The Call

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life;
Such a Way as gives us breath,
Such a Truth as ends all strife,
Such a Life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength;
Such a Light as shows a Feast,
Such a Feast as mends in length,
Such a Strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart;
Such a Joy as none can move,
Such a Love as none can part,
Such a Heart as joys in love.

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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Dialogue

Kevin T. Bauder

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Fundamentalists are notorious for their refusal to dialogue with other points of view. To some observers—and to some fundamentalists—this refusal to dialogue is part of the definition of fundamentalism. It is an aspect of their self-identity. It makes them what they are.

Some fundamentalists believe that any form of dialogue represents a compromise of conviction. They believe that they already have the truth, and any discussion with truth-deniers would imply some questioning of that truth. Such fundamentalists are willing to announce the truth, but they are not willing to converse about it, except perhaps with others who already possess it. Those who do not possess the truth are subject only to critique.

Of course, there is a species of dialogue in which no Christian can rightly participate. Those dialogues are not about truth. They are about synthesis. Participants may bring to the table a thesis or an antithesis, but no one brings "the truth," except insofar as *truth* is another word for *point of view*. Such relativism is extremely subversive, not only of Christianity but also of all genuine dialogue. Christians ought never to participate in any dialogue that begins with the prerequisite to deny that their beliefs could be universally and absolutely true.

Real dialogue does not require the participants to diminish their commitment to their beliefs. On the contrary, a real dialogue provides the opportunity for the most deeply-held beliefs to be articulated in their most convincing form. When conducted between skilled and knowledgeable participants, that kind of dialogue can be tremendously instructive.

What are the conditions for such a dialogue? First, the participants must know and understand their own positions thoroughly. Second, they must be skilled listeners who are able to grasp and to digest accurately the position of an interlocutor. Third, they must be sufficiently even-tempered and charitable to be able to discourse kindly with people who advocate ideas that seem wrong, strange, or even offensive. Fourth, they must be sufficiently

stable not to be swept away when they hear a plausible presentation of an alternative position.

Why would anyone wish to participate in this kind of dialogue? Specifically, what could Christians hope to gain by involving themselves in such conversations? Even a strong Christian might have several reasons for engaging in genuine dialogue.

The first is simple understanding. When we encounter intricate mechanisms, we like to find out how they work. The best way of doing that is by talking to their designers. Systems of thought are intricate mechanisms, and their designers (or their advocates) are the best people to tell us how they hold together. Even false ideas must have some plausibility, or else they would lose their appeal. Their plausibility usually lies in how they are constructed. The defender of truth has an interest in understanding how false ideas are held together, and no one can explain those ideas better than the people who advocate them.

Conversation with other points of view may also expose the gaps in one's own thinking. We have trouble detecting the weaknesses and flaws in the presentation of our own ideas, even when they are very good ideas. We know that we are not infallible, but we often cannot say just where we have gone wrong. We are unaware of the boundaries of our own thinking and argument. By encountering interlocutors who reject our thinking, we gain the opportunity to have our weaknesses pointed out to us. Of course, we shall have to judge whether any particular criticism really does point to a weakness, or whether it simply reflects the bias of the critic. If our critics do expose our weaknesses, we gain the opportunity to correct them. Our ability to present the truth is strengthened.

Exposing our weaknesses is one vital function of an opponent. Ideally, our friends should help us to see these weaknesses. If our friends are too much like us, however, they may share the same weaknesses without ever being aware of them. And (sadly) friends are sometimes misled by a false charity, resulting in their failure to point out our weaknesses even when they do see them. Our opponents will not allow us to get away with flaws that our friends sometimes excuse.

Dialogue with opponents will also help us to discover areas in which we need to develop our ideas further. The doctrine of the Trinity probably never would have been fully developed if Christians had not been forced to respond to Arians. Our understanding of justification would remain truncated if Luther had not had to respond to Roman Church notions of salvation. Of course, Athanasius was not dialoguing with Arius, nor Luther with Leo. But each of these hero-theologians studied closely the opposing point of view. What I am suggesting is that dialogue of a certain sort is a legitimate mode of study. Conversation with opposing points of view will help us to discover where we have work that still remains to be done.

Finally, a good dialogue does give us an opportunity to convince an opponent. Granted, in a good dialogue the parties are often sufficiently advanced in their own positions that any "conversion" is unlikely. While dialogue is not a sufficient condition for convincing an advanced opponent, it is a necessary condition. Without a conversation no transfer of thinking can occur.

When we conduct such conversations, we do not have to adopt the goal of rapprochement. We need not aim to come to a common understanding with our opponent. We ought not to assume that we shall have to modify our own point of view. But we should wish to understand.

Of course, there is always the risk that our opponent may convince us. That is not a reason to avoid the confrontation, however. If our ideas can only be maintained by avoiding exposure to criticism, then they must not be very strong ideas. Every good dialogue is going to raise arguments that we cannot answer immediately. Part of the skill of being a good conversationalist is the ability to hold those arguments in suspension so that our minds have time to ponder their intricacies and implications. That skill only comes with maturity. An unguided dialogue is not an activity for the immature.

The last consideration points out another danger in dialogue, and that is the danger that less mature persons may be led into dangerous conversations by following the example of more mature persons. That is a danger, and it is cause for concern—just as we are rightly concerned about teenage boys trying to act like race car drivers when they get behind the wheel. But we do not bar professional drivers from the track. What we do is to warn the immature and to explain the difference. We ought to be able to draw the same kind of distinction when it comes to the exchange of ideas.

Even healthy dialogue entails some risks. The risks can be minimized, however. On any account, the risks are not sufficient to outweigh the benefits. Rather than condemning dialogue *tout court*, Christian leaders ought to help their followers understand when and for whom such dialogues are good things.

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.
