

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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Those Baptist Missionaries

Kevin T. Bauder

The press is full of reports about Baptist missionaries who have been arrested in Haiti. They are accused of—and, as of yesterday, formally charged with—attempting to abduct children illegally into the neighboring Dominican Republic, ostensibly with the purpose of eventually selling the children into adoption. The missionaries have been moved from lodging in a public building and sent to jail. Jail in Haiti. Jail in a Haiti that has been decimated by earthquakes.

I admit that my first reaction when I heard the story was, "Oh, no! Another black mark against Fundamentalists." As it turns out, however, these missionaries were not from any Fundamentalist group. They were from Southern Baptist churches (albeit mainly from northern Southern Baptist churches). Still, they wear the names *Baptist* and *missionary*, and as far as most people are concerned, that has implications enough for the rest of us who are Baptists concerned with missions.

Naturally, the American press is playing up the story, focusing mainly on the two words *Baptist* and *missionaries*. To read the reports in the daily papers one would imagine the worst. *Baptist missionaries have been arrested. Baptist missionaries were abducting children. Baptist missionaries have been charged and jailed.* The natural assumption is that Baptist missionaries must be guilty.

The American public has reacted predictably. The press has offered its usual lurid report and the bulk of Americans assume that they have the facts and have been told the truth. The words *child abduction* stir up images of Amber Alerts and faces on milk cartons. Americans are all about images. If you can evoke the right images, you can get them to do anything.

So now we hear something like an outcry from the American public. In many cases, Christians have joined the outcry. Professional relief organizations (which are as jealous of each other as teenage girls at a prom and as territorial as a dog at a fire hydrant) are also piling on.

The specific reaction against the missionaries also serves as an occasion for the enemies of Christ. Christians tend to be so encapsulated within the bubble of their own subculture that they do not realize the vehemence with which many people hate their faith, or, in some cases, any faith at all. Within the United States are people who, with the slightest provocation, would completely obliterate Christianity or even religion if they could. These people are the ones who tend to react most shrilly to headlines such as *Baptist Missionaries Arrested for Abducting Children*.

Are there lessons to be learned from this episode? Oh, yes. Let me mention a few.

First and most importantly, it communicates a valuable lesson about the press. The lesson is very simple. Don't trust what you read.

There is no such thing as a brute fact. Facts by themselves are meaningless. A fact has no value until it has been set in the right context and interpreted. A fact without a context is worthless, and a fact in the wrong context is misleading and destructive. It is possible to lie with the facts, and journalists are past masters of the art. Never, ever think that the press is just reporting what happened. They do not report so that you can decide. Those who report have already decided, and what they communicate to you is their decision.

Reports are starting to come out of Haiti that have not shown up in the mainstream press. Some of these reports indicate that the missionaries had followed legal channels for expatriating the children, but that they had been turned back at the border for lack of some bit of paperwork. It was after returning to the capital to complete the paperwork that the missionaries were arrested. Other reports indicate that the Baptists were not planning to sell these children into adoption, but to build an orphanage for them in the Dominican Republic.

Of course, these reports may be no more reliable than the ones that come through AP or Reuters. What they do demonstrate, however, is that context may completely alter the interpretation of the event. Only a foolish person trusts journalists to provide all the facts and to present them in the right context. If all that we had to rely upon was the reporting of the *Washington Post* or *USA Today*, we should even be skeptical of the existence of Baptist missionaries.

The second lesson is almost as important. When you go to Haiti, or for that matter to any foreign country, you're not in Kansas anymore. The laws are different. The culture is different. The ethos is different. Life is lived by a different set of rules.

For example, in virtually any non-Western country (and even in some of the Western ones) bribery is a way of life. Even legitimate functions are often performed only in return for a "tip." It is possible to get into serious legal trouble simply for neglecting to bribe the proper officials. Very often, these officials will leave some bit of paperwork or communication uncompleted until the bribe is paid. You may think that you are following all the laws and regulations until you suddenly discover that your completed procedures have mysteriously vanished or been forgotten. It is at least possible that these Baptist missionaries may have simply failed to grease a sufficient number of palms.

Once, when traveling in a third-world country, my host and I witnessed a serious accident in which a man was run over by a car. My host ordered our driver to speed up and get us out of the area. I asked, "Aren't we going to help?" My host replied, "You're an American. If we stop, this will be your fault."

Americans have no business rambling around countries about which we are ignorant. If we don't know the laws, and if we don't understand the ethos, we are simply asking for trouble. We may be relatively safe as long as we are under the protection of a national or someone who knows the ways of the place, but if we set out to do our own thing we can expect calamity.

In spite of the press reports, these Baptists aren't really missionaries. To all indications, they are just ordinary church members who saw a problem and who wanted to help. They plunged into a foreign nation whose culture they did not know and whose ways they did not understand. It was only to be expected that they would find trouble.

Here's an application for real missionaries. You need two things. First, you really must learn the language and culture of the people to whom you plan to minister. Second, you really need a good mission agency behind you. A good agency is worth more than its weight in gold if it can keep you out of trouble or get you out of trouble. If you want to be a missionary, you need to look for an agency that has experience dealing with that sort of thing. The people who are under arrest in Haiti appear not to have had any agency advising them.

One final lesson. Even a genuine crisis should not invoke the crisis mentality. The crisis mentality says, "We have a crisis—do something! Do *anything!*" As the Haiti situation demonstrates, however, misdirected compassion can be highly destructive. Even well-intentioned people simply make matters worse unless they are doing the right thing.

This is a lesson that applies to many areas of life. One thinks, for instance, of the putative crisis over health care in America. Or the economic crisis. Or global warming. Or whatever else the crisis *du jour* may be. Here as everywhere, hasty and naïve solutions may actually compound the problem exponentially. It is never right just to do something. We have a responsibility to act so that our "solutions" will not multiply evil, grief, and pain in the world.

The ancients drew a distinction between compassion and pity. Compassion was thoughtful, carefully directed, regulated, and ordinate. Pity was heedless and reckless; it was inordinate. Compassion was thought to be an affection, a demonstration of the *splangchna*. Pity was considered a vice, a passion or appetite, stemming from the *koilia*. Crises call for compassion, but they are compounded by pity.

We have yet to learn the truth about the Baptist "missionaries" who have been arrested in Haiti. Perhaps we never shall. Until we do, however, we do not know what to think about this situation. We cannot judge it, but we can learn lessons from it. ✘

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.

Anthem for the Cathedral of Exeter

Joseph Hall (1574-1656)

Lord, what am I? A worm, dust, vapour, nothing!
What is my life? A dream, a daily dying!
What is my flesh? My soul's uneasy clothing!
What is my time? A minute ever flying:

My time, my flesh, my life, and I,
What are we, Lord, but vanity?

Where am I, Lord? Down in a vale of death.
What is my trade? Sin, my dear God offending;
My sport sin, too; my stay a puff of breath.
What end of sin? Hell's horror never ending:
My way, my trade, sport, stay, and place,
Help to make up my doleful case.

Lord, what art Thou? Pure life, power, beauty, bliss:
Where dwell'st Thou? Up above in perfect light:
What is Thy time? Eternity it is:
What state? Attendance of each glorious sprite:
Thyself, Thy place, Thy days, Thy state
Pass all the thoughts of powers create.

How shall I reach Thee, Lord? Oh, soar above,
Ambitious soul! But which way should I fly?
Thou, Lord, art way and end. What wings have I?
Aspiring thoughts of faith, of hope, of love:
Oh, let these wings, that way alone
Present me to Thy blissful throne. ✠

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