

Father of Mercies, Bow Thine Ear*Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795)*

Father of mercies, bow Thine ear,
 Attentive to our earnest prayer:
 We plead for those who plead for Thee;
 Successful pleaders may they be!

How great their work, how vast their charge!
 Do Thou their anxious souls enlarge:
 Their best acquirements are our gain;
 We share the blessings they obtain.

Clothe, then with energy divine
 Their words, and let their words be Thine;
 To them Thy sacred truth reveal,
 Suppress their fear, inflame their zeal.

Teach them to sow the precious seed;
 Teach them Thy chosen flock to feed;
 Teach them immortal souls to gain,
 Souls that will well reward their pain.

Let thronging multitudes around
 Hear from their lips the joyful sound;
 In humble strains Thy grace implore,
 And feel Thy new-creating power.

Let sinners break their massy chains,
 Distressed souls forget their pains;
 Let light through distant realms be spread,
 And Sion rear her drooping head.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***The Future of Fundamentalist Education: Delivery***Kevin T. Bauder*

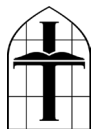
Twenty years ago almost no reputable college, university, or seminary offered distance education. In fact, “distance ed” was one of the marks of a diploma mill. Nevertheless, the new computer technologies, and especially the internet, were about to provide platforms that could be used for widespread experimentation in distance education.

An early adopter was Northland International University, which was reputed to have spent seven figures setting up a distance ed platform. Their technology relied heavily on pre-recorded presentations and threaded Internet discussion groups—an approach typically known as *asynchronous* distance education. I taught one course for Northland using those tools, and I hated it. I thought that it depersonalized the educational process, so much so that I could not understand how it fit with Northland’s mission of “life touching life.” I was convinced that students who took the course in this format received a worse education than those who took it live.

Another early adopter was Maranatha Baptist University. Unlike Northland, however, Maranatha adopted *synchronous* distance education, using an early version of Zoom technology to combine local and distance students in the same learning experience. I also taught a course for Maranatha in those days, and I found very little difference between interacting with local students who were physically present and interacting with distance students who were virtually present. This was my first positive experience with distance ed; for the first time I could see how distance ed might be done effectively.

Several years ago Central Seminary began using the Zoom platform to incorporate synchronous distance education into our curriculum. At the master’s level, every class has included some combination of distance students and local on-campus students. The technology has enabled us to reach students not only throughout the United States and Canada but in multiple countries in Africa, South America, and Asia.

Any remaining hesitation we might have harbored about distance education was swept away by the COVID pandemic. Every institution and every accreditor has recognized that some form of distance education is essential un-



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der the present circumstances. For Central Seminary the move to all-Zoom courses has been seamless at the master's level. In about a month we will be offering our first all-distance D.Min. course. I don't know of an institution of higher learning that is not making the same adjustments. To paraphrase Nixon, "We're all distance ed now."

My guess is that COVID-19 loosed the genie from the bottle. I doubt that any of us will ever go back to education as it used to be. What we need to do now is to take stock of the situation and to decide how to make the most of—OK, this is an expression I thoroughly despise, but it applies here—of the "new normal." In this vein I offer the following four observations.

First, distance education brings some definite positives. One is that we can reach students anywhere in the world, as long as they can get a decent Internet connection. Another is that we can offer education to students in their home churches. They do not have to move to Minneapolis to go to seminary.

Second, from a strictly academic point of view, we lose very little when we use synchronous technology. The virtual classroom really is still a classroom; professor and students can still interact as a fellowship of learning. The verbal exchange is slowed only slightly, and some group activities (such as singing together) are impaired, but students can still learn languages, hermeneutics, exegesis, and theology.

Third, what we actually do lose is all of the stuff that usually happens outside the classroom. Traditional chapels become impossible. Lunchroom conversations do not happen. Mentoring takes on an impersonal tinge. We can still grade assignments, but we get little opportunity to evaluate our students' spiritual discipline, their work ethic, their personal skills, or their devotion. Even when we do get some impression of these things, we aren't able to do much to help them. This deficiency is important, because these areas are exactly what has distinguished seminary and even Bible college education in the past. If these areas are left unaddressed, then the next generation of pastors and missionaries could be disastrous for the churches.

Fourth, something has to be done to address the non-academic side of ministerial preparation. The good news is that the Lord Jesus Christ has already created an institution and ordained it to accomplish that task. His institution to make disciples and to prepare Christian leaders is the local church. It is time for the churches to reclaim ownership of ministerial instruction.

As a Baptist, I see this situation as overwhelmingly positive. In the New Testament, the churches equipped and trained their pastors. Part of my goal since coming to Central Seminary has been to move the responsibility for training pastors and missionaries back toward the local church. Seminaries can provide the academic side, and that is a good thing, because most churches will never be able to. The process of discipling a future leader

into Christian ministry, however, is always done better by the local church. Seminaries need churches even more than churches need seminaries.

For decades Central Seminary has operated in close partnership with local churches. Indeed, our mission statement begins with the words, "to assist New Testament churches." The present situation simply underlines the importance of church partnerships. Future pastors need to be trained by present pastors under the discipline of effective New Testament churches. Colleges, universities, and seminaries are service organizations whose mission is simply to help local churches. It is time for our institutions to celebrate their rightful place as junior partners in the process. It is also time for local congregations to take seriously their own responsibility in equipping future generations of leaders.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of 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.
