

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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Do We Have To Fight About This?

Kevin T. Bauder

Of all the discussions in which we engage, the bickering between some Calvinists and some Arminians tends to be among the least edifying. Not that I'm against discussion: far from it! These are issues worth deliberating, and I have my own views about what is biblical. I've grown enormously through hearing and reading the intelligent and charitable exchange of opinions. The problem is that, too often, the exchange is neither intelligent nor charitable.

Both Calvinism and Arminianism have their reasonable and balanced defenders. I find myself challenged whether reading John Wesley or François Turretin. I find myself edified through the writings of both A. A. Hodge and A. W. Tozer. Both Reformed theology and Arminianism can be defended charitably. Alas, not all defenders are so thoughtful.

There are Crusading Calvinists, and there are Aggressive Arminians. They feed off each other. One of them begins with a bit of sniping, and then we are confronted with the spectacle of caricature, misrepresentation, vituperation, extreme reaction.

I know, I know. Plenty of people are going to say, “I'm neither a Calvinist nor an Arminian.” Sometimes they mean that they simply aren't purebreds who hold all five points of either system. Sometimes they want to claim a supposedly-superior third position (often, and affectedly, labeled “biblicism”) that, in fact, almost always turns out to be some version of anti-Calvinism.

Whatever.

I am not half so concerned about what you call yourself as I am about how you behave yourself. And some have been behaving badly.

There are Calvinists who love to use the label "Semi-Pelagian" for anyone who doesn't hold all fifty-five points. They think that even the mildest Arminianism is not only anti-Reformed, but anti-intellectual and even anti-Christian. They cannot say "Arminian" without a sneer of superiority.

There are Arminians (and, if you like, "biblicists") for whom every Calvinist is a hyper-Calvinist. They allege that even the mildest Calvinism is a denial of human freedom and an attack upon God's justice and love. They cannot say "Calvinism" without a squeal of indignation.

Look, folks, this has got to stop.

I don't mean the discussion. I mean the bickering. The misrepresentation. The one-upmanship. The ecclesiastical manipulation. Even the purges.

How can we talk about this subject without going into spiritual meltdown?

First, we ought to know what we are talking about. The problem is that almost all of us *think* we do when, in fact, too many of us *don't*. Here's a simple test. If your opponents say that you have misrepresented or misunderstood their position, you almost certainly have. You don't really have the right to speak to the issue until you can articulate it in terms that its advocates will recognize.

We can only get to that point by learning sober habits of mind. We should get our understanding from the most responsible representatives of the opposing view. We should read with sympathy (which is not the same as agreement), and interpret our opponents according to their own *usus loquendi*. We should read to understand, not just to search for evidence that we can use to blast the opposition. We should open ourselves to the possibility that our opponents just might be right, and then we should weigh their arguments carefully to discover whether they are. Until we have done all of that, we do not have the moral right to express an opinion.

Second, we ought to recognize what is extreme and what is not. Both Arminianism and Calvinism have fringes that challenge Christian faith and obedience. Hyper-Arminianism becomes a system of virtual works-salvation, leading people to trust their own obedience to keep their salvation. Hyper-Calvinism can result in the tragic withholding of the gospel by those who refuse to proclaim it.

Not all Calvinists are extreme Calvinists, however. Think of Carey, Edwards, Whitefield, Judson, and Spurgeon. To these men, belief in the sovereignty of God was a powerful spur for the proclamation of the gospel. They were evangelists because of their Calvinism, not in spite of it.

Nor are all Arminians extreme. The Wesleys were about as Arminian as you can get, but they certainly trusted God and His grace, not their own works or obedience. The following are not the words of a man who doubts his salvation!

*Five bleeding wounds He bears,
Received on Calvary,
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly plead for me.
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,
"Nor let that ransomed sinner die."*

Third, we do not need to fellowship with each side equally. Actually and objectively, everyone possesses greater fellowship with those who hold more of the faith in common. It is natural that we should seek the subjective fellowship of those who understand the Scriptures as we do.

There is no particular reason that Arminians should not unite in organizations that promote Arminianism. Likewise, there is no reason that Calvinists should not unite in organizations that promote Calvinism. Calvinists *should* fellowship in Calvinistic organizations, and Arminians *should* fellowship in Arminian ones. But there is also a place for fellowship that is neither strictly Calvinistic nor strictly Arminian. At some levels, more-or-less Arminians and more-or-less Calvinists can and should meet on the common ground of the gospel plus whatever other biblical distinctives they hold in common.

Fourth, we must not become predatory. We should feel free to challenge one another's ideas, whether we are in a mutual fellowship or in separate fellowships. None of us, however, should seek to subvert the other's endeavors.

If an organization has an anti-Calvinistic statement of faith, then a Calvinist should stay out of it. He should not join it and then begin to plead for toleration of his views. That is dishonest and subversive.

Likewise, if an organization has a Calvinistic statement of faith (such as the New Hampshire Confession, which places regeneration logically prior to faith in the *ordo salutis*), then an Arminian should not join it. An anti-Calvinist who joins such a fellowship has no moral right to expect to be left alone. He is being dishonest and subversive.

Some fellowships have chosen to stake out a range of belief that includes moderate versions of both Calvinism and Arminianism. People who affiliate with an organization like that have a duty to respect the chosen diversity of the group. If they try to conduct a purge, then they have become predators.

Michael Barrett is a Calvinist who teaches in a Calvinistic school. A. Philip Brown III is an Arminian who teaches in an Arminian school. Both men are within the boundaries of the Christian faith. As it happens, I agree with one man more than I agree with the other, though I have some disagreements with each. We can debate those differences as part of our Christian fellowship. But when the rubber meets the road, both have a claim upon my love and a right to my fellowship. Both have a right to expect me to understand their position, and to treat them fairly and charitably. Both have a right to expect me to defend them when they are misrepresented. And that is just what I intend to do.

I don't care who started the fight. Let's stop it. Now. ✖

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.

LORD OF ALL BEING

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. (1809-1894)

Lord of all being, thronèd afar,
Thy glory flames from sun and star;
Center and soul of every sphere,
Yet to each loving heart how near.

Sun of our life, Thy quickening ray,
Sheds on our path the glow of day;
Star of our hope, Thy softened light
Cheers the long watches of the night.

Our midnight is Thy smile withdrawn;
Our noontide is Thy gracious dawn;
Our rainbow arch, Thy mercy's sign;
All, save the clouds of sin, are Thine.

Lord of all life, below, above,
Whose light is truth, Whose warmth is love,
Before Thy ever blazing throne
We ask no luster of our own.

Grant us Thy truth to make us free,
And kindling hearts that burn for Thee,
Till all Thy living altars claim
One holy light, one heavenly flame. ✠

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