

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 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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December 8, 2006

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Fundamentalists and Theater: Act Two So What?

Kevin T. Bauder

They say that confession is good for the soul. Well, here's my confession.

I love the theater.

I fell in love during my junior year in high school. On a whim I tried out for a school play and somehow ended up with a lead role. That was a turning point in my life. Acting was the first thing I discovered that I could do really well.

I loved it, and I threw myself into theater for the last two years of high school. As it turned out, I was in the right place at the right time. Our little school had a terrific team of theatrical coaches. Under their direction we repeatedly captured the highest honors in state competitions. Because of their investment I personally was given the highest awards that it was possible to receive.

Granted, this was high school. But we were working at a level far beyond most prep school theater troupes. We were outperforming even the big, metropolitan schools and functioning beyond many college theater departments.

I loved the greasepaint. I loved losing myself in the roles that I played. I loved the applause. I loved the camaraderie. I loved acting.

After I graduated, I qualified to become a judge in that state's high school speech and theater association. I wanted to judge the acting events. At that time I was the youngest judge ever to be credentialed in that state—a record that probably still holds.

While my coaches pressured me to attend a good college for theater, I ended up in a Bible college instead. I participated in a couple of productions there, but it wasn't the same. Don't get me wrong, I had some fun. I got to be in a troupe that performed in churches across the country. College theater is where I met and grew to love the woman whom I eventually married. But I could never warm to my college's theatrical environment. Even compared to my little high school, the college stuff was far too amateurish.

Incidentally, that's pretty much true of virtually every Christian stage production or movie that I've ever seen. We just don't do theater well. It's bad, usually embarrassingly bad, so bad that a self-respecting thespian would cringe to be a part of it. But that's a different topic.

After my second year in Bible college, I became convinced that the Lord was calling me to vocational ministry. The Lord's call seemed to fit naturally with my love of theater. I believed that churches could use a good deal more showmanship. I had visions of Sunday evening extravaganzas, plans to punch up the morning worship, and a scheme to do first-person monologues that would depict various biblical characters.

I had grown up under the typical, fundamentalist prohibition of movies (though this prohibition was not applied to "films" produced by Christians). By the time I was out of college I could no longer agree with the usual objections, though I did not rush out and start going to the movie theater. Of course, I was already attending stage productions pretty regularly; my college did not have a rule against that. I even remember writing a paper for my college English class that defended dramatics on the grounds that the Bible never mentioned the theater and certainly did not forbid it. By this I meant that the Bible did not forbid theater in so many words. It never occurred to me that the Bible might articulate principles that would have anything to do with the subject.

Shortly after that, video cassette recorders became affordable. Like others of my generation, I experimented with some of what Hollywood had to offer. This was illuminating in some ways. I discovered that there really was a difference between what you could see on television and what you would see in an uncut movie. I found that some of my favorite TV movies were much more obnoxious when they were viewed as they had actually come from Hollywood. That discovery unsettled me and forced me to begin revisiting some of the old arguments about content.

So did my first encounter with the writings of A. W. Tozer. I had developed some respect for Tozer from his book, *That Incredible Christian*. Then a seminary professor introduced me to Tozer's little essay on "The Menace of the Religious Movie." Here was Tozer, arguing that theater *as a medium* was completely incapable of conveying Christian truth. Needless to say, I dismissed his argument—but it was the first time that I'd seen any Christian attack theater as a medium rather than simply to attack the content or connotations of particular theatrical productions.

As I studied the history of Christian thought, I gradually became aware that my generation had departed from a truly historic Christian standard. I had never realized how completely the Christian church had denounced theater. The condemnations came, not from an extremist here or there, but from the whole Christian tradition in nearly all of its permutations. There I found an

inchoate sensibility, a prejudice against theater that was not often stated explicitly but seemed to be assumed as part of the spiritual atmosphere. When it was stated, however, the expressions displayed considerable force of conviction.

At about this same time, my knowledge of Western intellectual history was beginning to grow. I discovered that part of that history included a long discussion about the nature of theater and its effects upon the audience. This list of participants in this conversation was notable: Aristotle, Hume, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Schiller, Jaspers, Gadamer, Weaver, Kaplan, and Postman. As I became more familiar with the details of this discussion, I found it disconcerting that much of the aesthetic analysis of theater appeared to reinforce the objections of Christians like Augustine and Pascal.

I had dismissed Tozer as a crank, but I found it increasingly difficult to dismiss the entire conversation. I no longer found it easy to overlook a consistent prohibition of some eighteenth-century standing. The arguments that I found within church history began to look suspiciously like the careful and thoughtful application of biblical principles. I also wrestled with the manner in which the unprejudiced analysis of the aesthetes reinforced the historic prejudices of the Christian tradition. I began to suspect that the prohibition of theater might be based on some wisdom that was more perceptive than I had hitherto believed.

So here is my problem. On the one hand, I still love theater. If a production is skillfully done, I can watch either stage or screen with enormous enjoyment. Beyond that, I would love to act. Nothing is quite like a stage production in front of a live audience, but I would like to try film, too. Most of all, I truly itch to try to raise the level of production among Christians for both stage and screen.

On the other hand, I do not feel quite free to dismiss an understanding of the application of Scripture that was articulated explicitly and held almost universally by Christians from Tertullian until the days of Tozer in the 1950s. I also do not feel quite free to ignore upwards of two millennia of philosophical discussion about the nature of theater. Both of these considerations give me pause in considering both the morality of theater in general and the utility of theater as a vehicle for communicating Christian truth.

I am perplexed. I love a thing, but I have some reasons to suspect that the thing I love could be spiritually harmful and perhaps even immoral. Therefore, if someone were able to convince me of the complete legitimacy of theater, I would be delighted. I would be forever in that person's debt. I truly wish to be convinced.

Suppose someone wanted to convince me: how could they do it? What sort of issues would they have to address? What factors would they have to consider? What questions would they have to help me answer?

Before I deal with that, there is another confession that I need to make. But the next confession has to wait for the next essay. ✖

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.

The Love Of Christ Which Passeth Knowledge.

Christina Rossetti (1830—1894)

I bore with thee long weary days and nights,
Through many pangs of heart, through many tears;
I bore with thee, thy hardness, coldness, slights,
For three and thirty years.

Who else had dared for thee what I have dared?
I plunged the depth most deep from bliss above;
I not My flesh, I not My spirit spared:
Give thou Me love for love.

For thee I thirsted in the daily drouth,
For thee I trembled in the nightly frost:
Much sweeter thou than honey to My mouth:
Why wilt thou still be lost?

I bore thee on My shoulders and rejoiced:
Men only marked upon My shoulders borne
The branding cross; and shouted hungry-voiced,
Or wagged their heads in scorn.

Thee did nails grave upon My hands, thy name
Did thorns for frontlets stamp between Mine eyes:
I, Holy One, put on thy guilt and shame;
I, God, Priest, Sacrifice.

A thief upon My right hand and My left;
Six hours alone, athirst, in misery:
At length in death one smote My heart and cleft
A hiding-place for thee.

Nailed to the racking cross, than bed of down
More dear, whereon to stretch Myself and sleep:
So did I win a kingdom, — share My crown;
A harvest, — come and reap. ✠

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