

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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The Importance of Separation

Kevin T. Bauder

One occasionally hears the wry observation that fundamentalists believe in *all* the fundamentals—including separation. The force of this remark is to imply that fundamentalists separate, not only from people who deny the fundamentals, but also from genuine Christians who believe all the fundamentals but who do not separate. The remark is usually meant to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of fundamentalism, leaving the impression that a fundamentalist is a Christian who separates from everyone indiscriminately.

Of course, separation can be, and sometimes is, practiced divisively and schismatically. Nevertheless, not every separation—not even every separation from a believer—is a schism. The New Testament requires at least some separations between Christians, such as when a believer rejects church authority (Matt.18:15-17), engages in scandalous conduct (1 Cor. 5:11), or trifles with apostolic teaching (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15). Admittedly, Christians raise many questions about the application of these passages (What issues qualify for separation? What levels of fellowship are affected?). No one can deny, however, that some separations between believers are authorized and even required. The question is whether a refusal to separate is ever serious enough to qualify for one of the passages that require separation from other Christians.

In order to answer this question, we must remind ourselves about the nature of Christian unity, the problem of apostasy, and the reasons for separating from apostates.

Unity is always a function of that which unites, and fellowship is always a function of that which is held in common. The one thing that all Christians hold in common and that unites them is faith in the gospel. People who possess this faith are united by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ, the true church. Since the possession of faith is invisible, the true church is sometimes called the “invisible” church. Membership in the true, invisible church is the most fundamental form of Christian fellowship and unity.

We cannot directly observe saving faith, so we do not know certainly who is included in the invisible church. We do not know who *possesses* faith—but we can know who *professes* it. Therefore, while we let God judge who is in the invisible church, we must evaluate the professions of those who wish to be recognized as Christians. We must gauge whether or not an individual actually professes to have faith in the gospel.

What is the gospel? Paul described it as the message that Christ died for our sins and rose again (1 Cor. 15:1-8). The gospel assumes that we have sinned, that our sins have placed us under God’s wrath, and that we cannot save ourselves. It assumes that Christ is returning to execute God’s judgment upon the living and the dead. It assumes that Christ is a qualified sin-bearer, i.e., that He is truly divine and truly human, born of a virgin, sinless in His person, and righteous in all His acts. It assumes that we have an authoritative, inerrant source from which to learn all of these things.

The list of truths that are assumed in or implied by the gospel is quite long, and we do not yet know everything that belongs on it. What we do know, however, is that these assumptions and implications are extremely important, so important that to deny any one of them is to deny the gospel itself.

These necessary assumptions and implications of the gospel are called the *fundamentals*. A fundamental doctrine is precisely a doctrine that is essential to the gospel. One need not know every fundamental in order to believe the gospel, but to deny a fundamental is always to deny the gospel itself.

Here is our rule: we recognize as Christians only those people who profess faith in the true gospel. Obversely, we recognize no one as a Christian who denies the gospel. The gospel itself is the basic category for determining Christian recognition.

Christian fellowship is obviously not possible with people who are not Christians. Whenever we refuse to recognize someone as a Christian, we are *ipso facto* declaring that person unfit for Christian fellowship. No Christian fellowship or unity can exist with a non-Christian, because the one basic thing that unites Christians in fellowship is the gospel itself. Therefore, no Christian unity, fellowship, or recognition can exist with an individual who denies the gospel.

An infidel is a person who rejects Christianity and denies the gospel. Atheists are infidels. Muslims are infidels. Buddhists are infidels. No Christian fellowship is possible with infidels. That kind of fellowship would be a contradiction.

An apostate is a person who denies the gospel while claiming to be a Christian. The difference between an apostate and an infidel is that an apostate names the name of Christ. Apostates want to be recognized as Christians. They want to be accepted into Christian fellowship. Like infidels, however, apostates deny the gospel. Also like infidels, apostates are excluded from

Christian fellowship. Since they deny the gospel, they reject the very foundation of Christian fellowship and unity.

This point cannot be overstated. Apostates are not Christians. They are enemies of Christ. They must never be recognized as Christians. They must never be regarded as suitable objects of Christian fellowship or unity. They are outside the household of the faith. To extend any show of Christian commonality, recognition, mutuality, fellowship, or unity to them is worse than hypocrisy. It is to betray the gospel. It just might be the most scandalous thing that a Christian could do.

We have to make two choices about every doctrine. We must first decide whether we believe it. We must next decide how important we think it is. These two choices must be made about the fundamentals. Christians believe all the fundamentals; apostates deny at least some. Even those who believe the fundamentals, however, do not all agree about how important those doctrines are.

Some Christians do believe the fundamentals, but they do not believe that acceptance of the fundamentals should be made a test of Christianity or of Christian fellowship. Such people do not *deny* the gospel. Indeed, they may even defend the truth of fundamental doctrines. In the nature of the case, however, they *demean* the gospel. They remove the gospel from its position of definitive centrality for Christian faith and fellowship. They knowingly seek to extend Christian fellowship and recognition to gospel-deniers.

A professing Christian who robs a liquor store or commits perjury will ruin a testimony. A Christian leader who has an affair will ruin a ministry. But a Christian who knowingly extends recognition and fellowship to an apostate imperils the gospel itself. Such a Christian is guilty of doctrinal indifference, of spiritual apathy, of disobedience to Christ, and of grave unfaithfulness to the gospel.

At the very least, we should never look to such persons as Christian leaders. Furthermore, our willingness to involve them in the Lord's work ought to be severely truncated. Scripture gives clear instruction about how to handle professing believers who become involved in lesser scandals such as sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, and fraud (1 Cor. 5:11). How much more seriously should we treat the professing Christian who publicly demeans the gospel by removing it from its position as the adjudicator of Christian recognition and fellowship?

Separation is not a fundamental of the faith, but it grows directly out of a correct understanding of the importance of the fundamentals. Separation from apostates is the necessary corollary of Christian unity. The gospel has authority to create unity among those who receive it, and it has authority to preclude unity with those who deny it. Separation from apostates, therefore, is a matter of acknowledging the authority of the gospel itself. To reject separation is not some ordinary disobedience of Scripture. It is a grave act, and it requires an equally grave response. ✘

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.

Before the Cross
Jacques Bridaine (1701-1767)
Tr. Thomas B. Pollock

My Lord, my Master, at Thy feet adoring,
I see Thee bowed beneath Thy load of woe:
For me, a sinner, is Thy life-blood pouring;
For Thee, my Saviour, scarce my tears will flow.

Thine own disciple to the Jews has sold Thee,
With friendship's kiss and loyal word he came;
How oft of faithful love my lips have told Thee,
While Thou hast seen my falsehood and my shame!

With taunts and scoffs they mock what seems Thy weakness,
With blows and outrage adding pain to pain;
Thou art unmoved and steadfast in Thy meekness;
When I am wronged how quickly I complain!

My Lord, my Savior, when I see Thee wearing
Upon Thy bleeding brow the crown of thorn,
Shall I for pleasure live, or shrink from bearing
Whate'er my lot may be of pain or scorn?

O Victim of Thy love, O pangs most healing,
O saving death, O wounds that I adore,
O shame most glorious! Christ, before Thee kneeling,
I pray Thee keep me Thine for evermore. ✠

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