

Lord, When Thou Didst Ascend on High

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Lord, when thou didst ascend on high,
Ten thousand angels filled the sky;
Those heavenly guards around thee wait,
Like chariots that attend thy state.

Not Sinai's mountain could appear
More glorious when the Lord was there,
While he pronounced his holy law,
And struck the chosen tribes with awe.

How bright the triumph none can tell,
When the rebellious powers of hell,
That thousand souls had captive made,
Were all in chains like captives led.

Raised by his Father to the throne,
He sent his promised Spirit down,
With gifts and grace for rebel men,
That God might dwell on earth again.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

On Knowing One's Limitations

Kevin T. Bauder

Nobody is omniscient. Nobody. At some point, everybody has to rely on somebody else for information, advice, and perspective. The trick is in knowing whom to rely upon.

Most people gain considerable expertise in some one area. I had a friend who was an outstanding delivery driver. He was so good that he eventually was given the job of training other delivery drivers. My brother is a broadcast engineer, and one of my sisters is an emergency physician. Both of them know things that I don't and probably never will (there won't be much need for emergency medicine during the Millennium). While I can tinker with cars and make basic repairs, I take my vehicle to a trained auto mechanic. My father-in-law was a farmer, and his experience gave him detailed knowledge of soils, weather, tilling, crop rotation, markets, and polled Hereford cattle. I myself would not be able to earn a living doing any of the above.

My doctor's degrees do not qualify me to offer advice in matters medical or legal. One doctorate is in systematic and historical theology—I *do* know a bit about that. The learning that I acquired while earning that doctorate also gives me significant competence in related biblical disciplines, plus a kind of trailing expertise in cognate disciplines such as philosophy and intellectual history. I can also bring the tools of my discipline to bear upon other humanities such as languages, literature, various historical studies, and the liberal arts. My training also provides some tools for criticism in the fine arts, particularly where they overlap with aesthetics, as well as a platform for interacting with the social sciences (which are more like humanities than sciences). Other than helping to order the mind, however, my preparation in theology gives me little insight into what have been called the "servile arts" (business, finance, accounting, and related fields), and none at all into the formal, natural, and applied sciences.

You have heard that it has been said that everybody has a right to an opinion. That is not true. The only opinions to which people have a right are informed opinions. An opinion that is not backed by informed perspective is sheer presumption and bigotry. That is why I cannot offer legal and medical advice beyond, "See a doctor," and, "Talk to a lawyer." Indeed, if I were



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to hang out a shingle advertising myself as available for legal and medical advice, I would expect a visit from the authorities rather quickly.

The truth is that what I know is only a drop in the ocean of all that can be known. That's how it is with all of us. We are forced to rely upon other people who know things that we don't. We trust people in their areas of expertise. We have to.

Some people want that trust without having earned it. The most egregious offenders are actors and athletes. Actors make their livings by pretending to be what they aren't. The fact that they can pretend well gives them no qualification whatever to offer observations about any serious matter—unless you consider pretending to be a serious matter. The same is true of athletes. When it comes to the weightier matters of life—the permanent things—why should anyone credit the opinion of a person whose sole contribution to the world is the ability (borrowing Garo Yepremian's phrase) to “kick a touchdown”?

Other people try to erect alternative frameworks of trust. For example, a person who can't make it through medical school can still advertise and practice some form of “alternative healing.” Commonly, such a person will claim to possess esoteric knowledge that has been neglected by traditional medicine, while at the same time attempting to call into question the credibility of the medical profession itself. This person's claims will not typically be backed with rigorous research or double-blind studies, but with ephemeral correlations, anecdotal evidence, and personal testimony. The same sort of mentality in the religious sphere results in cultic thinking. In the political sphere it bolsters conspiracy theories.

Sometimes a figure who has gained credentials that merit trust might abuse that trust. For various reasons, experts might place their reputations at the disposal of political and social forces that promote policies they ought to know are mistaken. Increasingly, it is becoming apparent that key individuals did exactly that in the face of the COVID pandemic. They knowingly withheld vital information and even lied to us while claiming to be following the science. One expert even claimed to be the science. The result is that many people will distrust governmental pronouncements about diseases for a long time to come.

Yet we must trust someone, even if we do it critically. And we ought to know whom to distrust: journalists, shills, demagogues, conspiracists, sensationalists, blogs of all sorts, social media sites, and anonymous sources (including those that start with Q). We must trust, but we ought to try not to be gullible.

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.

