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Class Notes

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On Main Things and Lesser Things

Question: Is every hill a “hill on which to die?” Or can we recognize a hierarchy of doctrines in the Bible and in ministry?

Possibly apocryphal story:

When John MacArthur began his pastoral ministry at Grace Community Church in February of 1969, he noted that the church vans had the following slogan painted on their sides:

“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”

MacArthur had the slogan painted over, saying, “There are no non-essentials.”

This slogan has a long and interesting history, originating from an obscure German Lutheran theologian, Rupertus Meldenius. He wrote a tract in 1627 during the horrendously bloody Thirty Years War (1618-1648) which was essentially a continual religious war between Protestants and Catholics for religious and political control of Europe. Many theologians who followed seized on it as a prime statement of Christian unity, including Richard Baxter and Philip Schaff (the great Christian historian), who called it “the watchword of Christian peacemakers.” The Moravian Church of North America also seized on it, as well as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Whether MacArthur did that or not, his general pattern of preaching has been to assert equal certainty to almost every assertion he makes based on his exegesis. While his exegesis is (in my opinion) usually sound, I still question the gathering of all manner of doctrinal assertions and insights from the text into one basket of absolute truth. I actually believe it undermines a pastor’s credibility to never admit to uncertainty or a lower level of clarity on any issue in the Bible... as though all of the Bible is equally clear.

The question before us... Is John MacArthur right? Or are there primary, secondary, tertiary issues in the Bible and therefore in pastoral ministry? Can a pastor make distinctions, and say sometimes "I don't know what this means, but here is my opinion"?

Main Thesis:

It is scriptural and therefore vital for pastors to recognize the difference between primary, secondary, tertiary issues in the Bible, and teach/ minister accordingly, keeping the main things inviolable and the secondary/tertiary issues properly weighted, taught, and acted upon.

My geeky expression: "Hierarchy of certainty of truth"

Everything is equally clear to God, who knows the truth or falsehood of all assertions. But all things are not so equally clear to us... equally "certain."

The Perspicuity of Scripture:

Why is this? Is something wrong or unclear about Scripture? NO!

Perspicuity of Scripture rightly understood:

"All things in Scripture are *not alike plain in themselves*, nor alike clear unto all. Yet, those things that are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or another, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."
[Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7]

The statement itself implies a division within Scripture: 1) all things in Scripture; 2) those things necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation

Scriptural Proof of a Hierarchy:

Scripture itself asserts such a hierarchy:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

The basic gospel is there asserted to be “of first importance” ... nothing is more important than this! All things are of lesser importance.

Matthew 23:23-24 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

Jesus himself asserts a variability in the laws of God... the “more important” (“weightier” KJV, ESV) matters of the law versus those that aren’t so weighty. The camel vs the gnat implies primary vs secondary issues. Yet Jesus does say the lesser matters should not be neglected.

2 Peter 3:16 [Paul] *writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*

The Apostle Peter acknowledges that **some things** in Paul’s epistles are “hard to understand” ... that clearly implies a division in Scripture between things easier to understand and things harder to understand.

Same thing with the “milk” and “meat” distinction:

Hebrews 5:12-14 *though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

Paul acknowledged that some of the Philippians might disagree with aspects of his teaching, and he was willing to be patient until God revealed the truth to them:

Philippians 3:15-16 *All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

And finally, Romans 14 is an entire chapter given to handling “disputable matters” in the Christian church:

Romans 14:1 *Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.*

“Disputable matters” cannot be “essentials” of the faith, but matters that can be disagreed upon within healthy fellowship, while there is still room for growth and persuasion.

Dangers for Church Members Who Deny This:

If church members believe that all issues are equally clear and therefore we must have absolute agreement about every point of doctrine, they are in spiritual danger. What dangers?

- 1) **Spiritual pride:** they think they have arrived already at full, comprehensive doctrinal perfection
- 2) **Stunted growth:** because they think they have arrived, they miss out on the benefits of loving discussion with people who disagree with them... “Iron sharpens iron” won’t be happening with them because they flee interactions with people of different convictions
- 3) **Suspicion:** They will be suspicious of leaders who disagree with them, thinking they are “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Similarly, they will be suspicious of other church members and unable to have sweet fellowship with them
- 4) **Factions:** They will be likely to start a faction of others that do agree with them on the controversial issue
- 5) **Fractured unity:** They will eventually leave disgruntled, and start the whole process all over again at another local church... ultimately they will be strongly tempted to be totally isolated, doing “family church” or being alone on Sundays because they can’t find any church that agrees with them from A to Z

Recent Cautionary Tale:

Sad recent history of dogmatic divisiveness in evangelicalism:

The “triple-header monster” of 2020: 1) race relations; 2) politics; 3) COVID

Principles from Romans 14:

Romans 14 gives these three fundamental concerns with disputable matters:

1. **GOSPEL FREEDOM:** Concern about understanding the freedoms Christ has won us, the church needs to understand the gospel of grace and walk in the freedom of a child of God rather than a slave... **THE GREAT DANGER OF LEGALISM**

2. GOSPEL PURITY: Concern about sin and worldliness on the one hand... the church needs to help its members know how to keep itself from being polluted by the world... THE GREAT DANGER OF SIN
3. GOSPEL UNITY: Concern about arrogant judgmentalism on another hand, the church needs to help its members set their own rules and regulations about daily issues without facing judgment from other members... LOVING CHRISTIAN UNITY... SWEET FELLOWSHIP

And three basic virtues:

- 1) **Humility:** Accept each other in the Lord warmly as brothers/sisters, without PASSING JUDGMENT; acknowledge you might be wrong
- 2) **Truth:** Strive to grow to Christian maturity... the best possible Biblical understanding of every matter, and the most loving demeanor
- 3) **Love:** Act in love toward others, seeking their growth in righteousness and understanding... not flaunting your freedoms

What to do about the hierarchy of certainty of truth:

- 1) Keep the gospel primary, central, as Paul did

1 Corinthians 2:2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

- 2) Seek Trinitarian unity in doctrine... genuinely, truly agreeing about everything

John 17:20-23 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me

Philippians 2:2 make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

- 3) Teach the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) as you understand it... don't neglect the "gnats" while you emphasize the "camels"

4) BUT be clear/honest when you are not so certain or just giving your opinion

1 Corinthians 7:25 About virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

2 Corinthians 8:10 Now I am giving an opinion on this because it is profitable for you, who a year ago began not only to do something but also to desire it.

5) Be patient as a teacher of the Word (Philippians 3:15-16)

Philippians 3:15-16 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

In other words, be patient while God works the same level of certainty in your hearers that he has in you, but call the church to live up to our present level of understanding

6) Delight in the level of agreement you already have

Only by the Spirit's work in yourself and your church members have you already agreed about all the key issues of the Christian faith! Praise God often for the agreement you already have about most things!

7) Distinguish levels of agreement necessary for levels of role in the church

Members can disagree, just as they're not "duty bound to publicly challenge the Elders

So also some Bible study teachers, small group leaders... as long as they don't teach contrary to the Elders

Deacons should agree with the official teaching of the Elders, even though they can't necessarily understand/explain all aspects; yet they must "keep the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience." (1 Tim. 3:9)

Elders must agree with the official doctrine of the Elder body on all points and be wholeheartedly able to teach it

YET Elders themselves should make distinctions between primary, secondary, tertiary issues. In other words, there may well be doctrinal issues in which a range of opinions is acceptable within the Elder body (e.g. the millennium)

- 8) Teach this principle (hierarchy of certainty of truth) to church members, so they will be protected from the dangers listed above (spiritual pride, divisiveness, factions, separation)

Appendix: FBCs Onboarding Elder Document

I. ***The Doctrine of the Elder***

The doctrinal life of the elder is of top priority. One of the requirements of elders is firm doctrinal conviction and the skill to refute false teachers.

Titus 1:9, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." It says of deacons, *"They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Tim 3:9)*. How much more should this be true of elders!

Paul gives this pattern for all elders in *Acts 20:20; 27: "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ... For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God."* The doctrine of the elders is the central treasure they offer to the church. It is by this means that we are able to "feed" Christ's sheep, as he said to Peter in John 20.

a) **Affirm, Advocate, and Teach in Accordance with BF&M 2000, FBC's Doctrinal Distinctives, & Elder Position Statements**

Resource: [BF&M 2000](#)

Elders must be able to affirm, advocate, and teach with a clear conscience in accordance with all aspects of the Baptist Faith & Message 2000, which is FBC's official statement of faith. Beyond this, FBC elders should be able to affirm, advocate, and teach FBC's doctrinal distinctives and key elder position statements.

b) **Doctrinal Unity & Diversity**

The elders do accept a division of doctrinal truths to varying levels of certainty. There are primary, secondary, and tertiary issues. We understand that the goal should always be complete unity in the pattern of the Trinity, but we know that some issues are so complex that a measure of variability in conviction should be allowed among the elders while we still do ministry and teach the church together.

What follows is a list of several doctrinal issues that the elders have addressed in the past. There may be other such issues in the future not listed here. We desire perfect unity on these issues, if possible, but where some individual elders may disagree with certain minor elements of the official position of the FBC elders and may communicate those concerns privately with other elders, we expect elders not to contradict the official elder position in public and to affirm it as far as their conscience allows. The elders will seek not to put dissenting elders in a position to speak/teach publicly on those topics, and the elder himself should make his dissent known to the elders so that he will not feel duty-bound to contradict in public. We desire to present doctrinal unity to the church as much as possible.

c) Elders' Positions on Key Controversial Issues

FBC elders should be in hearty agreement with the following positions.

○ **Reformed/Calvinistic Soteriology**

We do not believe that holding Reformed soteriology is essential to salvation. Many non-Reformed people have a genuine faith in Christ and will spend eternity in heaven. But we consider Arminian or Semi-Pelagian soteriology to be evidence of doctrinal immaturity, of coming far short of the full counsel of God's Word. We expect elders at FBC to affirm all five points of Calvinism, commonly known by the acronym TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints) but upgraded to RSDEP in the following pattern:

- **Radical Depravity**
- **Sovereign Election**
- **Definite Atonement**
- **Effectual Calling**
- **Perseverance of God with the Saints**

- **Inerrancy**

Resource: [The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#)

FBC elders must be able to affirm The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

- **Gender & Authority**

Resource: [Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood](#)

Resource: [Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges](#)

FBC elders must be able to affirm the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood. In addition, they must agree to the assertions made in "Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges" on pp 8-9.

- **Homosexuality/Transgenderism**

Resource: [Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges](#)

FBC elders must agree to the assertions made in "Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges" on pp 6-8.

- **Social Justice/Race Relations**

Resource: [Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges](#)

FBC elders must agree to the assertions made in "Timeless Truths for Today's Challenges" on pp 10-28.

- **Creation**

FBC elders must believe in the doctrine of God's personal creation of all things; that God spoke into existence all things by his powerful word. We reject macro-evolution and assert that there was a historical figure named Adam from whom the entire human race descended.

Concerning the age of the universe, we generally assert six literal days of creation, since the Ten Commandments makes it plain that God made the universe in six days and rested on the seventh, setting up a pattern for the sabbath rest commanded on a specific day of the literal week (Exod 20:11). Scripture nowhere asserts anything requiring billions of years of time; hence, the drive for

believing an “old earth” must come from science, not the Bible.

Whether Christians can harmonize apparent evidence of a very old universe with the literal, grammatical/historical hermeneutic the elders of FBC use everywhere else in the Bible is debatable. We hold that effort to be covered in the “unity and diversity” statement made above. “Young earth creationism” is the normative approach of the elders of FBC, but we do not force all elders to believe this in their hearts, so long as they hold to God’s direct activity in creation and to a literal, historical Adam.

- **Eschatology**

The general statement on “Last Things” is the BF&M 2000 is sufficient for all FBC elders. The elders of FBC do not bind the conscience of any members of the church, including other elders, to any one view of the millennium. We have no official position on the millennium, but accept thoughtful articulations of pre-millennialism, post-millennialism, and amillennialism.

- **Charismatic Gifts**

Concerning the “sign gifts” such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, and miracles, the elders of FBC would not be characterized as either charismatic or cessationist. Many have used the language of “open but cautious” to describe the position we have taken. We are aware that many excesses have occurred in charismatic churches, and that the preponderance of evidence across twenty centuries of church history implies a significant change in these sign gifts when the apostolic era ended. Therefore, we are especially cautious in any public manifestation of the sign gifts in the life of FBC.

We would require that any speaking in tongues in corporate worship must have a clear interpretation of the message, or that person must refrain (1 Cor 14:27). We also believe it is reasonable to require anyone claiming to have the gift of prophecy to validate his/her gift by a clear foretelling of the future, which must then be independently verified by fulfillment, in the pattern of Deuteronomy

18:22. However, on the whole, we consider cessationist arguments to be lacking scriptural weight. Therefore, we are open but cautious. Again, this issue will function under the “unity and diversity” statement, since we realize some elders may have leanings toward one side or the other.

- **Divorce/Remarriage**

Resource: [Divorce, Remarriage & the Elder or Deacon Candidate](#)

We require that the elders at FBC assent to the elder statement “Divorce, Remarriage & the Elder or Deacon Candidate.” As a simple summary, we uphold the standard evangelical teaching that divorce is seen by the Lord to be forbidden except in the case of adultery, abandonment, or abuse. We also hold that divorce does not permanently disqualify a man from service as an elder or deacon, so long as the man is either 1.) the innocent party in a divorce, or 2.) he has brought forth fruit in keeping with repentance on an illicit past divorce and is now (and has been) living a teaching in accordance with biblical standards on marriage.

- **Child Baptism.**

Resource: [Baptism Theology & Practice](#)

We require that FBC elders assent to the elders’ position paper “Baptism Theology & Practice.” Regarding child baptism, we uphold the Baptist standard that water baptism should only be administered to people who can make a credible profession of faith in Christ, and that while children can come to a genuine faith in Christ even at a very early age, it is difficult to discern it until the child has had a chance to grow and to face the reality of a world that hates God. So, we prefer to wait to baptize until they are “youth” age. We also refrain from defining “youth” precisely because there is no scriptural warrant for a specific age.