

From Pole to Pole Let Others Roam

John Newton (1725–1807)

From pole to pole let others roam,
And search in vain for bliss;
My soul is satisfied at home;
The Lord my portion is.

Jesus, who on his glorious throne
Rules heaven and earth and sea,
Is pleased to claim me for his own,
And gives himself to me.

His person fixes all my love,
His blood removes my fear;
And while he pleads for me above,
His arm preserves me here.

His word of promise is my food,
His spirit is my guide;
Thus daily is my strength renewed,
And all my wants supplied.

For him I count as gain each loss,
Disgrace for him renown;
Well may I glory in my cross,
While he prepared my crown.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Future of Fundamentalist Education: Challenges

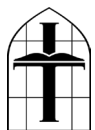
Kevin T. Bauder

Anybody who gets into the business of predicting the future is on hazardous ground. None of us can see even one second into our future. Only God can, and where He does not reveal it to us, we had better admit ignorance. What we can do, however, is to project trends and to hypothesize about what the future will probably look like if those trends continue. We can guess at a possible future, even if we do not know the actual one.

The present trends indicate that living out a thoroughly Christian testimony and operating as fully ordered New Testament churches may well be growing more difficult. A growing number of those who manipulate the levers of political and cultural power seem to be operating under the influence of a radical secularism. Through the increasing cultural weight of critical theory, a very hostile Marxism has crept in the back door. Civility and genuine tolerance are evaporating as shrill voices inspire Twitter mobs into unprecedented brutality. In short, we seem to be on the cusp of a Dark Age, not only for Christians, but for whatever is truly humane.

Such a future places special burdens upon the churches and their leaders. Of course, the first burden is mere survival, and we experience a powerful temptation to sacrifice other ends to this one. We think that we shall have succeeded if our grandchildren, or their grandchildren, or theirs, eventually emerge from the Dark Age with a basic Christian faith intact. Some of us may hope for a shorter period of decay, punctuated by the Rapture and interrupted by the Second Coming. In either case, the temptation is to focus on the bare minimum that we must preserve, jettisoning whatever is not absolutely essential to the being of our churches. This minimalist approach, however, would be unfortunate and even disobedient.

We are responsible, not only for the bare essentials of Christianity, but also for all the counsel of God. We must attend, not merely to the being of our churches, but also to their wellbeing. Our job is to transmit the entire system of faith and obedience in its integrity. Believers and churches must emerge from the Dark Age (or reach the Rapture) with a full embrace of all that God wishes us to know and do. We must arrive full of faith, holding firm to our hope, and loving both God and neighbor. Our churches will require leaders who can both call them and lead them into this vision.



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Of course our obligation does include the essentials or fundamentals of Christianity. We must pay particular attention to the gospel, understanding its purpose, nature, content, and parameters. We must grasp the way in which the gospel establishes the boundary of the Christian faith. We must understand how gospel deniers are outside that boundary, even when they name the name of Christ. We must refuse to pretend that we can enjoy Christian fellowship with these gospel deniers, because we genuinely have no fellowship with them. Clarity on these points will be critical, for as we are persecuted for the sake of Christ, we will naturally wish to gravitate toward other people who are also being persecuted for what they think is Christianity. Sometimes, however, the “Christianity” for which they are being persecuted will not be a genuine Christianity at all, but an actual denial of the gospel.

We must recognize that full fellowship is not possible even with all who do affirm the gospel. To be sure, some level of real fellowship exists among all true Christians, and *Christian* is the proper label for those who affirm the genuine gospel. To enjoy some level of fellowship, however, is not necessarily to enjoy every level of fellowship. In the face of opposition and even persecution, pressures may mount to ignore real differences and to suppress controverted points of the system of faith. Instead, we must cling tightly to the whole system, each of us as she or he understands it before God. Differences over the system of faith will to some degree result in separate organization, but (as the Princetonians argued more than a century ago) separate organization is not necessarily schism.

Even under persecution it is not sin—indeed, it is a virtue—for a Baptist to maintain charitably the importance of Baptist distinctives. This is exactly what the first generations of Baptists did as they emerged from the English Reformation. They recognized their commonalities with the Puritans and the Separatist Congregationalists, and they affirmed fellowship at those points. Nevertheless, they rejected full fellowship with these groups in favor of church order that approximated (as they saw it) more closely that of the New Testament. All of these groups stood against the persecution of the established order, but they all organized churches according to their understanding of the biblical pattern.

Under persecution the differences between Christians over eschatology may become even more pointed than they are in times of peace. We might ask whether believers who are suffering deprivation and imprisonment reasonably expect that they might be delivered by the Rapture at any moment. Or must they resign themselves to a hope in the distant future? Should those who experience opposition and oppression expect the gradual transformation of the earthly order by and into the millennium, a process that may require centuries? Or should they expect the complete and sudden replacement of the present order by the kingdom of Christ? To people in a jail cell these differences could hardly seem merely academic.

When Bibles are being confiscated and burned, will churches receive some additional prophecies to speak directly to them under their present circumstances? Will they be able to exercise Kingdom Authority over disease, demons, and possibly even death? Or should supposed prophecies and exorcisms be seen as counterfeits and distractions from the main business of understanding the Scriptures and transmitting the system of faith? The differences between Cessationism and Charismaticism will become more, and not less, important as conditions worsen.

Pastors of the future must be prepared to guide their churches through all of these mine fields. They must also be prepared to galvanize their congregations against the corrosions that seep in from the secular culture. Already some professing evangelicals are attempting to defend same-sex unions and gender transitions. Evangelicals are playing with Marxian-based critical theory. Such people offer sophisticated arguments in favor of these deeply anti-Christian trends. Future pastors must understand the influences, grasp the arguments, and steer their churches through the new obstacle courses with which they are confronted.

Knowing what we may soon face should shape our vision of fundamentalist education, and particularly our vision of pastoral preparation. While we might wish that we were preparing men to lead great revivals, we are most likely preparing them to lead the churches through the new Dark Age. We need to rethink the content of our pastoral preparation with that Dark Age in view.



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.
