

Finding The Right Hills To Die On

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Topic: Christian Unity and Cooperation

“Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us” (Luke 9:49). This was the protest of the well-meaning Apostle John as he struggled with the relationship between his “group” and other “groups.” Jesus’ response to the zealous apostle was simply, *“Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”* While there are a lot of questions that Jesus’ response leaves unanswered, it does establish a principle that is desperately needed within Christian circles and churches today, which is the principle of Christian unity and cooperation.

American culture is growing increasingly fragmented and contentious, which is trickling down into the relationships and culture of the church. The unfortunate irony of this reality is that our world needs a unified church and gospel witness now more than ever. So, in this edition of *Tensions*, I want to tackle the topic of Christian unity by addressing the tension we sometimes feel between our convictions and the need for cooperation—between the desire for doctrinal purity and the need for Christian unity. We know that there are certain hills that are worth dying on. There are certain beliefs and convictions essential enough to the faith that we must separate from those who are not aligned with us. At the same time, we also know that, too often, Christians and churches die on hills when no fight was necessary. How do we balance the tension we feel between our convictions and our cooperation with other believers?

As the world around us continues to splinter and become increasingly post-Christian, it is going to be all the more important for Christians to think carefully about what issues are worth separating over and how we can eagerly maintain the unity Christ died to give us without compromising our convictions. We must recognize the difference between unity and uniformity. Here are a few principles I hope will be helpful toward that end.

We should carefully avoid the extremes of unnecessary separatism and convictional minimalism.

An approach you will see me take often in *Tensions* while navigating current issues is to identify unhealthy extremes on different ends of a spectrum in pursuit of the right approach. This is not to suggest that truth is always found somewhere “in the middle.” Our goal is not merely to find the middle ground but to find the

right ground. Nevertheless, we can typically identify error in the extremes. There are two extremes on this issue of Christian unity I want you to consider.¹

Unnecessary Separatism

The first extreme to avoid is *unnecessary separatism*. This is any attitude, belief, or practice that unnecessarily contributes to division in the body of Christ, resulting from the inability to distinguish between different kinds of issues. This error says that if you do not believe exactly like I believe on every point, we cannot be in the same church or even cooperate for gospel causes.

A key word in that definition is “unnecessarily.” There are times when division is necessary. We see an example of this in Galatians when Paul rebukes the church for not separating themselves from the Judaizers who taught circumcision was required for salvation. There were other issues, however, where Paul saw division as unnecessary such as the issue of consuming meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 9-10). Unnecessary separatism fails to see the difference between these types of issues. It puts all convictions on the same plane. It treats a disagreement over the divinity of Christ no differently than a disagreement over the timing of Christ’s millennial reign.

Unhealthy separatism usually occurs under the banner of “holiness” and the desire to keep themselves separate from those they believe to be in error. In reality, however, this type of separatism is rooted in pride. It assumes that nothing can be learned from others who see a matter differently. It falsely assumes that convictional minimalism, which we will discuss next, is inherently more destructive than separatism. Truth be told, unnecessary division harms the unity, mission, and godliness of the church. Much of our separatism unfortunately stems from finding our identity in our differences with other believers rather than the gospel. When this happens, we will tend to major in the study of differences and may even find ourselves looking for faults in others in order to define ourselves.

We should remember that the pursuit of unity doesn’t mean we stop caring about theology. It does mean that our love of theology should never exceed our love of real people.

Convictional Minimalism

The opposite extreme to avoid is *convictional minimalism*, which says, “Let’s stop dividing over doctrine! It just hurts people. We just need to love Jesus and feed the poor.” This mindset minimizes the importance of nonessential doctrines and

¹ Many of the concepts in this article came from Gavin Ortlund’s very helpful book, *Finding The Right Hills To Die On* (Crossway, 2020).

is reluctant to establish firm doctrinal requirements for those with whom they partner. In essence, this posture minimizes the importance of doctrine and conviction all together in the name of cooperation and unity.

Our aim should be to avoid both the extremes of unnecessary separatism and convictional minimalism. The remaining two principles will help to demonstrate *how* this is accomplished.

Distinguish between different orders of belief and maintain the right mindset for each.

In order to avoid both extremes mentioned above, we need a framework to distinguish between different types of belief. The exercise of distinguishing between beliefs of varying levels of significance has been described as “theological triage.”

The purpose of triage in an Emergency Room is to differentiate between the various types of ailments that need medical attention to assure priority is given to those who need it most. Hospitals do not want to have someone die of heart failure in the waiting room because they were busy treating a broken pinky toe. When performing triage, the triage nurse must consider a number of factors (e.g. severity of condition, likelihood of recovery, danger of delaying treatment, etc.) to determine where priority should be given.

Theological triage seeks to perform similar prioritization for Christian beliefs to help us make judgments for when we should allow for freedom of disagreement or when separation is needed. Many Christian thinkers have found it helpful to differentiate between three categories of belief—first rank, second rank, and third rank doctrines. Each of these doctrinal categories requires a different mindset and approach. Let’s consider each level.

First-Rank Doctrines

These are beliefs that are *essential* to the gospel itself. These are the tenants of our faith that function as boundary markers between orthodox Christianity and heresy. Thus, a denial of a first-rank doctrine is a denial of the essence of the Christian faith itself. Examples of first-rank doctrines would be the Trinity, salvation by grace apart from works, and the resurrection of Christ.

When it comes to first-rank doctrines, the right mindset is that of *courage and conviction*. These are those beliefs where Christians must have the courage to actively defend “the faith delivered once for all” (Jude 3) no matter how unpopular it may be. It is important that Christians not only affirm these doctrines, but

possess strong conviction that they are true and worth protecting. First-rank doctrines are hills worth dying on.

Second-Rank Doctrines

These are beliefs that are *urgent* for the health and practice of the church. They are significant enough they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of the local church and denominational partnership. Good and well meaning Christians may differ on certain second-rank doctrines and still maintain a healthy and charitable relationship. However, the nature of second-rank doctrines will make partnering in the same church extremely difficult when these types of differences are present.

A great example of a second-rank doctrine is baptism and whether or not infants should ever be baptized. Some Christians believe infants of believing parents should be baptized as a sign of their inclusion within the covenant community. Other Christians believe that baptism should be reserved for believers only. While it would be inappropriate to declare that our Presbyterian brothers and sisters who affirm infant baptism are heretics, this difference is urgent enough that partnering together within the same local church would be almost impossible. At the end of the day, the decision must be made: Will babies be baptized or not? Another example of a second-rank doctrine would be the belief regarding whether or not the Bible allows women to serve as ordained Pastors within a church.

The right mindset when approaching second-rank doctrines is *wisdom and balance*. Of all three of these categories of belief, second-rank doctrines may be the most difficult to identify, which is why wisdom and balance is needed. There are many instances when we should courageously defend second-rank doctrines. It would be foolish for a church to yield its conviction on baptism merely to make room for those who practice infant baptism (or believers baptism), baptism being one of the two ordinances Christ gave His church. However, because credo-baptists (those who affirm believers baptism) and paedo-baptists (those who affirm infant baptism) believe in and proclaim the same gospel, there remains a high degree of cooperation between the two groups for gospel ministry within a city or community.

Third-Rank Doctrines

These are beliefs that are *important*, since every doctrine taught in the Bible is important, but not significant enough to justify separation or division even within a local church. In other words, members of the same church can disagree on these issues and still maintain harmonious and loving partnership with one another. Examples of third-rank doctrines would include details surrounding God's sovereignty in salvation, many issues related to the availability of miraculous gifts

today, the relationship between the church and the nation of Israel, the nature and timing of Jesus' millennial reign, the age of the earth—just to name a few.

The right mindset with these types of doctrines is *circumspection and restraint*. If a Christian finds themselves unusually angry over a third-rank belief, some self-reflection may be in order to consider where that anger is coming from. Unless there are unhealthy practices flowing from these beliefs that are damaging the church, it is very rarely wise to contend or divide within a church over third-rank beliefs. Humble restraint is always in order within this category. Regrettably, many of the doctrinal and ideological squabbles between Christians today fall into this final category, resulting in unnecessary division and contention within churches and broader evangelicalism.

Ranking Doctrines

It is important to recognize that not every doctrine fits neatly into one of these categories. The reality is that there is a spectrum of doctrinal importance, and thus, some beliefs we might conclude are on the border between one category and another.

Theological triage should not become a subjective exercise where judgments are made based upon one's personal feelings. There are some objective criteria we should consider when evaluating the priority of various beliefs. Questions you may consider include:

- How clear is the Bible on this issue?
- What is its importance to the gospel?
- What is the testimony of the historical church concerning this matter?
- What is its practical effect upon the church today?

This framework of theological triage will likely not solve all our problems or questions surrounding Christian unity and cooperation. However, it does provide a helpful starting point and framework for considering when to dig in your heels and when to demonstrate humble restraint. It is on this matter of humility that we should conclude.

Practice humility in everything.

“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Peter 3:8). It's difficult to think of qualities that are more needed today than the ones Peter lists here—especially having a “humble mind.” Beyond practical frameworks and categories of theological triage, the quality of humble mindedness is what will matter most when it comes to Christian unity and cooperation.

Having a humble mind does not imply compromising truth. It does, however, acknowledge the possibility that your beliefs are fallible and should always be evaluated against God's word. It acknowledges that we all have something to learn from those with whom we disagree and that we should work through these issues in the context of Christian community. As one author puts it, "Humility teaches us to navigate life with sensitivity to the distinction between what we don't know and what we don't know that we don't know."² If we are willing to embrace the possibility that we may be less than perfectly right on certain issues, it will lead us to engage with careful listening, a willingness to learn, an openness to receiving new information, and a willingness to adjust our perspective. "Pride makes us stagnant; humility makes us nimble."³

God's people must have a zeal for theology and biblical conviction, but our zeal for theology should not exceed our zeal for unity and our actual brothers and sisters in Christ. We must pursue both gospel doctrine *and* gospel culture. A gospel culture is gracious, cooperative, and humble. Its opposite is harsh, unnecessarily rigid, and pridefully stubborn.

I acknowledge that performing theological triage can be very difficult. Some issues are more simple to evaluate—we die on the hill of Christ's divinity; we do not die on the hill of a post-tribulation rapture. Other issues are not nearly as clear—how much convictional alignment is necessary within a church on issues regarding cultural engagement, ethical issues, the appropriate way to address racism, etc? Nevertheless, I hope the framework we've discussed provides a helpful resource to address these questions and clarifies unhealthy extremes that we should avoid. In many ways, I created the *Tensions* resource so that we can work through many of these complex issues together. As we do, I pray we will take our stand on the gospel that unifies us and proceed forward comfortable managing the tension we feel between courage and humility because it is within that tension that wisdom is found.

² Ibid., 147.

³ Ibid.