

Jerusalem, My Happy Home

F. B. P. (16th cent)

Jerusalem, my happy home,
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end?
Thy joys, when shall I see?

O happy harbor of the saints,
O sweet and pleasant soil!
In thee no sorrow may be found,
No grief, no care, no toil.

Thy saints are crowned with glory great;
They see God face to face;
They triumph still, they still rejoice:
Most happy is their case.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
God grant that I may see
Thine endless joy, and of the same
Partaker ever be!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Initial Thoughts on Distance Education

Kevin T. Bauder

It's no secret that Central Seminary has begun to deliver seminary courses through distance education. We talked about doing something like this for nearly a decade but were hesitant because we questioned whether we could deliver an on-line educational experience that was comparable to classroom participation. While we were thinking and discussing, the technology was advancing. We are now able to use computer technology to bring students from virtually anywhere in the world into our classrooms in real time.

We experimented with this technology for about a year before moving ahead. During that year volunteers from all over the world visited my classes. They could see me and the rest of the class on their computer screen, and we could see them. Subsequently, we sought and received clearance from our accreditors to offer courses for credit via synchronous distance ed. We couldn't advertise these offerings before we received word from the accreditors, so we had only a few students take our distance ed courses last semester. This semester, however, we have seen a jump in the number of students taking advantage of these offerings.

When we began exploring distance education, our personnel evidenced different levels of enthusiasm. Some were quite interested; others were skeptical that a computer screen could deliver a quality educational experience. I was among the most doubtful—I'd seen it done too poorly in too many other institutions. The fact is, however, that many students were more interested in convenience than in quality, and even poorly-managed distance ed programs were siphoning students away from us. Over time we came to feel that we at least had to try to find a way to offer courses that would be comparable to those received by our on-campus students.

My skepticism may have been one of the reasons that I was chosen to help test the technology before we sought permission to implement it. Whether that's the reason or not, it was good for me to get a sense of how combining resident students and distance students in the same classroom would work. Overall, the experience convinced me that we could indeed offer credible education with the technology at our disposal.



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Now I've taught distance ed students for real. I believe I'm beginning to get a sense of what is gained and what is lost by bringing students into the classroom through the computer screen. My initial evaluation is that the technology brings both gains and losses.

The losses are real, and can be illustrated by my relationship to the students I'm teaching this week. On the first day I told the class that I'd be going out to lunch on Friday, and I invited any interested students to join me. Of course, that invitation only works for resident students—distance students are not going to travel to Minneapolis for a lunch. That's the point. In my own education, I probably learned more from my teachers outside the classroom than I did inside. Conversations over lunch in a fast-food place, or over dinner at home, or even over coffee in the lunch room were an important part of the experience. Those are the settings in which I really grew to know my teachers, in which I had the opportunity to probe their thinking, and in which they had the chance to challenge me and nurture me in very personal ways.

This is an experience that our distance students will hardly ever enjoy. Relationships will remain more superficial. In my relationship to these students, I feel more like a delivery system for theological information than I do like a teacher. That's a problem because Christian teaching requires far more than the transmission of information. I do not believe that I am shaping my students' theology if I am not shaping their lives, and that sort of shaping is difficult or impossible to accomplish in the classroom alone, especially if the classroom is visible only on a computer screen.

The argument can be made that this sort of discipleship is really the business of the local church and should take place there. I grant that point. But I also insist that biblical and theological learning must never be divorced from accountability, obedience, and affection. By turning seminary professors into information dispensers, I believe that we risk serious damage to the next generation of Christian leadership. The problem will be compounded because they will never know that they missed something irreplaceable.

While this negative is real, I believe that the benefits of distance education more than make up for it, at least in some instances. The greatest benefits are accessibility and affordability. Students do not have to move to Minnesota to take our courses. They do not have to travel to Minneapolis and secure lodging and meals to attend one of our modules. The class I teach next week will have several African students (already teachers in their own country) who could never travel to the United States for advanced education but who can attend class by computer.

In terms of biblical and theological content, our distance students gain the full benefit of seminary education. They really are attending class with our resident students. They hear the same lectures and participate in the same

discussions, but they do it from their own desks and kitchen tables. In my judgment, the classroom experience is just as beneficial for distance students as it is for resident students.

On balance, I've become a believer in distance education, at least in the way Central Seminary is doing it. At the same time, I'm glad that we still have resident students. A young man who wishes to prepare for ministry will still do better to move to Minneapolis and to participate in the full seminary experience. For students who cannot consider such a move, however, distance education opens possibilities that have never before existed. I welcome those students and hope to get to know them as well as the technology permits.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
