

# 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.

—Kevin T. Bauder

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

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May 26, 2006

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## The Illiberality of Liberalism

Kevin T. Bauder

Last weekend I had occasion to attend a commencement exercise at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. St. Thomas is, as you might guess, a Catholic institution of higher learning. About half of the students are non-Catholics, however, and the professors are all over the ideological map. Even the theology department has room for liberal Protestant feminism.

At each commencement, the university designates one senior as “Tommie of the Year.” This student, selected for academics, leadership, and character, is given the opportunity to deliver one of the two main addresses at the commencement ceremony. The “Tommie of the Year” for 2006 was Mr. Benjamin Kessler, a football star, philosophy major, and student in the undergraduate seminary affiliated with the University of St. Thomas.

For his commencement address, Kessler chose to focus on the profound selfishness that pervades American society. He began by referencing an episode in which a campus activity had turned into a food fight that had to be broken up by the St. Paul police. Then he named a campus controversy in which some unmarried couples (both hetero- and homosexual, including some faculty couples) protested a ban on cohabitation during official university trips. Finally, he branded birth control as a selfish practice that undermines the best interests of women, men, and children.

When Kessler talked about the food fight, the atmosphere of the commencement became noticeably charged. When he labeled the protests against cohabitation as a form of selfishness, he began to get catcalls from the crowd, and several professors and students exited the stadium. When he stated that birth control was selfish, much of the assembly erupted into derision. Calls rang from across the stadium to “pull him down,” and “get him off the stage.” Factions within the crowd made repeated attempts to drown out Kessler’s remarks with shouts and jeers. Someone even touched off a siren.

Kessler appeared not to let the ridicule unnerve him. He repeated his remarks where necessary, and eventually, he finished his speech and sat down. The ceremonies continued as if nothing had happened.

Today, the story is all over the local news. According to one local television broadcast, St. Thomas president Dennis Dease has stated that Kessler’s remarks were not appropriate for a commencement. Kessler himself has offered a public apology.

Why would *In the Nick of Time* take notice of this controversy? It is, after all, an intramural disagreement at a Roman Catholic university. To all appearances, fundamental Baptists don’t even have a dog in this fight. Still, I think that the episode contains lessons that we had better take to heart.

The first lesson is the unpopularity of conservatism. Benjamin Kessler’s views are unquestionably conservative. Kessler is not merely an economic “neoconservative.” He is philosophically a moral and social conservative in the Catholic tradition. The views that he expressed in his commencement address were not radical or extreme. They are mainstream Catholic teaching, officially authorized by the Vatican. What is more, he delivered his remarks in a Roman Catholic institution. If his viewpoint is welcome anywhere, it should be on a Catholic campus.

For the record, I did not agree with all that Kessler had to say. I disagree at least partly with his (and Catholicism’s) complete opposition to artificial birth control. I recognize, however, that his views do represent Catholic teaching and that he was expressing them from a Catholic platform.

For a Catholic to articulate the Catholic perspective from a Catholic platform does not seem at all unreasonable. Members of the crowd may have disagreed with Kessler, just as I did, but no one should have been surprised to hear what he had to say. Certainly no one had any right to take offense at his remarks.

Genuinely conservative views have become so unpopular in the culture at large that they are barely tolerated even in institutions that are theoretically committed to their propagation. If a speaker can be jeered and booed for expressing Catholic views from a Catholic platform, imagine how his opinions are received in the larger culture. This is particularly true of views that imply some moral limitation upon sexual conduct. Nothing invites greater censure within our civilization than to express moral opprobrium toward what people choose to do in their sex lives.

The second lesson is the illiberality of liberalism. Kessler’s opinions, while unpopular, were reasonably presented. He had earned the right to speak. He used that right to express some unpopular views, but he expressed them with dignity and moderation. Nothing in the manner of his address was extreme or offensive.

A reasonable person might have disagreed—as I did. A reasonable person, however, would have recognized Kessler’s right to speak. A reasonable person would have thought carefully about Kessler’s remarks, thought of good arguments to make in response, and located the appropriate venue for making those arguments.

That is how conservatives typically respond to speakers with whom they disagree. Rarely does one hear overt derision from a conservative crowd. Conservatives may feel strongly about their principles, but they feel even more strongly about the necessity of a free exchange of ideas. They try to respond to bad thinking with better thinking, not with force.

The liberals at St. Thomas did not respond with reason. Their only reply to Kessler was the verbal equivalent of the *argumentum ad baculum*. Rather than challenging him to debate his ideas in a reasonable venue, his opponents simply tried to silence him. They did their best to intimidate him, to ridicule him, and to drown him out. This treatment is not qualitatively morally different from an act of terrorism. Both are deeds of brutality and force. Both are motivated by hatred and revenge. True, the one involves physical force while the other involves verbal force, but this is a difference of degree, not of kind.

The illiberality of liberalism is a lesson that must never be forgotten. This illiberal spirit is not confined to the University of St. Thomas. On the contrary, it pervades our civilization. Those who challenge the prevailing liberal (permissive) mores can expect to feel the bite of this intolerant movement. We must always remember that contemporary liberals are not interested in the free exchange of ideas. They are interested in getting their way, and they will try to destroy anyone who effectively opposes their will.

Nothing is less successful than a naïve and Pollyannaish conservatism. Some conservatives seem to believe that merely being nice, and perhaps a bit concessive, will suffice to disarm liberals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Liberals do not care about niceness and they will not be satisfied with small concessions. Conservatives who compromise principle can expect to hear liberals loudly demanding yet further surrenders. Liberals will not be satisfied until every conservative has either capitulated or else been utterly silenced.

The persistence of this liberal attitude creates a temptation to respond in kind. To adopt the selfish and demanding attitudes of contemporary liberalism, however, is no solution. If we shout down the opposition and trammel the free exchange of ideas, then we have already abandoned the conservative ideal. Conservatives must find ways to articulate their ideas without surrendering their civility.

We are not Catholics, but we are conservatives. The ugly incident at the University of St. Thomas serves to remind us of how we are viewed within the culture at large. It also illustrates the reflexes of contemporary liberalism. The irony is that the spirit of true liberality has come to be valued mainly by the most conservative speakers in our civilization. ✕

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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Idea. Sonnet XII.  
Michael Drayton (1619)

*To the Soul*

THAT learned Father, who so firmly proves  
The Soul of man immortal and divine,  
And doth the several offices define,  
Gives her that name, as she the Body moves ;  
Then is she Love, embracing charity ;  
Moving a Will in us, it is the Mind ;  
Retaining knowledge, still the same in kind ;  
As intellectual, it is Memory ;  
In judging, Reason only is her name ;  
In speedy apprehension it is Sense ;  
In right or wrong they call her Conscience ;  
The Spirit, when it to Godward doth inflame.  
    These of the Soul the several functions be,  
    Which my Heart, lightened by thy love, doth see. ✕

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