



Gavin Ortlund

Foreword by D. A. Carson

**FINDING
THE
RIGHT HILLS
TO
DIE ON**

The Case for Theological Triage

“A timely and well-written book on a vitally important subject. Ortlund reminds us that Christian theologians must see themselves first and foremost as servants of the Great Commission. He shows us how much of the Christian academy has been divorced from the gospel mission. The Bible is a theological, pastoral, and evangelistic book—and those must never be separated, lest one become malformed. I am immediately using this book with our elder and pastoral team!”

J. D. Greear, President, Southern Baptist Convention; author, *Not God Enough*; Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

“Gavin Ortlund is a scholar and leader who both wields the sword of the Spirit and exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. He not only stands up for Jesus but also stands with him in love, holiness, and mission. In a sadly contentious time, this book shows us how to love each other and stay on mission together even when we see some nonessential doctrines in different ways. This is a wise and needed book.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“To put it simply: this is an important book. With a historian’s insight, a theologian’s precision, and a pastor’s wisdom, Gavin Ortlund has given the church an invaluable handbook for navigating our ongoing doctrinal challenges and for healing our ongoing doctrinal divisions.”

Jared C. Wilson, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Spurgeon College; Author in Residence, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *The Imperfect Disciple*

“Some seem to think that faithfulness to God is measured in how much we argue about things. I am so grateful for Gavin Ortlund’s book, which reminds us that faithfulness can be defined in far more biblical ways. Ortlund does not pretend that he has the answers to end all church arguments, but he helps us understand that failure to distinguish critical matters from secondary and tertiary concerns is an abandonment of the pastoral prudence that is essential to Christ’s mission. Even Jesus said, ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.’ For pastors operating with the care and courage of Jesus, patience is not compromise, kindness is not weakness, and Christ’s mission supersedes our personal victories. Ortlund honors Christ’s manner as well as his message in this fascinating and challenging book.”

Bryan Chapell, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

“There are few needs today as urgent as the one Gavin Ortlund so ably addresses in this wonderful book. Healthy theological perspective and poise are all too absent in an age of immediate escalation and rage. This book could transform our thinking, our capacity for fellowship, and our witness to the world. I pray it is read widely and heeded deeply.”

Sam Allberry, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries;
author, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* and *7 Myths about Singleness*

“Gavin Ortlund helps us think well as brothers and sisters in Christ on where we must staunchly defend the truth and draw immovable lines. He also helps us know where to extend grace and lovingly disagree while working together for the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the building up of the Lord’s church. This book is much needed in our day. May our Savior use it for our good and his glory.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In this age of theological infighting and compromise, Gavin Ortlund issues a clarion call for wisdom. You don’t have to agree with him on everything to appreciate his sane and clarifying advice. This is an important book for our time, helping the church as we struggle for both faithfulness to God’s word and a proper Christian unity.”

Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology, Oxford, United Kingdom

“As best I can tell, this is the first book of its kind and is long overdue. Gavin Ortlund has done the church a tremendous service by providing a clear, irenic, and well-reasoned (not to mention biblical) perspective on the comparative importance of our many Christian doctrines. Some in the church today have waged vigorous war and ‘died’ needlessly on virtually every hill, while others, in the name of unity, don’t find any hill worth ‘dying’ on. To both, and to everyone in between the two extremes, I say, ‘Read this book!’”

Sam Storms, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

**FINDING THE RIGHT
HILLS TO DIE ON**

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The Case for Theological Triage

Gavin Ortlund

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To Covenant Theological Seminary
and Immanuel Church, Nashville,
two institutions that display beauty
in their theological culture

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Foreword

Some years ago I watched with interest as a senior minister I greatly admired resigned from his ministry in Canada and left to serve in France. He already spoke French with some fluency, and he was greatly stirred by the smallness and low number of evangelical churches in that country. So, not long before the age when many people would have been dreaming of retirement, he felt called of God to address this great need, and off he went.

He lasted just over thirty months before he was asked to leave by the same group of evangelical churches that had warmly invited him to come and help them.

About the same time, I got to know a youngish man who became a missionary to a Slavic country that could have certainly used his help. He too was asked to leave. He lasted less than two years.

The first man had come from a North American denomination that was adamantly opposed to the use of alcohol by Christians. Believing this stance was morally right, he tried to convince his French brothers and sisters in Christ of the rightness of this position. From their point of view, not only was he wrong, but, even if they could imagine he might be right, they felt he was making a mountain out of a molehill. He dug in and brought up the subject so frequently that pretty soon his position became untenable.

The second man came from a freewheeling North American denomination from which he had derived many of his ethical practices (one hesitates to call them principles). The Slavic brothers and sisters in Christ found him to be loose and undisciplined: imagine going to mixed swimming sites! That's what unbelievers do, exposing acres of bare flesh and undermining Christian efforts to follow the ways of chastity and holiness. Sadly, he interpreted their stance as interfering with his Christian freedom, and pretty soon he was urged to return to California.

Both of these examples deal with something not directly addressed by Gavin Ortlund, namely, the challenges of cross-cultural church practices, cross-cultural codes of conduct, cross-cultural communication. Nevertheless, behind these issues lies a still larger issue, the issue that Dr. Ortlund powerfully tackles in this insightful and probing book. It is the issue of *theological triage*.

As far as I know, the expression "theological triage" was first coined by R. Albert Mohler, who draws analogies with medical triage. At the scene of a terrible accident or some other violent event, there may be too few first responders to deal with all the victims immediately. Decisions have to be made: should the first concentrated attention go to the victim with severe burns, the victim who is bleeding profusely, or the victim with a couple of broken limbs? It is the responsibility of the initial triage teams to make these hard choices. Similarly, in the realm of theology some theological issues are more important or more urgent than others, and Christians who have to decide on how best to deploy their energy need to exercise godly judgment as to where their theological priorities should go.

Ortlund usefully develops four tiers in his theological-triage system: (1) doctrines that are *essential* to the gospel; (2) doctrines that are *urgent* for the health and practice of the church,

such that Christians commonly divide denominationally over them; (3) doctrines that are *important* for one branch of theology or another, but not such that they should lead to separation; (4) doctrines that are *unimportant* to gospel witness and ministry collaboration.

Of course, some believers distance themselves from such triage grids. If the Bible asserts something, they avow, it is God's truth and not to be relativized or declared more (or less) important than any other part of God's truth. Others resort to what might be called "LCD theology" (Lowest Common Denominator theology). The question that interests them is this: What is the *least* that any person should believe and adhere to in order to be a Christian? Both of these strategies will readily dismiss all attempts at theological triage.

It is precisely here that Ortlund is a helpful guide. He helpfully points out that Paul (to go no further) can designate certain doctrines as matters "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3), while other beliefs allow for difference of opinion (Rom. 14:5). Certainly when the apostle finds himself in different cultural settings, he feels free to emphasize slightly different things as he takes his audience into account (compare his sermons in Acts 13 and Acts 17 respectively, one in a synagogue and one in the Areopagus). This book seeks to establish clear thinking about such questions. When he comes to concrete examples, Ortlund is less eager that you should agree with all his conclusions than that you learn how to think about the importance of theological triage. And this becomes all the more important when theological triage is overlaid with the challenges of cross-cultural communication.

This book is a little exercise on how to read and use your Bible humbly, carefully, faithfully, and wisely, like workers who do not need to be ashamed.

D. A. Carson

Acknowledgments

One of my goals in this book was to write with a sensitivity to the real issues affecting local churches. So I conducted a number of interviews with various pastors in order to learn how different doctrines have played out in their ministries. I want to express my appreciation for the insights of Brad Andrews, Jeremiah Hurt, J. A. Medders, Ben Vrbicek, Simon Murphy, and Hans Kristensen. Kristensen and Murphy were particularly helpful in giving a sense of the scene in Australia and Singapore, where they respectively minister.

I am grateful to Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson for the invitation to write this book and their collaboration along the way. Greg Strand offered helpful feedback as well. Justin Taylor and Andy Naselli directed me to several helpful resources. The entire team at Crossway did, as always, an incredible job. Special thanks to Thom Notaro for his careful editing.

Introduction

There's an old saying (I can't remember where I heard it): "There is no doctrine a fundamentalist *won't* fight over, and no doctrine a liberal *will* fight over." Strictly speaking, that's not quite fair to thoughtful liberals and fundamentalists. But we can probably recognize these two instincts. Most of us have a tendency in one direction or the other—to fight over doctrine too much or too little.

This book is about finding the happy place between these two extremes—the place of wisdom, love, and courage that will best serve the church and advance the gospel in our fractured times. In other words, it's about finding the right hills to die on.

Albert Mohler has developed a helpful metaphor for this idea: *theological triage*.¹ Triage is essentially a system of prioritization. It is often used in medical contexts. For instance, if you are a doctor on the battlefield, you cannot treat every wounded soldier simultaneously, so you must develop a process to determine which injuries you treat first.

Using the concept of triage in the context of theology assumes two things. First, doctrines have different kinds of importance. Some hills are worth dying on. Others are not. As basic as this might seem, plenty of people, either in principle

1. For instance, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Disappearance of God: Dangerous Beliefs in the New Spiritual Openness* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009), 1–8.

or in practice, deny this—more on that in a moment. Second, triage assumes that the needs are urgent. You can spend more time fixing a broken arm when no one is hemorrhaging ten feet away. If you have neither a broken arm nor a dying man to attend to, you can give more attention to a chipped tooth or bad bruise. But the more demanding the issues, the more you have to make hard decisions.

Similarly, if souls were not perishing, if our culture were not seeming to escalate into a whirlwind of confusion and outrage, if the church did not have so many languishing needs—I suppose, if these were not the conditions we faced, we could do away with theological triage and work on every doctrine all at once. But the dire needs of the times require us to make strategic decisions of prioritization in order to be as effective as possible at pleasing Christ, serving the church, and advancing his gospel.

Now, everyone understands how important triage is in a medical context. Just think what would happen if you didn't have triage! One person would lose a limb so another could have his arm set. In the worst scenario, one person would die so another could have a bruise bandaged.

But we often forget to think in the same way about theology. Sometimes we flatten out all doctrine—either because we want to fight about everything or because we want to fight about nothing. More commonly, we have some kind of functional theological triage, but we have not thought it through very self-consciously. As a result, it is determined reactively by our circumstances and temperament rather than proactively by Scripture and principle.

There are all kinds of ways to distinguish doctrines.² In this book I suggest four basic categories. We could explore further

2. Erik Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says about the Things That Matter Most* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 35, suggests a similar fourfold categorization: "Absolutes define the core beliefs of the Christian faith; convictions, while not

subcategories as well, but this fourfold ranking should help as a starting point:

- 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.

In this book I consider the Trinity, for example, to be a first-rank doctrine, baptism a second-rank doctrine, and the millennium a third-rank doctrine (more about that later). An older term, borrowed from Greek, that roughly corresponds to category 4 is *adiaphora*, literally meaning “things indifferent.” In Lutheran and Puritan circles, this term was used to identify practices or views that are neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. An example of a fourth-rank issue is the musical instrumentation used in worship or the number of angels that exist. Fourth-rank issues might be practically relevant or intellectually stimulating, but they are not *theologically* important.

core beliefs, may have significant impact on the health and effectiveness of the church; opinions are less-clear issues that generally are not worth dividing over; and questions are currently unsettled issues.” Another gradation is dogma, doctrine, and opinions (Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002], 44). Daniel B. Wallace, “My Take on Inerrancy,” Bible.org, August 10, 2006, <https://bible.org/article/my-take-inerrancy>, provides a helpful and slightly more nuanced list of four kinds of doctrines (italics his):

1. What doctrines are essential for the *life* of the church?
2. What doctrines are important for the *health* of the church?
3. What doctrines are distinctives that are necessary for the *practice* of the local church?
4. What doctrines belong to the *speculative* realm or should never divide the church?

Not everything will fit neatly into one of these four categories, of course.³ But at least they provide a basic framework from which we can make further specifications and nuances as necessary.

You might be interested in this book if you have wrestled with questions like these:

- How do we pursue the realization of Christ's prayer for the unity of the church (John 17:21) without disobeying Christ's charge to obey all that he commands (Matt. 28:20)?
- What partnerships and alliances are appropriate among Christians of different denominations, networks, or tribes?
- What kinds of attitude and speech are most helpful in our interaction with those in the body of Christ with whom we have significant theological disagreements?
- What does it look like to handle, with integrity and transparency, personal differences of conviction that may arise with your church, boss, denomination, or institution?

Or, perhaps you can relate to one of the following fictional scenarios:

1. You are relatively new on the pastoral staff at a local church. In a particular song the congregation is accustomed to singing, you have a reservation about some of the lyrics. You wonder whether it's a big enough deal to address and, if so, how soon in your time at the church you should tackle this, and what the process and communication should be like.

3. I first articulated this fourfold schema in my article "When Should Doctrine Divide?" The Gospel Coalition, August 14, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-should-doctrine-divide>. Some of the material here expands upon this article, as well as my prior article "3 Reflections on Cultivating Theological Poise," The Gospel Coalition, August 10, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cultivating-an-ethos-of-poise>.

2. You have been working at a parachurch ministry for several years. As part of your contract, you have to annually reaffirm your commitment to the statement of faith of the denomination with which the ministry is associated. The statement of faith affirms a particular view of the end times that you had not studied much when you took the job, and you were happy at that time to affirm it. Over the years, however, you've grown unsettled about this view, and at this point you lean away from it, though you are not fully decided. You hesitate to keep studying it, for fear of landing in a place that threatens your job. In your conscience, you wonder at what point you need to communicate your reservations about this doctrine. Is it only when you have fully decided? If so, what does this process look like, and how do you go about it?

3. A group of churches in your community is putting on a joint service of worship and outreach. You have significant theological differences with some of the other churches participating, and you wonder whether you can take part with a good conscience. How do you decide what to do? And what does it look like to approach this situation with graciousness and humility without compromising your convictions?

4. You love listening to a particular Bible preacher on the radio. His sermons are both convicting and uplifting. But one day you learn that he speaks at conferences that have a "health and wealth" emphasis, and you start to notice aspects of his teaching that can be interpreted in this way. How should your perception of his preaching be altered (if at all) by his broader ministry associations? How clearly must his own teaching veer into a "health and wealth" gospel before you stop listening?

5. You are dating seriously and thinking about marriage. However, you and your companion hold different views on the proper expression of gender roles within a marriage. You

have talked through the issues with other trusted Christians and studied the question with your prospective spouse, but the two of you have not reached a resolution. Should you break up? How should you think about your differences?

These are some of the scenarios I have in mind while I write this book, though what we arrive at will hopefully be more than a series of “how to” answers to questions like these. Instead, we are after a set of theological instincts that can guide us in various situations of real life and ministry. Thus, the variety of issues addressed in this book are meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

Some of the doctrines I’ll cover are ones I’ve personally agonized over, like creation and baptism. But I want to make it clear up front that my desire in this book is not to convert you to my view on these doctrines (really, I mean that). Rather, I’m trying to get at the whole way we go about theology, in both forming our convictions and then navigating life and ministry in light of them. I sincerely hope that this book will help you as you form your *own* convictions about how theological triage should function in your life and ministry.

I’m writing from an evangelical Protestant perspective, and I draw particularly from resources within the Reformed tradition. Nonetheless, the principles and topics covered here have a broad relevance, and I’d be delighted if Christians from other traditions, or non-Christians, found value in this book.

One note of caution: some of the most divisive issues among Christians concern not theological matters per se but cultural, wisdom, and political issues. For example, should Christians send their children to public schools or private schools or do home schooling? Under what circumstances, if any, may Christians drink alcohol? When and how (if at all) should reference to current political and cultural events be made in a church

service? These are all important questions, but in this book I am focusing more on specifically theological matters.

In the first two chapters, then, I will identify two opposite errors to provide an overall framework for thinking about the importance of doctrine. Then, in chapter 3, I want to share a little bit of my story. This will help explain how this whole topic came up for me and why I think it is so important. It will also start to get us into specific doctrines. Chapters 4–6 will work through a number of specific doctrines in light of theological triage, attempting to identify criteria for ranking the importance of different issues.

PART 1

**WHY THEOLOGICAL
TRIAGE?**

The Danger of Doctrinal Sectarianism

It is easy to lose your balance when you're standing on one foot. The strongest posture is one of balance between both feet: one of *poise*. That's why boxers put so much care into their footwork.

In our theological life as well, we need poise. The character of the gospel is complex. It contains both truth and grace, both conviction and comfort, both hard edges of logic and deep caverns of mystery. It is at one moment as bracing as a cold breeze and the next as nourishing as a warm meal. Faithfulness to the gospel, therefore, requires more than one virtue. We must at times boldly contend and at other times gently probe. In one situation we must emphasize what is obvious, and in another we must explore what is nuanced.

Jesus is the perfect blend of these diverse qualities—"gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29) and yet unafraid to cleanse the temple (Matt. 21:12–13) or denounce the Pharisees (Matt. 23). Most of us, by contrast, tend to tilt toward *either* courage *or*

gentleness, particularly when it comes to theological disagreement. For instance, we might be naturally careful about theological clarity but have a blind spot to the destructiveness of divisiveness. In the other direction, we might be horrified at the lack of love some Christians exhibit but naive about the effects of doctrinal erosion. As Martin Luther noted, “Softness and hardness . . . are the two main faults from which all the mistakes of pastors come.”¹ The same could be said of all Christians.

This chapter therefore addresses the danger of doctrinal sectarianism, and the following chapter addresses its opposite, the danger of doctrinal minimalism. By doctrinal sectarianism I mean any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ. Doctrinal sectarianism often results from the inability to distinguish between different kinds of doctrine. So we must begin by asking what rationale we have to make such distinctions in the first place.

Are All Doctrines Created Equal?

People often claim that “all sins are the same in God’s eyes.” That sounds spiritual because it seems to take sin seriously. And it is certainly true that any sin is enough to make us guilty before a holy God. For instance, James 2:10 says that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.”

But on closer examination, there is much in the Bible that would discourage us from considering all sins equal. The prophets decried some sins as more heinous than others (Jer. 16:12; Ezek. 23:11). Jesus spoke of “the weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23) and of lesser and greater degrees of punishment for different kinds of sin (Matt. 10:15; Luke 12:47–48; John

1. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 139.

19:11). The Old Testament law made provision for different kinds of sins, such as “unintentional” versus “high-handed” sins (Num. 15:22–31). First John 5:16–17 distinguishes “sin that leads to death” from other sins. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism explains, “Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.”²

In an analogous way, it might initially sound good to say that “all *doctrines* are equally important,” but it is a difficult statement to justify biblically. Paul, for instance, speaks of the gospel as a matter of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). On other topics, he often gives Christians greater latitude to disagree. For instance, in Philippians 3:15 he writes, “If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” On certain issues, he goes further and commands Christians not to “quarrel over opinions” (Rom. 14:1). Even on an important topic like baptism, Paul draws a prioritization for the gospel: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17).

Why is it important to make doctrinal distinctions? What is at stake? For starters, equating all doctrines leads to unnecessary division and undermines the unity of the church.

Unnecessary Division Harms the Unity of the Church

Historically, theologians in the Reformed tradition have often drawn a distinction between essential and nonessential beliefs out of concern for the unity of the church. Writing in the seventeenth century, Francis Turretin provided a series of arguments that certain “fundamental articles” are more important than others.³ As he put it, some doctrines are “primary and

2. The Shorter Catechism, Q. 83, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1966), 309–10.

3. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 1.14.1–27.

immediate; such as the articles concerning the Trinity, Christ the Mediator, justification, etc.,” while others are “secondary and mediate,” and come into view only as a consequence of these primary doctrines.⁴ Turretin also observed that different doctrines serve different functions. Some doctrines are necessary to produce faith; others are necessary to perfect and grow faith.⁵ To support this observation, he drew attention to the distinction between milk and solid food in Hebrews 5:12–14. He saw solid food as a metaphor for more established and nuanced doctrines, and milk as a metaphor for “the basic principles of the oracles of God” (v. 12).

Turretin also maintained that there are different kinds of theological errors, with corresponding levels of severity. For instance, some errors are about doctrinal language or phrases only (he calls these “verbal errors”); others are about the doctrines themselves (he calls these “real errors”).⁶ Additionally, we can be in error about the substance of a doctrine or in error about its mode and circumstances. As an example, Turretin argued that the Greeks (those whom we often call Eastern Orthodox) are in error about the mode of the procession of the Holy Spirit but that this does not constitute an error about the Trinity itself or the divinity of the Spirit.⁷

Why was it so important for Turretin to distinguish between different kinds of doctrine and different kinds of error? In his own context, Turretin was facing two distinct threats. First, he was concerned by Socinian and Roman Catholic claims that their distinctive doctrines were fundamental truths of the faith. But, second, Turretin was concerned about other orthodox Protestant traditions that were dividing over nonessential mat-

4. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.8.

5. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.7.

6. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.12.

7. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.15.

ters of doctrine. In other words, Turretin was opposing not only the elevation of what he regarded as *false* doctrines into necessary articles of faith but also the elevation of *true but secondary* doctrines into necessary articles of faith. This concerned Turretin because it led to unnecessary separation among true Christians. For instance, he faulted “the more strict Lutherans who (to render a union with us more difficult) extend fundamentals more widely than is just, turn almost every error into a heresy, and make necessary those things which are indifferent.”⁸ Here it is evident that Turretin’s concern about elevating nonfundamental doctrines to a fundamental status derives from a deeper concern about the unity of the church. The problem with making every error a heresy is that it “renders union more difficult.”

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin voiced a similar concern. In his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin warned against the error of “capricious separation” from true churches and Christians. He argued that what marks a true church is “the pure ministry of the word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments.” If a church possesses these marks, “we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.”⁹ Calvin further allowed that there may be errors in the *way* a church practices these two marks, and yet it is a true church: “Some faults may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church.”¹⁰ But how do we know which errors are severe enough to require us to separate from a particular church? Calvin developed an answer to this dilemma by appealing to a distinction between primary and secondary doctrines:

8. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.2.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4.1.12.

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith.¹¹

As an example of the latter kind of doctrine—those over which it is not necessary to break the unity of faith—Calvin identifies a difference of opinion among those who think that the souls of believers fly to heaven upon death, and those who would not dare to define the place to which souls go, but acknowledge that they live to the Lord. Citing Philippians 3:15, Calvin insists that such differences of opinion would not be a source of division apart from “unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness.”¹² He goes so far as to assert that churches will not survive apart from a willingness to tolerate errors on lesser matters:

A difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians. . . . Either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.¹³

Calvin argued strenuously and at great length against the sin of schism, emphasizing that the church will always be mixed and imperfect until judgment day, and that much separatism comes from pride rather than holiness.¹⁴

11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

13. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12. Where the Battles translation has “condone delusion,” John Allen (1813) renders it “forgive mistakes.”

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.13–22.

The Unity of the Church Is Essential to the Mission of the Church

The concern Calvin and Turretin expressed about unnecessary division stemmed from the value they attached to the unity of the church. We should maintain this concern today. Some of us have a natural bent to worry about doctrinal minimalism. We are eager to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and we are on alert against any watering down of biblical truth in the face of cultural pressure. This is good, but we must be careful that we are not naive about how destructive sins in the opposite direction can be. It is false to think that doctrinal minimalism is necessarily or inherently more destructive than doctrinal sectarianism. Errors in both directions can diminish our gospel impact.

The unity of the church is not an optional add-on—something we can get to later, once we’ve gotten our doctrine straight. The church’s unity is foundational to her identity and mission. For example, it is one of the four marks or attributes of the church recognized in the early creeds: *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. But what does it mean, exactly, to say that the church is *one*? How do we reconcile this affirmation with the divisions and rifts we see throughout church history and today?

To affirm the unity of the church is to affirm that there are not multiple, distinct groups that constitute separate peoples of God. Jesus does not have a plurality of brides. He has *one* bride, and her unity is so important that, as Paul stipulates in Ephesians 2:14, it was among the intended aims of Jesus’s atoning death: “he . . . has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” In context, Paul is speaking of the union of Jews and Gentiles, but his point is certainly relevant to all expressions of unity in the body of Christ, including among various estranged Gentile groups. Note the

words *in his flesh*. It was at the cost of Jesus's death that we were reconciled to God and, in the same movement, reconciled with those reconciled to God. If we have peace with God, we have peace with each other. Our unity is so important that Jesus gave his blood for it.

If we value the cross, we should value the unity of the church. When Paul rebukes the factious Corinthians, he does so by pointing them to Jesus's death for them as the object of their ultimate allegiance: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor. 1:13). Not only this, the unity of the church is ultimately grounded in the deeper reality of who God is. Later in Ephesians, Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6; see also 1 Cor. 1:10–17). It is striking in this passage how Paul weaves together the church's unity (one body, hope, faith, and baptism) with God's triune unity (one Spirit, Lord, and God and Father). Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggested that Paul probably structured this passage in order to show that "the unity of the Church is a manifestation of the perfection of the Godhead."¹⁵

There are, of course, different expressions of Christian unity: being ordained in a particular denomination is one thing; becoming a member of a local church is another; attending a prayer meeting is another; and speaking at a conference is another. We should have lower theological criteria for looser forms of partnership. There are a range of nuances involved in knowing how to pursue unity in any given situation, and we cannot resolve every question here. But let me at least make one basic point: the unity of the church is essential to the *mission* of the church.

15. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1–16* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 49.

We see this, for instance, in John 17:21, where Jesus prays that those who believe in his name “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” It is striking that Jesus correlates the kind of unity that Christians should experience with the unity he has with the Father. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be one with each just as the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father. And this unity serves a vital purpose for the church: “that the world may believe that you have sent me.” When we think of the church’s unity, we often think of her internal health—avoiding church splits and so forth. That is true, of course, but in this passage Jesus raises the stakes. The church’s unity is essential to the advance of the gospel around us.

One does not need to be particularly well studied in church history to know that churches are not often known for their unity. Though estimates of the number of Protestant denominations are often exaggerated,¹⁶ the fragmentation is undeniable. Thoughtful Protestants have always lamented this fact. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, for example, commented that “the rise of sectarianism that has accompanied the Protestant movement is a dark and negative phenomenon.”¹⁷ In the context of his treatment of the church’s catholicity (that is, universality), Bavinck stressed the importance of recognizing a distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental truths. He went so far as to claim that the inability to recognize true Christians outside one’s own circle leads to the spiritual detriment and ultimately to the death of that group:

16. As an example of a higher estimate, see “Status of Global Christianity, 2019, in the Context of 1900–2050,” <https://gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianity/>, accessed August 3, 2019. High-end estimates typically operate with a very loose definition of the term “denomination.”

17. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 247. I am grateful to Timothy Paul Jones for directing me to this article.

No one church, no matter how pure, is identical with the universal church. In the same way no confession, no matter how refined by the Word of God, is identical with the whole of Christian truth. Each sect that considers its own circle as the only church of Christ and makes exclusive claims to truth will wither and die like a branch severed from its vine.¹⁸

It's not hard to see how this can happen. The results of unnecessary doctrinal division—church splits, aloofness from how God is at work in our city, failed opportunities to link arms with other ministries, and so on—are incredibly damaging to the mission of the church. Those who completely wall themselves off from other genuine Christians will not flourish. Within the body of Christ, we need each other—and often we especially need those Christians who lean in a different direction than we do. As Collin Hansen reminds us, seeing our own blind spots and learning to appreciate how God has gifted other Christians often run together:

It's so easy to see the fault in someone else or in another group but so difficult to see the limitations in ourselves. Unless you learn to see the faults in yourself and your heroes, though, you can't appreciate how God has gifted other Christians. . . . Only then can we meet the challenges of our rapidly changing age.¹⁹

Pursuing the unity of the church does not mean that we should stop caring about theology. But it does mean that our love of theology should never exceed our love of real people, and therefore we must learn to love people amid our theo-

18. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 250–51.

19. Collin Hansen, *Blind Spots: Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, and Committed Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 26.

logical disagreements. As Spurgeon explained, talking about George Herbert:

Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints. Now I hate High Churchism as my soul hates Satan; but I love George Herbert, although George Herbert is a desperately High Churchman. I hate his High Churchism, but I love George Herbert from my very soul, and I have a warm corner in my heart for every man who is like him. Let me find a man who loves my Lord Jesus Christ as George Herbert did and I do not ask myself whether I shall love him or not; there is no room for question, for I cannot help myself; unless I can leave off loving Jesus Christ, I cannot cease loving those who love him. . . . I will defy you, if you have any love to Jesus Christ, to pick or choose among His people.²⁰

Do we have a “warm corner in our hearts” for every single true Christian, even if we strongly disagree with him or her on various issues? Spurgeon reminds us that if we love Jesus, we must love and embrace all those who belong to him. To leave off loving the people of Christ, as he put it, is to leave off loving Christ himself.

But loving all Christians is not easy to do! Some will inevitably annoy you, and the things some Christians believe and practice may deeply concern you (think of Spurgeon “hating” Herbert’s High Churchism). Nonetheless, we cannot emotionally stiff-arm other members of the body of Christ. If we love Jesus, we must love those who belong to him.

20. Charles Spurgeon, sermon 668, “Unity in Christ,” in *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 12, *Sermons 668 to 727* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2013).

Now, again, this love may not ultimately manifest in formal church membership together. There are different expressions of unity. And the healing of division in the church is complicated—where there have been real wounds, for instance, there may need to be confrontation and accountability. But we can start, at the very least, with the attitude of our hearts. Do we *want* unity? Is it a value to us, as it is to Jesus?

A good prayer to pray is this:

Lord, give me a “warm corner in my heart” for other Christians, especially those I am tempted to reject or despise. I know that I cannot solve all the divisions in your church, but show me what the next step might be for me personally to pursue and cultivate and honor the unity of your bride.

Jesus will give us grace where we have failed and help us know how to move forward.

Quarreling about Unimportant Doctrines Harms the Godliness of the Church

We must go even further. Doctrinal sectarianism harms not only the unity and mission of the church but also the holiness of the church. Consider, for instance, the way Paul sets doctrinal priorities in the Pastoral Epistles. Through these letters Paul repeatedly warns both Timothy and Titus against getting involved in foolish disputes about myths, genealogies, and other speculative topics that certain persons are stirring up. It is striking how often Paul grounds his admonition in a desire for the *godliness* of the churches Titus and Timothy are serving. Consider the concerns Paul articulates in the following passages:

- “Remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which

promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim. 1:3–4).

- “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7).
- “He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction” (1 Tim. 6:4–5).
- “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20–21).
- “Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers” (2 Tim. 2:14).
- “But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16).
- “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2 Tim. 2:23).
- “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4).
- “Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:13–14).
- “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9).

Paul never tells us the exact nature of the false teaching Timothy is facing in Ephesus, or Titus is facing in Crete. In both

cases it seems to involve certain myths and genealogies, it seems to be highly speculative and vain (he calls these views “silly” and “irreverent”), and it seems to breed quarreling and dissensions. Repeatedly, Paul commands that Titus and Timothy steer clear of these controversies because they do not produce godliness.

Now, we don’t face the same threats that Timothy and Titus faced. But surely we have all witnessed (or been a part of) theological debates that do not advance the godliness of those involved but instead promote quarreling and vain speculation. We should constantly remind ourselves of Paul’s prioritization of the gospel and his pastoral burden for godliness in these passages. The goal of our theology is “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5); theological debate that is disconnected from this goal must be avoided. As Kevin DeYoung put it, drawing attention to these same passages, “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).”²¹

One of the ways theological wrangling harms the holiness of the church is by discouraging love among Christians. In his classic book *The Cure for Church Divisions*, Richard Baxter cautions us, “They are dangerously mistaken that think that Satan has but one way to men’s damnation. There are as many ways to hell, as there be to the extinguishing of love.”²² Baxter goes on to suggest that an overly strict and fault-finding spirit is one of Satan’s principal means to discourage love among Christians:

21. Kevin DeYoung, “Where and How Do We Draw the Line?,” *Tabletalk* 36, no. 7 (July 2012): 14.

22. Richard Baxter, *The Cure for Church Divisions, or, Directions for Weak Christians to Keep Them from Being Dividers or Troublers of the Church with Some Directions to the Pastors How to Deal with Such Christians* (London: Symmons, 1670), 1.2.6, spelling and capitalization updated.

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.²³

As a result, Baxter warns that a harsh, critical spirit associates us with Satan:

You think when a wrathful envious heat is kindled in you against men for their fault, that it is certainly a zeal of God's 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: if it be so, if St. James be not deceived, you are deceived as to the author of your zeal (James 3:15–16) and it has a worse original than you suspect.²⁴

It might sound harsh to say that a loveless, exacting spirit comes from the devil. Yet the Scripture gives us ground to see that sinful behavior plays into the hands of Satan. Opponents of the gospel have been “captured by [the devil] to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26). Satan is “at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). Even among Christians, sin gives him “opportunity” (Eph. 4:27).

Jesus even calls Peter—the rock of the church—“Satan” for his worldly wisdom (Matt. 16:23). Anyone who has witnessed firsthand the destructive consequences of loveless zeal in the

23. Baxter, *Cure for Church Divisions*, 1.2.6.

24. Baxter, *Cure for Church Divisions*, 1.2.6.

church will understand how such a spirit can serve Satan's purposes. Christians are well capable of "devouring" one another (Gal. 5:15).

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. And in all our theological engagements with each other, we must be sure that our ultimate goal is to promote the godliness and welfare of the church.

Finding Our Identity in the Gospel

Unnecessary division is often a heart issue. It is easy for a spirit of self-justification to ride shotgun with our secondary distinctives. Much doctrinal separatism stems from finding our identity in our theological distinctives when we should be finding it in the gospel. As John Newton wisely warned, "Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines, as well as works!"²⁵ John Calvin went so far as to claim that "pride or haughtiness is the cause and commencement of all contentions."²⁶

We know there is a spirit of self-justification about our theology when we feel superior to Christians from other tribes and groups, or when a particular believer, church, or group unduly annoys us. It is one thing to disagree with another Christian. That is inevitable to anyone who thinks. It is another thing when our disagreement takes an attitude of contempt, condescension, or undue suspicion toward those with whom we disagree. If our identity is riding on our differences with other believers, we will tend to major in the study of differences. We may even find ourselves *looking* for faults in others in order to define ourselves.

25. John Newton, "On Controversy," in *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Nathan Whiting, 1824), 160.

26. John Calvin, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 20 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 158.

When we notice the unhealthy symptoms of doctrinal sectarianism in our hearts, we need to return our deepest level of emotional loyalty to Jesus himself. He is the one who died for us. He is the one to whom we will ultimately answer, and his business is what we are about in the first place. Jesus alone is worthy of our ultimate commitment, and all other doctrines find their proper place in relation to him. As we return to Christ himself for our deepest placement and identity, he will help us hold our convictions with both confidence and grace.

In theology, just as in battle, some hills are worth dying on and others are not. But how do we know which ones? When should doctrine divide, and when should unity prevail? Just as a medic on a battlefield treats the severely wounded first and then moves on to the less serious injuries, we must prioritize doctrine in order of importance. Pastor Gavin Ortlund implores us to cultivate humility as we prioritize doctrine into four ranks—essential, urgent, important, and unimportant—so that we will be as effective as possible at advancing the gospel in our time.

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