

Comfort, Comfort Ye My People*Johann Olearius (1611–1684); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)*

Comfort, comfort ye my people,
 speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
 comfort those who sit in darkness,
 mourning 'neath their sorrow's load.
 Speak ye to Jerusalem
 of the peace that waits for them;
 tell her that her sins I cover,
 and her warfare now is over.

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,
 blotting out each dark misdeed;
 all that well deserved his anger
 he no more will see or heed.
 She hath suffered many a day
 now her griefs have passed away;
 God will change her pining sadness
 into ever-springing gladness.

For the herald's voice is crying
 in the desert far and near,
 bidding all men to repentance,
 since the kingdom now is here.
 O that warning cry obey!
 Now prepare for God a way;
 let the valleys rise to meet him,
 and the hills bow down to greet him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,
 make the rougher places plain;
 let your hearts be true and humble,
 as befits his holy reign.
 For the glory of the Lord
 now o'er earth is shed abroad;
 and all flesh shall see the token,
 that his word is never broken.



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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***It's Not News***Kevin T. Bauder*

Over the past several weeks I have become aware that something is going on at an important Baptist church in my area—a church that shall not be named. Apparently, the senior pastor and other staff resigned. Members were upset. Accusations were made against other members and against pastors. People left the church, and when they left, they complained to the press. Reporters and pundits picked up the story, which has appeared in blogs and national publications.

People have begun asking me what I think about the church-that-shall-not-be-named. I have an answer to that question. I am now going to state my answer publicly.

I don't have an opinion.

It's true. I have opinions about all kinds of things. I have an opinion about Jello (and that opinion is not good). I have an opinion about golf (b-o-r-i-n-g). I have an opinion about J. S. Bach (greatest composer in history). I have opinions about jumbo shrimp, military intelligence, and CCM (all oxymorons). But I do not have an opinion about what's going on in the church-that-shall-not-be-named.

One often hears that everyone has a right to an opinion. Baloney. To be entitled to an opinion, one must first meet at least three qualifications.

First, one must be addressing a matter that is subject to opinion. A genuine opinion involves a matter of value, not of fact. The sum of one plus one is not subject to opinion. The speed of light is not subject to opinion. The specific gravity of nitric acid is not a matter of opinion. These are matters of fact.

Sometimes a matter of fact is unknown, but it is still not subject to opinion. It is subject to guesses. If these guesses are sufficiently informed, they may qualify as hypotheses. But they are still guesses and not opinions.

Second, to have a right to an opinion one must be correctly informed. An opinion is an informed, reasoned position on a matter of value. People who express themselves on matters of which they are ignorant do not have

opinions. They have prejudices. Prejudices are not opinions. They are assertions of uninformed preference. People who demand that such prejudices be respected can rightly be labeled as bigots. Bigotry is not the expression of opinion. It is the forcible assertion of prejudice. Most people who think that they have a right to an opinion really want a right to bigotry. While expressions of bigotry are mostly legal, people who think they have a right to have such eruptions heard are badly mistaken.

Third, to have a right to an opinion, one must be addressing an issue in which one has a legitimate interest. In other words, we have no right to an opinion about matters that are none of our business. Prurience is not a legitimate interest. The public has no right to know most things. People who itch with curiosity about things that are none of their business are some of the most destructive people in the world. Expressions of opinion about matters that are none of our business are mere meddling. Meddling in other people's affairs is like taking a pit bull by the ears. It is never a virtue.

This is particularly true in the case of a local congregation, a church of Jesus Christ. Each individual church is ultimately accountable to Christ as its head. The authority of the head is mediated through the congregation as taught biblically by the pastor or pastors. Pastoral authority comes strictly from teaching and example; it is never fiat authority. Under Christ, the congregation must hear and decide all disputes within the body. None of us has a right to an opinion in the inner affairs of another church.

"But wait!" you say. "Don't we judge other churches all the time? Don't we evaluate them by what their pastors preach and by what they do? Don't we rejoice when they are blessed? Don't we grieve when they are troubled?"

Indeed we do. But these evaluations always involve one of two things. They are based either upon public words and positions (as opposed to inner church conversations), or else they are based upon information that the church has chosen to make public. If a church decides to change its standards for admitting members, that is a public matter. If a church decides to reframe its doctrinal statement, that is a public matter. If a church asks other churches for prayer or counsel, that is a public matter. The inner struggles and decisions of the congregation, however, are the church's business alone.

Furthermore, unless some criminal activity has occurred, there is no higher court of appeal than the local church. When the congregation has delivered its decision, the duty of each member is to submit. Members who believe that the decision is seriously wrong must leave peaceably.

Of course, the recalcitrant often look for ways to escape their plain duties. One of the most popular escapes these days is found in the accusation of "spiritual abuse." Now, I believe that there is such a thing as spiritual abuse, and I encourage people to leave spiritually abusive situations. Nevertheless, about ninety percent of the time, someone who mutters, "spiritual abuse,"

really means, "I didn't get my way and I'm mad about it." In any event, the legitimacy of this claim can hardly ever be evaluated by those outside the situation itself—certainly not by those who practice "investigative reporting."

A church member can take no worse action than to carry complaints and disputes beyond the congregation itself. To bring other members into civil litigation is evil. It is inexcusable. To carry complaints to the press—whether secular or religious, whether print or electronic—is worse. It is contemptible. To involve the media in the attempt to sway the internal decisions of a church is worst of all. It is *argumentum ad odium*, an appeal to bigotry, and it is a shameful thing for a supposed Christian to do.

I do not know what is going on at the church-that-shall-not-be-named. I have no intention of trying to find out what is going on at the church-that-shall-not-be-named. The inner workings of the church-that-shall-not-be-named are none of my business. For me to intrude into them would be to violate the sovereign autonomy of that congregation as a church of Jesus Christ. I have no right to be informed. Because I have no right to be informed, I have no right to an opinion.

Nevertheless, people have bombarded me with copies of articles and links to electronic media, all of which pretend that they are able to opine upon the inner workings of the church-that-shall-not-be-named. These blogs, podcasts, and articles have been thrust into my consciousness, and about them I do have an opinion. These putative expressions of opinion, these "investigative reports," are one and all of the same moral quality, and that quality is damnable. "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell."



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.
