break in the proceedings of the ACCC, took over the meeting, and had himself elected president by loyalists who had remained in the room. The episode made national news and shocked the Christian world. It was one of those moments from which fundamentalism never recovered.

Fundamentalists have tried intermediate measures. It seems, however, as if one species of fundamentalism bred a generation of leaders (the generation that held power from the 1960s through the 1980s), many of whom could not accept intermediate measures. For some leaders, dissent was equivalent to disloyalty, and loyalty to the truth was equivalent to loyalty to their persons and programs. For those leaders, any intermediate measures almost always resulted in verbal violence and public ruptures.

That is why Carpenter, while not entirely right, is not entirely wrong. Within the noisiest branches of fundamentalism, intermediate measures were largely abandoned. Few possessed the effrontery to contradict the alpha males. The big boys knew how to deal with anything that they perceived as disloyalty.

People were afraid to face the bullies, but no one wanted to admit being a coward. The result was a fundamentalist subculture in which the avoidance of conflict with the chieftains was wrapped in a veneer of almost inviolable civility. This civility, however, rarely or never extended outside of one’s immediate circle, and even within that circle it flowed only up the chain of command and rarely down it.

We will never know how many young leaders were driven out of fundamentalism by this kind of hypocrisy. We probably won't know how many of those who stayed in still carry wounds that were inflicted by duplicitous and abusive leadership. What we do know is that the upcoming generation of fundamentalist leaders is not going to tolerate it. They thoroughly repudiate the pulpit tirades, the doctrinal tomfoolery, the political gamesmanship, and the outright character assassination of imperialist fundamentalism. One cannot blame them for reacting, but, like most reactions, these younger leaders run the risk of going too far.

They have often been reared under the influences of imperialism, and they tend to assume that all fundamentalism is, and maybe has to be, just like the imperialist fundamentalism that they abominate. They often find it hard to believe that there ever was, or ever could be, a fundamentalism that operates more from principles than from politics. Because they question the possibility of erecting a balanced fundamentalism, they are tempted to abandon the institutions and structures of fundamentalism altogether.

These young leaders are aware of the injustices of the past, and consequently they are very much on their guard against the imperfections of the present. When they perceive anything that looks like the old imperialism, they tend to react strongly. Given the availability of electronic communication, their reactions can be propagated widely and quickly. Sometimes, these reactions are poorly considered. Obsessed with issues and episodes, they run the risk of becoming as pugilistic as the very leaders to whom they object.

All of this brings us to the recent controversy over Pastor Dan Sweatt's sermon to the South Regional Fellowship of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship International, delivered at The Wilds in April of this year. The message caught the leadership of the FBFI by surprise. The crowd that actually heard it preached was relatively small. Some of the leaders of the South fellowship were not even present and did not know what had been said. I suspect that those who did hear it walked away shaking their heads, happy that Sweatt's remarks could be buried.

At one time it might have been thought they should not. This is the age of internet communication, however, when nothing is said in private. Pastor Sweatt posted the sermon on his church's website and on SermonAudio.com. Some who had heard the sermon determined to get it into the hands of people who could respond. And respond they did. Once the message got out, it provoked a storm of protest.

The questions raised by Pastor Sweatt's sermon are really two in number. First, will fundamentalists continue to excuse and perhaps even employ the flawed modes of leadership that were adopted by imperialists in a past generation? Second, will there be room within fundamentalism for charitable disagreement over issues such as Calvinism, concerning which fundamentalists have never seen eye to eye?

Pastor Sweatt's sermon exemplified exactly the wrong answer to both of these questions. If the sermon had been delivered to Pastor Sweatt's own congregation, it might have been simply

ignored. Since the sermon was delivered at a regional meeting of the FBFI, however, it presented that organization's leaders with a choice. To ignore the sermon was to run the risk of lending it credence. On the other hand, a blunt and public rebuke to Pastor Sweatt could have a chilling effect upon the platform of the fellowship by positioning the FBFI leadership as censors over every future speaker. What the FBFI leadership had to do was to find a way of distancing themselves from Pastor Sweatt's perspectives without coming across as a denominational Sanhedrin.

What the leadership of the FBFI has done is to adopt one of Joel Carpenter's "intermediate measures." The FBFI website now features a statement that makes it clear that varying positions on Calvinism have been and will continue to be acceptable within that fellowship. It calls for charity and fairness in the discussion of all issues.

By making this statement, the FBFI leadership has de facto accomplished two things. First, it has sufficiently distanced itself from the remarks of Pastor Sweatt, which were neither fair nor charitable. Second, it has sent a clear message about the spirit in which FBFI leaders intend to receive criticism in the future. By itself, this distances the current generation of FBFI leadership from earlier generations of leaders who would certainly not have responded with the same deference and humility.

Some would like to have seen a more direct denunciation of Pastor Sweatt. They wish for a clear, public rebuke. For my part, I think that would simply have been the old, imperialist mentality with the shoe on the other foot.

Christianity is not about getting a pound of flesh. As forgiven children of God, our purpose is never to call retribution upon others. We preach forbearance and forgiveness. Even a necessary admonition needs to be delivered with humility and charity, to whomever we may be addressing it.

Some think that the FBFI leaders have not sent a clear enough message. They wonder whether the current statement says all that needs to be said. Granted, it certainly does not say everything that needs to be said for all time, but I think it does say enough for the moment. It is an intermediate measure. If the FBFI really wishes to send a message about where it is going, then we will receive that message in many ways. We pay attention to the choice of speakers who appear on the FBFI platform. We listen carefully to what the FBFI leaders say about leaders who are outside of their immediate organization. We will examine the tone of the FBFI publications and resolutions. The present FBFI statement is a single (intermediate) step. I believe that the leadership of the FBFI would invite us to look for a trajectory.

The FBFI leadership has made a statement by whom they have invited to their national platform this year. The speakers include people like John Hartog III, Stephen Jones, Mark Minnick, and Chuck Phelps. These are men who know how to expound the Word. They are men who lead by their teaching and example, not by imperial decrees. They are men who have

had to bear the burden of significant ministries, and who have done it with grace and character. Frankly, they are men whose lives challenge me and from whom I am learning. They disagree over the question of Calvinism and over plenty of other issues, but I look for them to differ fairly and kindly.

A few question why the FBFI statement includes a reference to “the keyboard.” They wonder whether this is a slap at the bloggers who first sounded the alarm on Pastor Sweatt’s message. They are concerned that the FBFI leadership is attempting to lump the statements of these bloggers into the same category as Pastor Sweatt’s sermon.

Granted, the words could be construed that way. Is it charity or credulity to extend the benefit of the doubt? In this case, I see it as charity. I choose to believe that the FBFI leadership simply wishes to remind its constituents of the need for graceful communication in every venue. As one correspondent put it, “The statement calls for everyone to speak properly, leaving the implication that some did not. That is true for some and not for others. It seems unwise to take personal offense over a general call to biblical communication, unless you’ve violated that call.”

The FBFI leadership deserves more credit than some may be willing to grant. Fundamentalism is still home to quite a few people who were willing to burn incense to the emperors. Those people are very unhappy with the way things are going at the moment. They would like to see the FBFI leadership denounce me and a few others in no uncertain terms. Some would like me to be removed from the platform of the FBFI this summer. They have communicated their wishes to the leaders of the FBFI.

I have received no rebuke or warning at all from any of the current leaders of the FBFI, either publicly or privately (though I have received several expressions of agreement and appreciation). The leaders of the FBFI are resisting the pressures. They have taken no steps that could reasonably be taken as a repudiation of myself or any of the others who initially critiqued Pastor Sweatt’s words.

When John Vaughn and Brad Smith put their names to the statement on the FBFI website, they were not only distancing themselves from Pastor Sweatt. They were also distancing themselves from the ghosts left by a particular philosophy of leadership. Most importantly, they were distancing themselves from a small but noisy element within the fundamentalism of today. For Vaughn and Smith to publish this statement took grace and courage. We need to give credit where credit is due.

One week ago I said that the leadership of the FBFI could not afford to ignore this problem. I urged them to speak up and to clarify where the boundaries of fundamentalist fellowship really lie. The leadership did what they needed to do for this moment. They took a step that was intermediate but adequate.

My response?

'Nuff said. ✘

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](mailto:inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu).

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## Virtue

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky:  
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;  
    For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:  
Thy root is ever in its grave,  
    And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,  
A box where sweets compacted lie;  
My music shows ye have your closes,  
    And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,  
Like season'd timber, never gives;  
But though the whole world turn to coal,  
    Then chiefly lives. ✘

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900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043