

Equipping Night
Unity in the Truth: Knowing What Hills to Die on in Church and Theology

Introduction

Welcome to *Unity in the Truth: Knowing What Hills to Die on in Church and Theology*

Turn in your bibles to John 17. This is Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer." This is just moments before Jesus is betrayed and arrested, and he prays for his disciples, and for all Christians to come after the disciples.

John 17:9–11

⁹I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.

¹¹And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

Jesus is praying that his disciples would be united, just as Jesus and the Father are one, he wants the disciples to be one. Church unity is meant to reflect the unity of the Trinity.

Look later in John 17:20–21

²⁰"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,

²¹that they 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.

So he's praying not only for his disciples, but for everyone who believes through their word. That's us. That we may all be one. So that the world might believe that you have sent me.

So, Church unity is very important to Jesus, for many reasons, but one is, it helps our testimony to a lost world. We just heard Dan Mercurio's testimony on Sunday, and what did he say drew him back to the Lord, "a vibrant, faithful, Christian community." When Christians fight, especially over the wrong issues, it hurts our testimony. But when Christians get along, its attractive to the non-believer.

So Church unity is important to Jesus, but it's not "unity at all costs." It's not unity at the expense of truth. Look at what Jesus says in the very same prayer

John 17:17–19

¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

¹⁸As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

¹⁹And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

So Jesus wants us to be united, but united in the *truth*. A kind of unity that downplays truth, or downplays doctrine or theology is not the kind of unity that Jesus wants.

As one of my seminary professors often said, "we want to be as balanced as as the Bible is balanced."

Theological Triage

If you think about this long enough, you'll recognize there is a tension between unity and doctrine. How do we hold these two in balance? The best way to approach this is something called Theological Triage

Imagine you are a triage nurse in an emergency room. Someone comes in with chest pain. Possible heart attack. Someone else comes in with a broken arm. And a third person comes in with a cut thumb, but it won't stop bleeding. The word triage means to determine the urgency of something. If you are a triage nurse, you have to prioritize the urgency of these injuries, and treat the most urgent ones first.

What happens if triage is not done properly? If you don't triage properly, people will get hurt. People will even die.

The same is true for theological triage. If we don't appropriately triage doctrines in Christianity, if we don't know which matters are most urgent and not as urgent, we risk hurting other Christians, we even risk running a church into the ground.

Every injury is important, but they aren't all equally as important. A heart attack is more important than a broken arm. Likewise, every doctrine is important, but they aren't all equally as important

I want to point your attention to a few resources that were helpful for me.

1. An article by Albert Mohler - A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity – This is the article from 2005 that first coined the term theological triage. Now, even if that phrase wasn't used until 2005, the idea has been there throughout all of Church history, and even in Scripture, as we will see.
 - a. https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity?_ga=2.6963638.568564132.1704722067-272473638.1698076356
2. The second is a book by Gavin Ortlund. He's the brother of Dane Ortlund, who wrote *Gentle and Lowly*, son of Ray Ortlund. *Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage*
3. Lastly, there is a video. A panel from a Gospel Coalition conference from years ago, with Mohler, Ortlund, and others, discussing this topic for theological triage.
 - a. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TxRMKPKoNM&t=791s&ab_channel=TheGospelCoalition

All these resources are on the back of your handout.

When we engage in Theological triage, we are trying to avoid two opposite errors.

The first error is DOCTRINAL SECTARIANISM (TO be overly divisive). This is causing a fuss over every single disagreement that we have, and stir up division in the church when it isn't necessary. And make no mistake, this is sinful. Jesus prayed that we would be one, as him and the Father are one.

Take, for example, the book of Ephesians, a book that many Reformed types like myself love, chapter 1 we see the glories of Predestination, chapter 2, we see God's effectual calling, how even our faith is a gift from God, and yet chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 – all emphasize unity and love for fellow Christians.

So we don't want to be overly divisive. But for every error, there is an opposite error.

The opposite error is DOCTRINAL MINIMALISM (to downplay doctrine), or to seek "unity at all costs," even if it means compromising truth. Maybe you've heard someone say, "can't we all stop arguing over

theology and just love Jesus!” It sounds nice, but you can’t do that, because you have to define “Jesus.” And once you start defining “Jesus,” you are discussing theology, and division is unavoidable. Your Mormon friends will say, “I love Jesus,” but their Jesus is not the same Jesus. There are entire churches that deny that Jesus *really* rose from the dead in a physical body. The Jesus they claim to love is not the same Jesus.

Now I want to stop here and point out, every Christian will naturally fall into one of these errors. Ask yourself, which pit do you risk falling into. Are you more likely to downplay doctrine, or are you more likely to be overly divisive over doctrine? Sometimes, in order to avoid one ditch, we fall into the other ditch. And that’s not good either. So which one do you more naturally fall into? We’ll circle back to that later.

Someone might argue against this idea against theological triage and say, “all truth is God’s truth. Everything in the Bible is important, therefore ranking doctrines is unbiblical.” Now, they are right in saying everything in the Bible is important. But, Scripture itself teaches that some doctrines are *more important* than others.

Galatians 1:8–9

⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Paul says, if anyone preaches a false gospel, a false way of salvation, let him be accursed, let him be anathema...he’s saying, let him go to hell. The gospel, the way of salvation for sinners, is a first order doctrine. If you lose the gospel, you lose everything.

There was a party in the Galatian church teaching that you had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul says, that’s a false gospel. Sinclair Ferguson calls it “the damnable plus.” Jesus + circumcision. Jesus + who you vote for. Jesus + how you educate your children. Jesus + my good works. Anyone who preaches the damnable plus for your salvation, let him go to hell.

Look also in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4

³For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the **Scriptures**, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the **Scriptures**,

Notice what is “first importance” according to Paul – The death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the Scriptures.

1 Corinthians 15:14, 17

¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

The real, bodily, resurrection of Jesus is a non-negotiable doctrine. These doctrines are important enough to decide your eternal destiny. We can’t compromise these.

All theology is important, but not all theology is *first* importance.

Romans 14:1–6

¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, **but not to quarrel over opinions.**

²One person **believes he may eat anything**, while **the weak person eats only vegetables.**

³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵**One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.** Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

There are two disagreements that Paul is addressing. One is over food. Should Christians eat meat or only vegetables. The other is over observing certain days. In the original context, this debate was probably over Jewish holy days and festivals. Today, Christians may debate whether we should observe Lent, or, to what extent should we observe the sabbath, or if observing Christmas as its own special day is even helpful. Paul says in verse 1, don't quarrel over this. Verse 6 says, "whichever side you take, do it in honor of the Lord." Paul is saying disagreements over these things shouldn't cause division.

So we see from Scripture itself that not every doctrine is equally important. They are all important, but they aren't equally important.

So, we see Theological Triage with the Apostle Paul. We also see it throughout Church history, even in the Reformers. Even in John Calvin.

"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."

No one is going to accuse Calvin of being squishy in his theology, but even he admits this. As a side note, I think all of the worst stereotypes of John Calvin would be gone if people just read Calvin.

So let's put this idea to work. Let's try to rank doctrines by level of importance.

We'll begin with 1st order doctrines. This is what we call "orthodoxy". 1st level doctrines are doctrines that are essential to Christianity. If you reject these, then you reject Christianity. **What are some that you would put in 1st order category. And don't be afraid of being wrong.**

- Monotheism – only one God
- God's creation of the universe *ex nihilo*. (Out of nothing)
- The Trinity – the one God eternally exists in three distinct persons, equal in power and glory – The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- The virgin birth
- The two distinct natures of Jesus – truly God and truly man.
 - Jesus was not just a good teacher. He was truly God, in human flesh, with a human mind.

- The bodily death and burial of Jesus
- The bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus
- The bodily second coming of Jesus.
- The bodily resurrection of all the dead to the judgement seat of Christ.
- The inspiration, truthfulness, and authority of the Bible
- Justification by faith alone

This isn't meant to be an exhaustive list, but this is a start. If you take any of these doctrines out, you don't have Christianity anymore. You have something else. Churches who deny any of these are not true churches.

If you want to be a member at Christ Community Church, you don't have to agree with everything we teach, but you do have to agree with the 1st order issues, because those are what make up Christianity.

You might ask, "do you have to believe all of these things in order to be a Christian?" It depends on what you mean by that. Take for instance, the thief on the cross. I don't think he'd be able to articulate all of these doctrines in his mind, just minutes before his death, but he trusted in the real Jesus, and Jesus said, "today, you will be with me in paradise." Or take a young child, or a new believer, they might not be able to articulate the two natures of Jesus, but they have real faith in the real Jesus.

A friend told me...grandparents...heard about Jesus dying on the cross, they believed. Later had dinner with the pastor, he mentioned the resurrection...."He rose again?" Crying... They didn't know one of the first order doctrines, but they received Christ, and when they heard, they didn't deny it.

A better way to think about it is, these are doctrines you can't deny and be a true Christian. A new believer can have true faith without knowing all these doctrines, but as they mature, if they persistently deny any of these, there is a serious problem going on.

2nd Order Doctrines

As a disclaimer, ranking doctrines as second or third order is tricky. Scripture does not give us an exact science for this. Depending on your tradition or background, you might rank them differently. Some that I put as 2nd order, you may think are 3rd order. Some that I rank as 3rd order, you may rank 2nd. The important thing is, these aren't 1st order issues. Christians can disagree over them and still recognize each other as brothers and sisters.

How I'm defining 2nd order issues is: not required for Church membership, but they are required to be an elder or pastor in your church. For churches that make up a denomination, 2nd order issues are what are common in their denomination. **What do you think would go into this category?**

- The proper recipients of Baptism (Believers only or Believers and their children)
- The Doctrines of Grace (aka Calvinism) vs. Arminianism
 - a 2nd order issue, we should not be quick to assume they are breaking a first order issue.
- Spiritual Gifts: Continuationist vs. cessationism
 - Have the miraculous sign gifts of the Holy Spirit (tongues, prophecy, and healing) continued after the Apostles?

- The Pentecostal Church, for example, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, they affirm the first order issues, but we are going to land in two very different places on this issue.
- There is also an entire spectrum of beliefs
- Structure of Church Government. Congregationalist vs. Elder-led vs. bishop-led
- Complementarianism vs. Egalitarianism (is the role of Pastor/Elder reserved only for men?)

Now here's an important one to triage. Because some denominations affirm female pastors because they deny the inspiration of scripture (which is a first order issue).

But, there are churches and denominations that still affirm all of the first order issues, they are true Christians, but their understanding of this issue is different. So, when we disagree with someone on

So, you may disagree with a 2nd order doctrine and still be a member at Christ Community Church. Many here are still Baptists by conviction. And that's ok. We welcome you to fellowship. No one is going to make you baptize your baby.

I was a Baptist who attended this church for 5 years. Even when I was a MAP intern, I was wrestling with the Baptism issue. In seminary, Alayna and I firmly landed on the infant Baptist position, and our son Bridger was baptized when he was just a few months old.

So, to be a pastor or an elder in a church or in a denomination, you also have to agree on the 2nd order issues. Now why might that be? Why would a church need their pastors and elders to not only agree on 1st order issues, but also 2nd order issues? Because these kinds of doctrines heavily affect your how you do "church." If your leadership can't agree on these things, you won't get anything done.

Do we baptize infants, or not? The leadership has to be in agreement. Will we encourage the congregation to speak in tongues during the worship service, or not? Will we have female pastors, or not? We have to have a position, it would be irresponsible to say, "eh, it doesn't matter."

So 2nd order issues is what cause different denominations to form, which I think is appropriate for the reasons I just mentioned. But, even when we are in separate denominations, if someone affirms the 1st order issues, we embrace them as a brother or sister in Christ. We recognize their church as a true church.

Now...what would happen if we elevated a 2nd order doctrine to a 1st order doctrine? What would be a negative affect of saying, "only those who believe in infant baptism are true Christians. Or only Calvinists are true Christians?"

To start, you'd be claiming these people were not true Believers

Those who don't believe in infant Baptism

- Charles Spurgeon
- John Piper
- John Macarthur
- Billy Graham

Those who are continuationists

- Wayne Grudem
- Martyn Lloyd-Jones
- D.A. Carson
- Sam Storms

Arminians and Non-Calvinists

- John Wesley
- Billy Graham

Is anyone ready to anathematize all of these men? They all disagree with Christ Community Church on at least one level of 2nd order issues. But we embrace them as Christians, and even quote them in our sermons.

3rd Order Doctrines

Third order doctrines are doctrines that can lead to healthy debate between Christians, but should not be a matter of division in church leadership or in the congregation. What I'm saying is, you shouldn't leave a church over these issues. Even Pastors and Elders on the same session can disagree on these issues.

What might be an example of a 3rd order doctrine? Something that Paul and I could have different views on, but still serve side by side in the same church?

1. One's specific interpretation of Eschatology and Revelation
 - Is "the millennium" in Revelation 20 a literal 1,000 years? Or does the millennium represent the time between Christ's first and second comings?
 - Is there going to be a "secret rapture" before Christ's final 2nd coming? If so, will it be before the tribulation, during the tribulation, or after the tribulation?

Line's that *must* be drawn to protect the 1st order issue: Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

And yet, some camps elevate their view of Eschatology to a 2nd order doctrine, or even a 1st order doctrine. For example, if someone comes from a dispensationalist background (that's the view that believes in a secret rapture), if you tell them that you don't believe there is going to be a secret rapture, they might have a heart attack. And they might look at you like you just denied the second coming. That's where triage is important. You gotta say, "I believe Jesus is coming back, I just believe he's coming back *once*, I just don't believe in a secret rapture before he returns.

So, if someone says believing in a secret rapture is a first order doctrine, who do you lose?

- Augustine
- John Calvin
- Martin Luther
- C.S. Lewis
- Charles Spurgeon
- Jonathan Edwards
- B.B. Warfield (he defined the doctrine of inerrancy)
- J Gresham Machen (he was the most important Christian in the battle against liberal theology)

- RC Sproul
- Most of Christianity before the 19th Century
- Every pastor and Elder at Christ Community Church

So, have your view on Revelation. Be convinced by Scripture, but don't elevate it to a first importance doctrine.

2. The length of "days" in Genesis 1 / The age of the earth

- Are these 6 literal 24 hour days?
- Are "days" symbolic for a longer period of time? (Day-Age view)
- Was there a million-year gap between verses 2 and 3 in Genesis 1? (Gap theory)

Now, this doesn't mean that any interpretation of Genesis 1 goes. Certain lines must be drawn to protect the first order issue

- Genesis 1 is divinely inspired by God
 - God created the world *ex nihilo*.
 - God is distinct from his creation (Creator/creature distinction).
 - God created the world good.
 - God created the world for his glory.
 - God specially created Adam and Eve who both bear God's image.
 - Adam and Eve are humanity's first parents.
 - Adam and Eve are historical figures who really did disobey God in time and space history in the Garden of Eden.

So, any view that rejects a historical Adam and Eve, is unacceptable, because Adam and Eve are foundational to the Bible's teaching of human existence. And, Adam's existence is essential to the gospel. 1 Corinthians 15 says, "In Adam all die, in Christ all shall be made alive."

Now, let me put my cards on the table here. I believe the best understanding of genesis 1 is 6 literal, 24 hour days. I also believe in a young earth. I must admit, the universe looks old. It looks millions or even billions of years old. I think the best explanation is that God created the universe with the appearance of age. God created Adam and Eve with the appearance of age. They were a few days old, but they looked and acted like adults. *That's my personal position, I think that's the best position, but that's not the position you have to take. It's not even the position that our pastors and elders have to take.*

If I were to elevate the length of days and age of the universe to a first order issue, look who I'd have to lose:

- Augustine
- Charles Spurgeon
- B.B. Warfield
- Carl Henry
- JI Packer
- Chuck Colson
- Francis Schaefer
- Tim Keller
- Derek Thomas

These are all men who have a different interpretation of days and age in Genesis 1 than I do. But the views that they hold are all still within orthodoxy because they agree on the 1st order non-negotiables.

Sometimes these third order issues are tricky because they are so closely related to the 1st order issues. But they are things that Christians can agree to disagree, even in the same church, and even on the same leadership team.

So, in review: 1st order issues are essential to Christianity, 2nd order issues are important for church order and philosophy of ministry, and 3rd order issues are important, but shouldn't cause division on any level.

When someone is wrong on a 1st order issue, its called heresy. When someone is wrong on a 2nd or 3rd order issue, its called "error," but its not heresy.

But what about Cultural Issues? This is where some of the most heated debate comes with Christians.

As a disclaimer, nobody that I know of has written a book on Triaging cultural issues. So I'm going out on a limb here, trying to use my best judgement in light of Scripture.

- Biblical Marriage between a man and a woman – **1st order issue**
 - because it is abundantly clear in Scripture
 - its an image of the Gospel. Husband and wife is a picture of Christ and the Church
- Abortion – **1st order issue**
 - The Bible is clear about life beginning in conception
 - Breaking the sixth commandment (thou shalt not murder) is serious.
- Racism – **1st Order issue**
 - The Bible is clear that all humans are created in God's image and should be treated with dignity and respect.
- Pre-Marital Sex – **1st order issue**
 - 1 Thessalonians 4:3 - ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;
- Specific political strategy for fighting abortion – **3rd order issue**
 - Incrementalism – outlawing abortions step by step.
 - Absolutism – outlawing abortions all at once
- Voting for one political party over the other – **3rd order issue.**
- Total Abstinence from Alcohol – **3rd order issue**
- How to educate your Children – **3rd order issue**
- Views on political policy in relation to: war, immigration, economics. **3rd order issue.**

As you can see, these are all very important things that we need to think through biblically, but they rank differently, because the Bible is more clear on some of them than others.

As a general rule: the *more clear* the Bible is, the more likely it is a 1st order issue. The *less clear* the Bible is, the more likely it is 2nd or 3rd order.

We should thank God that the things most important to our salvation are the most clear in Scripture!

So, Theological Triage is fun in theory, but today's lesson will not benefit you at all unless you practice this in real relationships with real people.

So, to help, think of one person in your mind that you *know* you have a theological disagreement with. It could be a family member, a friend, have them in your head. Now ask yourself these questions:

1. Where do the other person and myself *agree*?

You might agree on more than you think!

2. What precisely are we disagreeing on?

For example, someone saying they believe in "Day age" theory of Genesis 1, doesn't mean they deny Genesis 1, so don't accuse them of that. That's bearing false witness.

Take the time to pinpoint what exactly you disagree on.

3. Which category of doctrine does our disagreement fit in? 1st? 2nd? 3rd?

If it's 1st, this is urgent, because eternity is at stake, but if it's a 2nd or 3rd order doctrine, it is still important, but not as urgent.

4. Is this even worth talking about with them? How fruitful will the conversation be? Are we mature enough to do this in a way that is friendly and respectful?

Some of us, we're so addicted to theological debate, we just steamroll people and hurt them.

5. If it's not a 1st order doctrine, am I committed to Christian unity with this believer, even if we never agree?
6. Am I willing to listen to the *best* arguments of the other position, not just the "straw men" that are easy to pick apart?
7. Do I care more about winning an argument or winning my brother?

What are some benefits of Theological Triage? When we do this well, how does it benefit our walk with the Lord?

1. It keeps the "main thing," the main thing.
2. It preserves the unity of the universal "catholic" church.
3. It provides a way for theological conversation to be FUN instead of heated.

Discussion Groups

1. Everyone has a tendency to be either “overly divisive” in theology or to “downplay doctrine.” Which danger do you more naturally lean towards? Can you share a specific instance when you’ve noticed this tendency in yourself?
2. What did you find helpful or thought-provoking about this idea of “Theological Triage”?
3. Was there anything that you were confused by? Someone in your group might be able to provide some clarity.
4. Name one or more Christians that you have *some* theological disagreements with, that still have been a tremendous influence on you.
5. Take a look at the final slide of questions to ask yourself before you engage in a theological disagreement. Which one of these questions is most helpful to you right now?