

NOT ALL TEACHINGS ARE EQUAL

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE LEVELS OF BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

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14 December 2016

In my previous article, *Living to Please God*¹, I mentioned our need to “know which kind of teachings we absolutely must be united about and which ones we can safely differ on.”² Bottom line, not all teachings are equal! Some doctrines are absolutely essential to the Christian faith that adherence to them spells the difference between genuine and pseudo Christianity; others are not as essential, but carry enough weight that to neglect them is to miss the very heart of God Himself; still others carry little weight that we can respectfully disagree about them and still be in genuine fellowship.

My purpose here is to help us understand the three levels of biblical doctrine, and thereby help enable us to differentiate one from the others. My hope is that we might become united in the things that matter most to God while allowing for differences of opinion on teachings that carry little weight.

Note: Scripture quotations herein are from the New International Version (NIV), 2011 edition.

CORE DOCTRINES

Ephesians 4:3-6

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

For all intents and purposes, these represent the very foundations of the Christian faith. There is only *one body*, the Church of Christ; there is only *one Spirit*, the Holy Spirit; there is only *one hope*, our living hope in Jesus³; there is only *one Lord*, Jesus Christ; there is only *one faith*, Christianity; there is only *one baptism*, the baptism of the Great Commission⁴; and there is only *one God and Father of all*, the God of the Bible. Apart from these, biblical Christianity cannot exist⁵.

The implications of these seven areas of teaching cannot be overemphasized! Since there is but *one body*, sectarianism is wrong; since there is but *one Spirit*, any form of spirituality other than in keeping with the Holy Spirit is sinful; since there is but *one hope*, any hope apart from Jesus is dead; since there is but *one Lord*, absolute subservience to a master other than Jesus Christ is abject slavery; since there is but *one faith*, Christianity is the only path to salvation; since there is but *one baptism*, only the baptism of the Great Commission confers forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit; and since there is but *one God and Father of all*, any god other than the God of the Bible is false. By nature, these teachings do not yield to personal interpretation; rather, they demand inflexible compliance⁶!

Keep in mind that it is within the context of the core doctrines that Paul calls us to unity: **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)**. The Greek word for “unity” here is *ἐνότης (henotēs)*, which means “oneness, unanimity”. This refers to the unity that God produces among Christians. It is worth noting that *henotēs* occurs just twice in Scripture, and they both appear in the same chapter (the other is in verse 13) and within the same general context. The implication is crucial: when it comes to the core doctrines, we must be of unanimous belief, conviction, and practice.

Another implication has to do with how these teachings define the lines of fellowship. Because the core doctrines reveal the absolute essential beliefs and practices of the Christian faith, we can determine what true Christianity is meant to be and thereafter figure out who the true Christian is. While it may seem an

oversimplification, it is truthful to say that an individual or group whose beliefs and practices are faithful to these teachings is Christian. Therefore, there is fellowship between them and us⁷.

Following is a biblical example of a core doctrine and the consequence of straying from it:

Galatians 1:6-9

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Galatians 5:2-5

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

The **gospel of Christ** (1:7) that Paul was referring to is the good news that salvation in Christ is a free gift by God's grace that is to be received in faith, not earned through law-keeping⁸. This doctrine—salvation by grace through faith—is the pure Gospel, a foundational tenet of Christianity, the **one faith** that **Ephesians 4:5** points to. This is why Paul took an uncompromising stand in its defense.

Notice also what Paul said about the preacher and adherer of the false doctrine he was guarding against:

Galatians 1:9b

If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Galatians 5:4

You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

The preacher of this false doctrine is **under God's curse** and its adherers **have been alienated from Christ** and **have fallen away from grace**. The matter of how a person is to be saved is one of the core doctrines of Christianity. This preacher had tampered with it and his adherers had abandoned it. Consequently, the former had fallen **under God's curse** and the latter had been **alienated from Christ**.

Bottom line, the core doctrines are non-negotiable!

IMPORTANT DOCTRINES

Matthew 23:23

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

Unlike the core doctrines—the non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith—the important doctrines do not necessarily define the lines of fellowship. As such, unanimity of belief, conviction, and practice here is not an absolute requirement. Yet these are to be faithfully observed in view of their importance.

Consider **Matthew 23:23** as a case study:

- Jesus expressed that the giving of the tithe must not be neglected. After all, it is holy and belongs to God (see **Leviticus 27:30, 32**).
- Yet for all the holiness of the tithe, He referred to justice, mercy, and faithfulness as **the more important matters of the law**⁹!
- One implication should be obvious: some biblical provisions carry more weight than others.

Following is another example of an important doctrine and how Jesus made sense of it:

Hosea 6:6

**For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.**

The burnt offering was commanded by God soon after Israel's liberation from Egypt (see **Leviticus 1**). This sacrificial offering was an integral part of Jewish worship; something God meant to delight in—an **aroma pleasing to the LORD (Leviticus 1:9b, 13b, 17b)**. Yet in the context of Israel's infidelity in Hosea's day, God would rather that His people had been merciful to one another¹⁰ than offered Him their sacrifices.

Jesus cited **Hosea 6:6** twice; first in **Matthew 9:13**, then in **Matthew 12:7**. In the former, Jesus was dealing with self-righteousness; in the latter, legalism—in both cases, mercy was being undermined¹¹.

Now, a significant observation is worth noting. In Jesus' mention of **the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness**, along with His citations of **Hosea 6:6**, it seems sufficiently clear that while acts of piety are important, the motives that drive those actions are more important still. Apparently, one can give offerings, but in hypocrisy (as in **Matthew 23:23**); another can point at a Christian's association with "sinners," but with an air of self-righteousness (as in **Matthew 9:13**); and still another can call attention to disobedience, but in a spirit of legalism (as in **Matthew 12:7**). Evidently, pious acts lose their meaning the moment they lose sight of what piety is truly meant to be.

In view of this, I believe the important doctrines are meant to guide us toward capturing the very heart of God. They teach us not only to execute the right actions, but to have the right heart behind those actions. Actions are important, but more so the heart.

PERIPHERAL DOCTRINES

Romans 14:1

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.

Of the three levels of biblical doctrine, these carry the least weight and are virtually of no consequence to biblical Christianity. For all intents and purposes, these represent personal beliefs or preferences that we can have different opinions about without compromising **the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace** or drawing the lines of Christian fellowship for.

Following is a biblical example of peripheral doctrines:

Romans 14:5-6

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Paul wrote this passage within the context of Christian freedom and responsibility (see **14:1—15:13**), and the pertinent issues he was dealing with had nothing to do with either core or important doctrines. For this reason, he counseled his audience to **be fully convinced in their own mind** regardless of how their opinions might have differed. This is consistent with his initial call against dogmatic attitudes toward disputable matters (see **14:1**). His later admonitions are worth noting:

Romans 14:13a

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

Romans 15:7

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

When it comes to disputable matters, Paul advocated for acceptance rather than harboring judgmental attitudes against one another. The implication is clear: when dealing with peripheral doctrines, we can

agree to disagree and still maintain genuine unity and fellowship.

Now, let me express that it shocks me how unhealthy emphases on or biases toward peripheral doctrines can damage Christian relationships, and even orthodoxy and orthopraxy¹². On the former, subjects such as politics and Church leadership style have historically lent to discord and dissensions in the fellowship. For the latter, Church history reveals how the adoption of pet peripheral doctrines at the expense of core or important doctrines has inadvertently caused divisions within the “one body” of Christ¹³.

Why do these happen? If we are to break free of these patterns, I believe one particular insight is worth considering. The Greek word for “disputable matters”¹⁴ in **Romans 14:1** is *διαλογισμός* (*dialogismos*), which refers to self-based reasoning that lends to confusion. Its verb form is *διαλογίζομαι* (*dialogizomai*), which implies “one confused mind interacting with other confused minds, each further reinforcing the original confusion.”¹⁵ Apparently, to put unhealthy emphasis on or be unreasonably biased toward a peripheral doctrine is essentially to sow and reap confusion. No wonder damage is done!¹⁶

Having said these, let it remain clear that Christianity is inherently a religion of freedom: **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free** (Galatians 5:1a). Believe it or not, God allows us a significant measure of liberty to conduct our personal and religious affairs according to our convictions¹⁷, provided these are faithful to the two greatest commandments:

Mark 12:28-31

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Nowhere is Christian freedom more evident than in the peripheral doctrines. However, freedom must be tempered with responsibility! Since these carry the least weight and are virtually of no consequence, we are free to hold differing opinions about them, but we must be careful not to harm Christian unity and fellowship by the exercise of this freedom. In view of this, consider this piece of wisdom:

1 Corinthians 10:23-24

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

The implication should be sufficiently clear: *If the exercise of my freedom causes harm to my brother, sister or the Church, then I should rather surrender it. For the exercise of my freedom is not worth the harm it may cause.*



In His infinite wisdom, God determined that not all teachings should be equal. In view of what we have learned, I hope to one day see our fellowship rallying in true unity behind the core doctrines, capturing the very heart of God as we faithfully observe the important doctrines, and tempering our freedom with responsibility in the face of peripheral doctrines. To Him be all glory, honor, and praise!

Notes

¹ Accessible online at <https://www.facebook.com/mmcconline/> (see 19 July 2016 post)

² See Endnote 25 of *Living to Please God*

³ See **1 Peter 1:3**

⁴ See **Matthew 28:18-20** (particularly, verse 19) and **Acts 2:38**

⁵ Perhaps this is why these are also known as “essential doctrines.”

⁶ For this reason, I fondly refer to the core doctrines as “the non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith.”

⁷ This is provided we ourselves remain faithful, of course.

⁸ See also **Ephesians 2:8-9**

⁹ The New American Standard Bible (NASB), a literal translation, renders it as **the weightier provisions of the law**.

¹⁰ See **Hosea 6:8-9** for an idea of the violence perpetrated in Israel at the time.

¹¹ For the context, see **Matthew 9:9-13** and **Matthew 12:1-8**, respectively.

¹² In Christianity, “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxy” refer to *right beliefs* and *right practices*, respectively.

¹³ In Endnote 25 of *Living to Please God*, I mentioned part of the reason I am now writing this follow-up article: “It is crucial that we know which kind of teachings we absolutely must be united about and which ones we can safely have differing opinions on. I have become convinced of its necessity in view of McKean’s tendency to take excessive liberties with matters that the Bible is silent about.” By this tendency, McKean has effectively, if not directly, been causing division! This happens whenever he puts unhealthy emphases on disputable matters and promotes them (often to justify a personal bias) as though they define the genuine marks of biblical Christianity.

¹⁴ The NASB renders it as **opinions**.

¹⁵ HELPS Word-studies; 2011, Helps Ministries, Inc.; as displayed at <http://biblehub.com/greek/1260.htm>; retrieved on 11 November 2011

¹⁶ I am convinced that we need to recognize this and take responsibility for it, or else we risk trapping ourselves within a harmful cyclical pattern. In the end, we harm not just the Church for whom Jesus died, but the very Name we have been graciously given.

¹⁷ This sharply contrasts the ancient Israelites, the minutest details of whose lives were governed by the Torah. Also known as *The Law of Moses* (or simply *The Law*) or the *Pentateuch*, the Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible, which are traditionally attributed to Moses.