

Amid the Thronging Worshipers

Psalter, 1912

Amid the thronging worshipers
 Jehovah will I bless;
 before my brethren, gathered here
 His Name will I confess.
 Come, praise Him, ye that fear the LORD,
 ye children of His grace;
 with rev'rence sound His glories forth
 And bow before His face.

The burden of the sorrowful
 The LORD will not despise;
 He has not turned from those that mourn,
 He hearkens to their cries.
 His goodness makes me join the throng
 where saints His praise proclaim,
 and there will I fulfill my vows
 'mid those who fear His Name.

He feeds with good the humble soul
 and satisfies the meek,
 and they shall live and praise the LORD
 who for His mercy seek.
 The ends of all the earth take thought,
 the nations seek the LORD;
 they worship Him, the King of kings,
 in earth and heav'n adored.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Nothing to See Here!***Kevin T. Bauder*

It must be hard work to write investigative reporting in the evangelical world. To be sure, evangelicalism has its share of scandals, just as all branches of professing Christianity always have. For example, when Pastor So-and-So runs off with the church secretary, it is a sleazy episode that lends itself to salacious prattle. But it is not news. We have seen so many church leaders manifest goatish behavior that it ceases to surprise us. Reporting the moral failures of Christian leaders hardly requires the persistence, skill, or dedication of a Woodward or Bernstein.

Consequently, most evangelical investigative reporting rarely rises above the level of grapevine chatter. Sometimes it does not even rise that high. One example is a recent report that appeared on an evangelical blog that claims to be devoted to investigative journalism. The report charges that over several years, a particular evangelical institution of higher learning awarded honorary doctorates to people who may not have deserved them. To make matters worse, three of the recipients either were or had been members of the school's board.

When I saw this "investigative report," I laughed out loud. That an educational institution awarded honorary doctorates to its own (possibly undeserving) trustees is not news, it is business as usual. To cite only one example, Wheaton College has awarded hundreds of honorary doctorates since 1874. Whether all of these recipients were deserving is a matter of judgment, but in at least some cases the degrees were awarded largely on the basis of who the recipient was related to. For good or for ill, that is how recipients of honorary degrees are sometimes chosen. One college even awarded an honorary doctorate to an evangelist's horse.

As a collegian I was only dimly aware that some doctorates are honorary. I discovered this fact when I learned that one of my professors (Bernard Bancroft) had been awarded a doctorate, but he refused to allow anyone to address him as *doctor*. When I asked him why, he told me that he didn't want to demean that accomplishment of people who had actually worked to earn their terminal degrees.



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

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Discovering the distinction between earned and honorary doctorates was illuminating. I still recall one of my seminary professor's evaluation of honorary doctorates: "Some schools hand them out like chocolates out of a box." That was when I learned that most doctorates claimed by evangelical leaders are honorary. For example, the world's most famous evangelist was regularly addressed as the "Rev. Dr. Billy Graham," although he had never qualified for an earned doctorate. A short list of other evangelical figures who were (or are) regularly addressed as doctors included James M. Gray, Carl McIntire, Robert T. Ketcham, Stephen W. Paine, Torrey M. Johnson, Josh McDowell, Joseph M. Stowell III, and John M. Frame. I can remember a time when advertisements for the big Sword of the Lord conference would feature a list of speakers, every one of whom had "Dr." in front of his name, but few of whom had ever done legitimate postgraduate work.

Should recipients of honorary doctorates call themselves doctors? These days, the practice is frowned upon today as a breach of etiquette, somewhat akin to selecting the wrong fork at a formal dinner. Nevertheless, Benjamin Franklin styled himself as *Doctor Franklin*, and Samuel Johnson did similarly. Heads of evangelical service organizations—especially schools—have regularly used the title *doctor*, or it has been used of them. Examples include Lewis Sperry Chafer (Dallas Theological Seminary), James T. Jeremiah (Cedarville College/University), Louis Talbot (Bible Institute of Los Angeles/Biola University), Charles U. Wagner (Northwest Seminary; Grand Rapids Baptist College/Cornerstone University), L. John Miles (Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music), Milo Thompson (Baptist Bible College/Clarks Summit University), Roger J. Andrus (Calvary Bible College), David Nettleton (Faith Baptist Bible College), all three generations of the Bob Jones dynasty, including Sr., Jr., and III (Bob Jones University), and William Fusco (Denver Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary). One can always find stuffy academics who object to this practice, but the general public seems more than willing to address most holders of honorary doctorates as *doctor*.

The founder and first president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis was Richard Volley Clearwaters. He did all the course work toward a doctorate at the University of Chicago, but he never finished the program. Instead, he was given an honorary doctorate from a different institution. For the rest of his life he was customarily addressed as "Doc" by nearly everyone who knew him (he was also sometimes called *Coeur de Lion*, but not to his face).

Whether these individuals' use of the title *doctor* displays poor form is a matter of taste and judgment. Whether it violates any laws or ethical standards is not: people with honorary doctorates have a perfect legal and ethical right to call themselves doctors. There is nothing scandalous in the practice. If they do, it is no more worth reporting than if a gentleman wears the wrong color tie with his shirt.

In theory, honorary doctorates ought to be awarded to individuals who have made contributions that might normally have been expected from someone who had earned a doctorate. Determining what is an equivalent contribution, however, is a subjective matter—especially considering how little some Ph.D. holders themselves contribute. Consequently, awarding these degrees may provoke disagreement over whether a particular recipient was genuinely worthy. These disagreements are not newsworthy, and (with the possible exception of the evangelist's horse) they are certainly not scandalous.

Some schools simply do not award honorary doctorates. The college from which I graduated has, during the past half century, awarded only one (the recipient was deserving). In the seminary that I presently serve (Central Baptist Theological Seminary), all recipients of honorary doctorates are nominated by the faculty, and we normally award honorary degrees only to people who already have doctorates. We have granted only a handful of such diplomas over the years.

To recapitulate, an "investigative reporter" has discovered that, over a process of years, a college awarded honorary doctorates to individuals who may not have deserved them. Three of these recipients were board members of the institution. At least some of them may have begun to use the title *doctor* for themselves. This is not news. This is not scandal. Nothing nefarious is happening. *There is no story here*. Whatever kind of appetite this sort of "investigative reporting" feeds, it is not one that will nourish biblical Christianity.



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.
