

## Thou God of Truth and Love

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Thou God of truth and love,  
 We seek thy perfect way,  
 Ready thy choice t' approve,  
 Thy providence t' obey,  
 Enter into thy wise design,  
 And sweetly lose our will in thine.

Why hast thou cast our lot  
 In the same age and place?  
 And why together brought  
 To see each other's face;  
 To join with softest sympathy,  
 And mix our friendly souls in thee?

Didst thou not make us one,  
 That we might one remain,  
 Together travel on,  
 And bear each other's pain,  
 Till all thy utmost goodness prove,  
 And rise renew'd in perfect love?

Surely thou didst unite  
 Our kindred spirits here,  
 That all hereafter might  
 Before thy throne appear;  
 Meet at the marriage of the Lamb,  
 And all thy glorious love proclaim.

Then let us ever bear  
 The blessed end in view,  
 And join with mutual care,  
 To fight our passage through;  
 And kindly help each other on,  
 Till all receive thy starry crown.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### **Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part 13: The Final Chapter**

Kevin T. Bauder

Over the process of a dozen essays, I have been interacting with Gavin Ortlund's book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*. Of course, much more can and should be said, but to say it all would take a book as long as Ortlund's. Indeed, it would take a longer book, because that book would have to address important matters that Ortlund leaves out of consideration (I'll say more about one of those later).

For now, I'll respond to Ortlund's conclusion. He ends the book with final appeals to humility and to unity. I'll address these one at a time.

First, as to humility, Ortlund rightly observes that sometimes we don't know what we don't know. We have blind spots to our blind spots. This realization should "make a noticeable difference in your actual interactions with people" [147]. Even in disagreement we should be willing to learn and open to new perspectives. We should always be open to adjusting our views. Still, a humble person can also be bold, as Luther was at Worms.

I find nothing in Ortlund's exhortation that I would disagree with. The problem lies in recognizing whether we are exercising appropriate humility because we realize our limitations or whether we are merely timid because we fear the consequences of our beliefs. We must not become so uncertain of ourselves that we render God incapable of communicating truth to us understandably and authoritatively. And we must never forget that Luther's opponents almost universally charged him with arrogance.

Ortlund is right that the way we hold our doctrines affects our fellowship as much as the doctrines that we hold. In the calculus of doctrine and fellowship, the importance of the doctrines that we believe is one consideration. The level of fellowship is another. Questions of attitude form an unavoidable third consideration. In some times and places, we should limit our message. In others, our message cannot be limited, and so our fellowship must be.

Now we come to the question of unity. A concern for unity is both appropriate and important (Eph 4:1–6). If that concern is genuine rather than senti-



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

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu  
 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

mental, however, we must remember that unity is a function of that which unites, and that fellowship is a function of what is held in common. For any given level of fellowship, we can enjoy unity only when we share whatever produces unity at that level. Any other claim to unity is hypocritical, as is any denial of unity and fellowship when we do share those things.

We never develop legitimate unity by aiming for unity. We must aim for what unites. At the lowest level, what unites us is the gospel. At the highest level, what unites us is the whole counsel of God.

Some biblical and theological questions should rarely or never interfere with fellowship. Who are the sons of God in Genesis 6? Are the locusts of Revelation 9 symbolic or literal? Does regeneration cause faith, or is it the other way around?

Some questions should limit fellowship at some levels but not others. I have argued that differences over cessationism, millennialism, and creationism are among these. Each of these issues will affect fellowship at different levels and to a different extent.

Some questions should limit fellowship at every level because wrong answers result in denials of the gospel. The doctrines that Christians must not deny are the fundamentals. Fundamentals (whether of belief, conduct, or affection) form the boundary of Christian fellowship. No level of Christian unity or fellowship is possible with someone who denies a fundamental.

And that brings me to what I believe is Ortlund's greatest omission. If the fundamentals are the boundary of Christian fellowship—if no level of Christian fellowship is possible with someone who denies a fundamental—then what should we do with gospel believers who pretend that they can enjoy Christian fellowship with gospel deniers? This is the key question that has distinguished fundamentalists from other conservative evangelicals.

From early on, some evangelicals (gospel believers) thought that they could commit to some level of Christian fellowship with some gospel deniers. This position was defended by Charles Erdman and J. Ross Stevenson at Princeton Theological Seminary. It was upheld by Harold Ockenga and Edward John Carnell at Fuller Theological Seminary (the school that granted Gavin Ortlund his PhD). It was embodied in the ecumenical evangelism of Billy Graham. These individuals were willing to reach across the gospel boundary and to accept gospel deniers into Christian fellowship. What to do about them?

Scripture seems clear enough on this subject. In 2 John a parallel example occurs: false teachers who appear at the door with the intention of propagating anti-gospel doctrine (7, 10). John's answer? Don't let them in and don't even give them a civil greeting (10). Why? Because whoever extends even

this minimal level of aid and comfort to enemies of the gospel gets a share or stake in the evil they do (11). The result will be loss of reward (8).

In fairness, these verses do not outline a specific program for dealing with liberal theologians in our denominations or seminaries. They do, however, provide a clear template. At minimum, if some Christian leaders attempt to extend Christian fellowship to gospel deniers, we should recognize that they are guilty of a serious error, and that they are tainted by the evil that those apostates accomplish. While these leaders do not deny the gospel, they do compromise its rightful place as the boundary of Christian fellowship. That is both a serious error and a scandalous one. At minimum, we should never point to such individuals as exemplary or insightful Christians. We should never place ourselves as followers under their leadership. In other words, their failure to separate from apostates who are outside the gospel boundary ought to limit their fellowship severely within the gospel boundary.

Ortlund seems to perceive J. Gresham Machen as an example worth following, and Machen's example is relevant here. He left his beloved Princeton and founded Westminster Seminary, not because Princeton brought gospel deniers onto its faculty, but because it *kept* evangelicals like Stevenson and Erdman. These men were willing to compromise the gospel by extending Christian fellowship to gospel deniers. A generation later at Fuller Seminary, Carnell understood what was at stake when he denounced Machen's actions as "cultic" (*The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 114–117, 120–121).

*Finding the Right Hills to Die On* makes many splendid points. As a fundamentalist, I welcome an evangelical into a conversation that evangelicals have neglected for far too long, and that fundamentalists have sometimes done badly. The kind of work that Ortlund has offered needs to be done and redone in every generation. On balance, I believe that his book offers insight and is worth interacting with.

As to differences, even though Ortlund and I are arguing for similar things, I would prefer a more nuanced calculus of doctrinal importance and levels of fellowship. I also consider most doctrinal differences more serious than he does. Most of all, I wish that he would address the problem that J. Gresham Machen called "Indifferentism."



---

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.

---