



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students
Presented by the
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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 7, 2006

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Tolerance: Deciding the Boundaries

Kevin T. Bauder

No society can tolerate every idea or behavior, and no society ever has. Without exception, every social order establishes some boundaries for acceptable speech and conduct. A society that became completely *laissez faire* in its approach to toleration would devolve into anarchy and would soon cease to exist as a society.

If unbounded toleration is deadly to society, the absence of toleration is equally lethal. No two humans agree about every idea and every behavior. To tolerate no deviation from one’s own canons of truth and right is to make of one’s self an island, or, even worse, an army of one. It is to declare warfare upon the rest of the human race, admitting only those individuals into society who will submit to the acceptable ideas and behaviors. This is tyranny.

Some measure of tolerance is essential in order to avoid tyranny, but some restriction upon tolerance is essential in order to avoid anarchy. Justice demands a right measuring of what should be tolerated. Deciding the boundaries for toleration is an important—and perhaps *the* important—concern of each society.

Reflection upon this concern leads to several discoveries. Tolerance does not imply agreement, and disagreement does not constitute intolerance. Ideas can be tolerated to a greater degree than actions. Involuntary societies must be more tolerant; voluntary societies must be less tolerant. The boundaries of toleration must be defined by licit authorities, and those authorities must not transgress their limitations.

Given all of these discoveries, the important questions still remain. What are the proper boundaries of tolerance? What is the standard of appeal that determines whether a boundary is acceptable or not? Most particularly, what boundaries and standards are appropriate for involuntary societies such as governments?

Many Christians have tried to answer this question by appealing directly to the Bible. If the Bible says that an activity is sin, they reason, then it ought not to be tolerated by society. The state should enforce all biblical standards of morality and justice.

This appeal to biblical revelation is a form of theocracy. Eventually, this is the shape that the world’s government will take. When Messiah exerts His dominion over the political and social structures of the earth, then obedience to divinely-revealed law will be mandated for all people. Postmillennialists wish to pull this divine rule forward, believing that it can be established prior to the return of Christ to the world. Premillennialists insist that the divine rule cannot be established until Jesus has returned and is ruling from the throne of David in Jerusalem. Both versions of millennialism agree, however, that a theocracy will be established in space-and-time history. Both agree that it represents the ideal social order.

What about the present age, however? Should present-day Christians seek to establish biblical morality or divine law as the rule for their civil order? Should special revelation be taken as the standard that establishes the boundaries of tolerance? Should all unscriptural ideas and activities be outlawed? Answering “yes” to these questions creates several problems.

The first is the practical problem that Christians are not in a position to impose divine law upon their society. They are neither numerous nor influential enough to exert this kind of power anywhere in the world. Of course, postmillennialists believe that Christians will gain this influence eventually, but they are not completely clear about how. Will Christians gain dominance over society because they are better thinkers? Because they are better people? Because they reproduce more rapidly than secularists? Or simply because they are better shots? Postmillennialists seem to disagree among themselves, and no wonder. The Bible itself never offers any formula for God’s people to take over a society. Those who decide that they want to do it are pretty much on their own.

Second, the Bible itself offers no clear mandate for enforcing biblical righteousness within the present social order. Not only does the Bible fail to articulate a plan for Christians to take over a society, it never even says that Christians are supposed to do so. True, God did establish a theocracy over Old Testament Israel. Israel, however, was a peculiar people, a unique nation. God never indicated that Israel was to enforce its law over all the gentile nations. The Bible never hints that every part of the Sinai Code was meant for all peoples.

Even the pattern of Israelite theocracy breaks down when transferred to New Testament Christians. One need not be a dispensationalist to recognize that the pattern and order of God’s people has altered between the Testaments. Even if Israel and the Church are the same people, the shape of the community has changed. Any attempt to establish a theocracy must limit itself to the actual covenanted community, and not to society at large. This limitation was respected by the unvarying pattern of the apostolic church, which never once attempted to establish Christian categories or biblical practices by appealing to civil authority.

Third, Christians do not and probably cannot agree among themselves concerning the biblical boundaries of toleration. Therefore, any group of Christians that could gain power would have to coerce, not only the unsaved of the world, but also those Christians who disagreed. This attitude is clearly seen in the Puritan theocracy of New England. Because of their vision of Christian righteousness, the Puritans whipped Baptists and even condemned Roger Williams to starve and freeze in the wilderness.

Of course, the greatest problem with establishing biblical righteousness through civil authority is simply that it cannot be done. To cite only the most obvious example, the most sinful act that a human can commit is to reject Jesus Christ as Savior. Should Christians therefore seek laws against rejecting Christ, including severe reprisals against those who will not profess faith? Very few, even among the theologians, would advocate such draconian measures.

Christians who wish for the state to impose biblical morality will often appeal to the distinction between outward compliance, which can be enforced, and inward acceptance, which cannot. This distinction, however, is not nearly as unassailable as it appears. On any account, this distinction is a *de facto* concession that only *some* biblical morality can be enforced by the civil authorities. This concession leads directly back to the original question: what is the standard by which to determine where the boundaries of tolerance should be drawn? If only *some* of biblical morality can be enforced, then the biblical revelation of morality is not itself the standard.

In the theocracy of the Millennium this vagueness will not be a problem. With Messiah ruling from the throne, the entire world will enjoy the completely just application of divinely revealed law. Until Messiah comes, however, future attempts to impose biblical morality through state authority are not likely to be any more just or successful than they have been in the past.

Some wrongs must be tolerated. Some must not. The biblical revelation of God’s moral requirements does not by itself decide which are which. While Christians ought to believe and live by biblical revelation, they do not have permission to impose it upon their societies *tout court*. Some other test must be found. X



On the Death of a Young Gentleman.

Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784)

WHO taught thee conflict with the pow’rs of night,
To vanquish satan in the fields of light?
Who strung thy feeble arms with might unknown,
How great thy conquest, and how bright thy crown!
War with each principedom, throne, and pow’r is o’er,
The scene is ended to return no more.
O could my muse thy seat on high behold,
How deckt with laurel, how enrich’d with gold!
O could she hear what praise thine harp employs,
How sweet thine anthems, how divine thy joys!
What heav’nly grandeur should exalt her strain!
What holy raptures in her numbers reign!
To sooth the troubles of the mind to peace,
To still the tumult of life’s tossing seas,
To ease the anguish of the parents heart,
What shall my sympathizing verse impart?
Where is the balm to heal so deep a wound?
Where shall a sov’reign remedy be found?
Look, gracious Spirit, from thine heav’nly bow’r,
And thy full joys into their bosoms pour;
The raging tempest of their grief control,
And spread the dawn of glory through the soul,
To eye the path the saint departed trod,
And trace him to the bosom of his God. X



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.



Francisco de Goya. *Le motin de Esquilache* (The Esquilache Riots). c. 1766-1767.



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