

Finding the Right Hills to Die On

The Case for Theological Triage

By Gavin Ortlund

Triage – a system of prioritization

Theological triage is a system of prioritization when it comes to various biblical doctrines and church traditions.

- First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself
- Second-rank doctrines are urgent for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of local church, denomination, and/or ministry.
- Third-rank doctrines are important to Christian theology, but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians.
- Fourth-rank doctrines are unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration. [Finding the Right Hills to Die On, Introduction p. 19]

Why is this important?

The Danger of Doctrinal Sectarianism: “any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ.” [p. 28]

In other words, the danger of doctrinal sectarianism (a sect or faction) is that a person can make almost any doctrine in the Bible an issue worth dividing over. Sometimes it can be as bad as separating from a church or brother and sister in Christ not because they reject an essential doctrine, but because they don’t promote it to the same degree.

They are some brothers and sisters in Christ who would agree with the doctrines of grace [Calvinism] but don’t call themselves Calvinist. And yet, there are some in the church who refuse to fellowship with them because of it.

“Historically, theologians in the Reformed tradition have often drawn a distinction between essential and nonessential beliefs.” [p. 29]

“Calvin argued strenuously...that much separatism comes from pride rather than holiness.” [p. 32]

Quarreling about Unimportant Doctrines Leads to Ungodliness in the Church:

Scrip. Ref: 1 Timothy 1:3-4 – As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, [4] nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith.

“**myths**” [muthos] a tale; fiction; a fable [1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4]

Scrip. Ref: 1 Tim. 4:7 – But have nothing to do with worldly **fables** fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness;

Scrip. Ref: 2 Tim. 4:4 – and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to **myths**.

The warning of the apostle Paul to Timothy concerning myths proves that the church can easily divide over a matter which in essence doesn't even exist.

Scrip. Ref: 1 Tim. 6:3-5 – If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, [4] he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, [5] and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.

Scrip. Ref: 1 Tim. 6:20-21 – O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge” – [21] which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.

“**empty chatter**” [kenophonia] kenos – empty; phone – a voice; empty sound; fruitless discussion: vain.

What is “empty chatter” – anything that does not advance the truth of the gospel or godly living. Is our conversation fruitful or fruitless? Examples of “empty chatter” – Did Jesus love or hate Judas? Dietary aspects of the Law; Arguing and dividing over Bible translations.

Scrip. Ref: 2 Tim. 2:14 & 16 & 23 – Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God not to wrangle about words, which is useless, and leads to the ruin of hearers. [16] But avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness. [23] But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.

“refuse” [paraitomai] (para) alongside; from; (aiteo) to ask, beg; to beg from; to get rid of by asking; to refuse; to shun; to beg off;

“foolish” [moros] – absurd; foolish; blockhead; dull

“ignorant” [apaideutos] a (alpha privative = negative (without)); paideuo (to instruct) without instruction; unlearned; untaught; foolish

*The Death of Expertise (The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters) Tom Nichols

“Never have so many people had so much access to so much knowledge and yet have been so resistant to learning anything...Not only do increasing numbers of lay-people lack basic knowledge, they reject fundamental rules of evidence and refuse to learn how to make a logical argument.” [p. 3]

“We all suffer from problems, for example, like “confirmation bias,” the natural tendency only to accept evidence that confirms what we already believe.” [p. 8]

“Not only is the Internet making many of us dumber, it’s making us meaner: alone behind their keyboards, people argue rather than discuss, and insult rather than listen.” [p. 9]

The same problem in the world is happening in the church today. People are only willing to listen to what they already believe as if their knowledge of theology is infallible. It’s disturbing to see some Christians debating matters of theology out of their own ignorance. And then believing that they have the expertise to discern what the problems are in the church.

Scrip. Ref: Tit. 3:9 – But shun foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law; for they are unprofitable and worthless.

“We should steer clear of theological wrangling that is speculative [goes beyond Scripture], vain [more about being right than being helpful], endless [no real answer is possible or desired], and needless [mere semantics].” [p. 40]

Puritan preacher Richard Baxter in his book *The Cure for Church Divisions* writes, “Satan will pretend to any sort of strictness, by which he can mortify love. If you can devise any such strictness of opinions, or exactness in church orders, or strictness in worship, as will but help to kill men’s love, and set the churches in divisions, Satan will be your helper, and will be the strictest and exactest of you all: He will reprove Christ as a Sabbath breaker, and as a gluttonous person, and a wine-bibber, and a friend [or companion] of publicans and sinners, and as an enemy to Caesar too... You think when a wrathful envious heat is kindled in you against men for their fault, that it is certainly a zeal of God exciting: But mark whether it have not more wrath than love in it: and whether it tend not more to disgrace your brother than to cure him, or to make parties and divisions, than to heal them.” [*Cure for Church Divisions*, 1.2.6 quoted from *Finding the Right Hills to Die on*, p. 41]

“Baxter’s words remind us that theological zeal must be subjected to the test of love. Not all zeal is from God. Even when the error we oppose is a deadly heresy, our aim must be to heal, not to disgrace.” [p. 42]

The Danger of Doctrinal Minimalism:

“The overall trajectory of our culture, particularly among younger generations, probably tends more toward doctrinal minimalism and indifferentism... This is the mindset that says: ‘Let’s stop dividing over doctrine! It just hurts people. Let’s just love Jesus and feed the poor.’ This is doctrinal minimalism.” [pp. 45-46]

“Another tendency is to reduce our doctrinal focus to a small body of truths related to the gospel message and then ignore everything else. I have heard people say, “It’s not a gospel issue; it’s just a secondary issue.” [p. 46]

“doctrines can be “secondary” or “nonessential” to the gospel and yet still make a difference in how we uphold the gospel. Consider the well-known saying, often falsely attributed to Augustine but actually dating from the early 17th century: ‘In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things charity...’ A weakness, however, is that it is working with only two categories: essential and nonessential.” [p. 47]

1. Nonessential Doctrines Are Significant to Scripture:

“One consequence of downplaying the importance of nonessential doctrines is, however inadvertently, downplaying Scripture itself... Whenever we ask whether something is essential, we must also ask, ‘Essential for what?’ Everything God reveals in Scripture is essential for somethings, or it wouldn’t be there. ‘Nonessential for salvation does not mean of no importance at all.’”

2. Nonessential Doctrines Are Significant to the Christian Life:

Example: “understanding God’s sovereignty has significant implications for everyday, practical Christianity” [p. 53]

“the doctrine of Christ’s heavenly intercession. While I’m convinced this doctrine is part of the gospel, we are not always conscious of it in our engagement with the gospel.”

“the Lord’s Supper”

3. Nonessential Doctrines Are Significant to Essential Doctrines:

“Many second-and third-rank doctrines will influence how we experience and/or uphold the gospel.” [p. 57]

Some doctrines give us a picture of the gospel [the marriage relationship between one man and one woman is to be a picture of Christ’s relationship to the church]

“Some doctrines protect the gospel. For instance, it is possible to have a powerful grasp of the gospel and yet a relatively low view of Scripture.”

“Some doctrines pertain to the gospel” – Example, the Lord’s Supper and water baptism.

Ranking Different Doctrines:

“Some first-rank doctrines are needed to defend the gospel, and others to proclaim the gospel” [p. 76]

“How do we determine how to rank the importance of any particular doctrine? Erik Thoennes offers a helpful list of criteria:

1. Biblical clarity
2. Relevance to the character of God
3. Relevance to the essence of the gospel
4. Biblical frequency and significance [how often in Scripture it is taught, and what weight Scripture places upon it]
5. Effect on other doctrines
6. Consensus among Christians [past and present]
7. Effect on personal and church life
8. Current cultural pressure to deny a teaching of Scripture.

Are First Rank Doctrines Essential for Salvation?

“Sometimes people define essential doctrines as those that must be affirmed in order to experience salvation. In certain circumstances, however, people experience salvation with very limited information. The thief on the cross is a classic example.” [p. 80]

Did the thief know that Jesus was be raised from the dead on the third day? Could he define the doctrine of the Trinity? Was the thief aware of the doctrine of election? Could he discern the effectual call of God upon his heart on the cross?

“Related to this, we must distinguish between what must be affirmed when someone becomes a Christian and what must be affirmed as a characteristic of growth in Christ over time... In addition, when a first-rank doctrine is denied, we must distinguish between a denial based upon ignorance or confusion and a knowing, willful denial... We must distinguish between confused sheep and active wolves.”

First-Rank or Primary Doctrines:

1. The Inspiration & Authority of Scripture Alone
2. The Doctrine of the Trinity – One God eternally existing in three persons [Father, Son and Holy Spirit]; The Attributes of God
3. The Person and Work of Jesus Christ [Virgin Conception; God in human flesh; Substitutionary Atonement; Resurrection]
4. The Creation of Man in God’s Image
5. The Fall of the Human Race into Sin
6. Salvation by Grace through Faith Alone [Justification]
7. The Church as the Body of Christ
8. The Priesthood of the Believer

- To deny or distort any of these doctrines is to be regarded as a heretic or false teacher.

Secondary Doctrines [Nonessential]:

1. Water Baptism [credobaptism versus paedobaptism]; Lord's Supper [ordinance or sacrament]
2. Spiritual Gifts [cessationalist versus continuationalist]
3. Women in Ministry [complementarianism versus egalitarianism]
4. Church Government [elder-led or congregational rule]
5. Marriage/Divorce & Remarriage
6. Ordo Salutis [Order of Salvation]

- Christians will divide over these issues but still regard one another as being in the faith.

Third-Rank or Tertiary Doctrines:

1. Creation [Young Earth versus Old Earth]
2. Eschatology [Premil, Amil, Postmil]
3. Bible Translations [KJV Only]

- Christians can agree to disagree and still worship together in the same church.

Fourth-Rank Issues:

1. Order of Worship Traditional versus Contemporary [Musical Instruments in Church]
2. Style of Dress in Worship
3. Homeschooling versus Public or Private School
4. American Flag & Christian Flag