When Doctrine Divides
Doctrinal Fidelity and Christian Unity

August 7, 2022 | Lesson 2
Resurrection Church
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Purpose

As Christians, we want to be biblical—we want to root our beliefs and practice in the Bible. Yet, Christians interpret the Bible in different ways and, as a result, find themselves in disagreement on matters of doctrine and conscience. In this class, we will consider how to navigate these important matters while avoiding the twin errors of doctrinal sectarianism and doctrinal minimalism.

Course Schedule

Lesson 2 | When Christians Should Divide Over Doctrine[1]

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labor to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy.

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

"Batter My Heart" | Holy Sonnet 14
John Donne

Introduction | Toward Disagreement without Division

In 1984, Francis Schaeffer asserted, "Evangelicalism is divided, deeply divided. And it will not be helpful or truthful for anyone to deny this."[2] The movement called evangelicalism exists on a spectrum, ranging from self-identifying fundamentalists to postconservative evangelicals, and includes seminaries and colleges, publishing houses and magazines, and, most significantly, local churches.[3] At every level, disagreement and division are not hard to find.

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[1] The foundational sources for this Bible Class are Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Rhyne R. Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God: An Evangelical Approach to Theological Diversity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

[2] Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984).

[3] Defining who belongs in evangelicalism is exceedingly difficult because there is no evangelical magisterium to determine who is in and who is out. More than that, the term *evangelical* used to define the movement *evangelicalism* should be considered an adjective (e.g., *evangelical Christian*) rather than a noun *evangelical*. The term describes a certain kind of Christian and form of Christianity, so it cannot stand by itself. For a range of views on evangelicalism, see *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, eds. Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hanson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

Significantly, the spectrum of evangelicalism transcends any one denomination, resulting in division and unity across denominational lines. For example, an evangelical Baptist church will have more in common with an evangelical Anglican church than with a liberal Baptist church. Nuances like this make navigating unity and division among Christians really challenging. While debates about the nature of evangelicalism and evangelical theology are important, we will focus on unity and division at the local church level.[4]

In this lesson, we will consider the issue of determining which doctrines are worthy of division and which afford latitude for disagreement without endangering unity. The matters discussed in this lesson can't be separated from the key ideas in our last lesson regarding the importance of unity and the inevitability of disagreement.

Unity is Important

Jesus cares about the unity of his people, locally and globally (cf. John 17).[5] The apostles, like Jesus, also promoted the unity of the body of Christ. Virtually every New Testament letter addresses the issue of Christian unity in one way or another. Paul gives special attention to this doctrine when he

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Contributing authors include Kevin T. Bauder (representing fundamentalism), R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (representing confessional/conservative evangelicalism), John G. Stackhouse Jr. (representing generic evangelicalism), and Roger E. Olson (representing postconservative evangelicalism). Churches sometimes go to great lengths to plot themselves on the spectrum. I was once in a membership seminar where the facilitator explained that the church was in-between fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism, but belonging to neither. Resurrection Church probably falls in the "Generic Evangelical" category, but it is difficult to know the value (or the meaning) of identifying with a particular category. Over the last two years, the issues that generally mark evangelical "camps" have shifted dramatically with the result that Arminians and Calvinists (who in previous years would never have united) are united together by social positions that transcend their previous concerns for soteriological clarity. Because evangelical identity is something of a fast-moving target, self-identification is even more elusive and less valuable than ever before.

[4] Identifying the "marks" of Baptist churches or of evangelical Christianity is further challenged by the reality that any investigation requires the twin foci of sociology and theology. Without a magisterium declaring the markers, those markers can only be identified by considering what Baptists (or evangelicals) have believed and practiced over time—and the results are far from consistent except for a few features that are not exclusively Baptist (e.g., the separation of church and state, baptism by immersion).

[5] Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 168-178.

teaches that Jesus created the church as a unified body (Eph. 2:15-16). Now, the church must make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

The doctrine of the church's unity is, regrettably, undervalued. When the doctrine of Christian unity is depreciated, other important doctrines are weakened. Notice how many other important doctrines are connected to the unity of the Church:

> The oneness of the church, then, is *christological* as Christ is the head of one body, *Trinitarian* with church unity emulating the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit, *kerygmatic* as it is rooted in one evangelical faith, *sacramental* as it shares one baptism and partakes of one loaf, and *visible* since unity is expressed in tangible relationships with others.[6]

When Christians fail to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, they deplete their witness to other significant biblical teachings.[7] Most importantly, their testimony that God sent Jesus Christ as an act of love for the world vanishes (Jn. 17:23). For that reason, decisions to divide require serious caution. There are times when Christians should divide in the interest of maintaining the purity of the church, but an improper emphasis on the purity of the church results in a deficient emphasis on the unity of the church.[8]

Disagreement is Inevitable

Even Christians who agree that the Bible is God's authoritative word will disagree about matters of biblical interpretation and theological

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[6] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 834.

[7] Christopher W. Morgan and Kristen Ferguson, "Baptists, the Unity of the Church, and the Christian Tradition" in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 19-25.

[8] Christians tend to prioritize one over the other. One Christian senses that an overemphasis on unity jeopardizes the church's purity, while another senses that an overemphasis on purity jeopardizes the church's unity. This is something of the case in Romans 14-15. There, Paul lands squarely on the side of unity over an over-realized notion of purity when he chides, "But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God…. Therefore, let us no longer judge one another"(Rom. 14:10-13). Pursuing unity and purity will always exist in tension, held together by Christ. Cf. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 161-168.

formulation. The Bible is not a systematic theology textbook, a manual for Christian living, or a statement of faith for local churches. It does not address every question readers might have and is not self-interpreting. Because Christians read and interpret the Bible differently, disagreements will inevitably happen.[9]

Christian disagreements over doctrine and biblical interpretation are often overstated, however. When Christians disagree about interpretation and the particulars of doctrine but mutually regard the Bible as God's Word, division is generally unnecessary.[10] I agree with John G. Stackhouse, Jr. that the most desirable unity in a church "is not characterized by cognitive agreement on the contents of the Bible" and that such agreement would not automatically produce perfect fellowship and unity.[11] Other matters, such as right practices and affections, contribute significantly to unity—perhaps more than precise agreement on doctrinal assertions.

Suppose Christians can avoid the error of making their *interpretation* of Scripture authoritative and cherish the gospel while also adopting the virtues of humility and love. In that case, most disagreements can lead to profound unity accented by diversity rather than division and separation.

To Divide, or Not to Divide?

The question of whether to divide is probably the wrong way to start. Perhaps it is better to ask whether we can unite. Still, Christians sometimes face questions like, "Can we join a church that takes a different position on _____?" "Should I assume that anyone who belongs to _____ denomination is not a Christian?" "Should we leave the church over _____?"[12] Hopefully, this lesson will provide help in asking and answering these questions.

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[9] Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 37-174; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers & Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 177-188.

[10] Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 194-195.

[11] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "A Generic Evangelical Response," in *The Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, 57.

[12] The question of whether or not to leave a church is especially vexing. Sadly, many church members make the decision without ever speaking to their pastors or every working toward resolving whatever issues prompt their departure. In *Sojourners and Strangers*, 167, Allison provides four important questions church members should ask before leaving a church: 1) Have I expended all of my opportunities to effect change

This lesson is also intended to remedy a more insidious and parasitic expression of division within a church—not the kind of division where someone has to make the hard decision to leave a church over doctrinal disagreements with the pastors or over a matter explicit in the statement of faith, but the kind of divisiveness that bubbles underneath the surface. This kind of division usually concerns disagreements among individuals within the church over particular aspects of doctrine or matters of conscience, negatively impacting the health of the whole congregation and inhibiting genuine relationships at the individual level. I hope that this lesson will be a step toward repairing this kind of fracturing where it already exists and preventing it in the future.

Framing the Discussion

Doctrine's Purpose

We can't escape doctrinal issues—they are unavoidable for Christians because doctrine, the Bible, and following Jesus are inseparably held together.[13] So, if we are going to talk about whether or not we should divide over doctrine, we should have some idea about the purpose of doctrine—what is doctrine for?[14] We can minimally identify two central purposes:

First, doctrine helps us know the Triune God. As such, it is more about listening than speaking. Still, churches and Christians must formulate

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in this church? 2) Will continued participation in this church exert a negative impact on my relationship with and worship of God, my ministry for Jesus Christ, the use of my spiritual gifts, etc.? 3) Do I have to compromise too much—essential doctrines and practices, a lifestyle in accordance with biblical values and principles—in order to remain in this church? 4) Do I have a legitimate reason for leaving? For those who lead ministries within the church he adds a fifth question: Has God released me from my current responsibilities in the church so that I am free to leave?

[13] R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014), 12; Christopher W. Morgan with Robert A. Peterson, *Christian Theology: The Biblical Story and Our Faith* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 3-25; Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 13-23.

[14] Division over doctrinal disagreements might also be tempered by sober consideration of how to formulate theology—how to go from biblical interpretation to doctrinal conclusions. Rhyne T. Putnam offers a basic introduction in *The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021). For a more detailed account of theological formulation, see David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

doctrinal statements and put that doctrine into action.[15] Without doctrine, we cannot know God and speak truly about him—we cannot answer Jesus's question to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" As such, "Doctrines are articulations of the implicit grammatical rules that govern the community's speaking and thinking about God."[16]

Second, doctrine helps us know ourselves—as we are and as we should be. Doctrine directs our way of being in this world. In this way, doctrine promotes and sustains discipleship.[17] Doctrine does not belong to the cognitive realm alone. It invades every aspect of life, not least the affective and behavioral.[18] Commenting on the terminology of *sound doctrine* in Paul's letters (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:0; 2:1), Vanhoozer explains,

> These trustworthy sayings are more than propositional statements to be gathered into a system of truths, more than a collection of authoritative statements by Chairman Paul. They are rather statements of *understanding* that indicate a grasp of the meaning and significance of what God has done in Christ. Accordingly, they are statements that call for personal (and practical appropriation, not mere theoretical acknowledgement. They are statements that call for their hearers to exercise trust and to respond not only with one's mind but also with one's whole being: heart, soul, and strength.… Doctrine is a special kind of teaching that instructs the head, orients, the heart, and guides the hand.… Doctrine helps us understand both what God is doing in the world in and through Christ and what we are to do in response.[19]

Suppose it is true that doctrine concerns our affections and behavior along with our cognitive assent to doctrinal claims. In that case, doctrinal division and unity cannot be centered on the cognitive alone (orthodoxy) but on affections (orthopathy) and practices (orthopraxy) as well.[20] Perhaps this is

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[15] Keller, *Center Church,* 17-21.

[16] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 7.

[17] Vanhoozer, *Hearers & Doers*, xxi-xxiii.

[18] Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[19] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Doctrine of Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 26.

[20] Conservative Christians often elevate the cognitive (orthodoxy) and active (orthopraxy) over the affective (orthopathy). But whenever one is negelected, the others

what Jesus was getting at when he made love for God and love for neighbor foundational for his followers. At the very least, we can conclude that doctrinal fidelity (or uniformity) is not enough for unity—doctrinal precision does not equate to spiritual vitality.

Doctrinal Minimalism and Maximalism

Every Christian and every church must navigate two ditches when dealing with doctrine: doctrinal minimalism and doctrinal maximalism/sectarianism. Doctrinal minimalists are usually animated by a concern for the church's unity, while doctrinal maximalists are generally animated by a concern for the church's purity.[21]

Doctrinal Maximalism/Sectarianism

Doctrinal maximalists, or sectarians, require strict adherence to precise doctrinal positions for unity and fellowship. They treat every doctrine as having equal weight and importance and consider all sins equally wicked. As a result, they promote unnecessary division that undermines church unity in favor of uniformity.[22] Ortlund defines doctrinal sectarianism as "any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ."[23]

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also suffer. This is what C. S. Lewis was getting at when he explained that Christians cannot be intellectual slackers. He warns, "If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you, you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you, brains and all" (71). But he goes on to clarify, "We might think that God wanted simply obedience to a set of rules: whereas He really wants people of a particular sort." (73). In other words, God wants all of us: our minds, our affection, and our actions. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2002).

[21] Concern for the purity of the church is especially noticeable among fundamentalists, even if it is unbalanced, and is well-documented in David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1986). Kevin Bauder tries to distinguish between genuine fundamentalism and hyper-fundamentalism, but the respondents in the book all suggest that Bauder's vision for fundamentalism is just that—a vision, not reality. Bauder laments the state of fundamentalism and suggests that it is a great idea, but "If it cannot rid itself of hyper-fundamentalism and revivalism, and if it cannot learn sobriety, then the fundamentalist movement probably does not deserve to survive" in "Fundamentalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, 47. While Resurrection Church is not a fundamentalist church, we should recognize the concern for the purity of the church that animates the best editions of fundamentalism.

[22] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 27-29.

[23] Ibid., 28.

Not everyone agrees about what constitutes a *necessary* division, though. While some sectarians may proudly identify as such, few probably think of themselves as making *unnecessary* divisions. Ortlund suggests that doctrinal sectarians may believe that all doctrines are equally important. I'm not sure that I agree. There are doctrinal sectarians that are insufferably gleeful about separating for any number of reasons, claiming that any diversity or disagreement is nothing less than compromise. Maybe these are the people he is thinking about. Doctrinal discussion with someone who operates in this strict vein of sectarianism probably won't be fruitful— best to pray for them and entrust them to the Lord.

It may be more accurate to say that doctrinal sectarians concede that not every doctrine is equally important. However, their concern for the church's purity leads them to assign greater significance to some doctrines than is necessary. When the inclination to assign greater significance to a doctrine than it actually carries is paired with an elevation of an *interpretation* of Scripture to the level of biblical authority, the necessary consequence is doctrinal sectarianism.

We have already considered the error of conflating an interpretation of Scripture with biblical authority. In this lesson, we will consider the idea of theological triage—a system of identifying the significance of particular doctrines. The problem of doctrinal sectarianism won't go away simply by categorizing doctrines according to their significance. Still, an important step away from this pitfall involves careful doctrinal categorization paired with interpretive humility and a realization of how strongly the biblical authors warn against unnecessary division.[24]

The most important guard against doctrinal sectarianism is to ground our identity and purpose in the gospel without packing our favorite hobbyhorses and pet peeves into our definition of the gospel. Do not miss the significance of this idea. If you make a particular denomination or doctrinal position key to your identification, you will inevitably push out the gospel as key to your identification. Although it is popular to define the

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[24] The so-called pastoral epistles are filled with warnings against unnecessary debate and division: 1 Tim 1:3-4; 4:7; 6:4-5, 20-2; 2 Tim 2:14, 16, 23; 4:3-4; Titus 1:13-14; 3:9. In light of these warnings, Kevin DeYoung is certainly right to conclude, "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 desired or possible), needless (mere semantics)" in "Where and How Do We Draw the Line?," *Tabletalk* 36, no 7 (July 2012): 14.

kind of Christian you are with denominational and doctrinal monikers, we must not treat those monikers as nouns instead of adjectives. We are Christians; we are not Baptists, __-millennialists, evangelicals, etc.[25]

Ortlund's counsel is needed whenever we start to turn adjectives into nouns (evangelical Christian → Evangelical):

> 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.[26]

We should be concerned about the purity of the church. If our concern for the church's purity overshadows our allegiance to Christ, however, we will inevitably end up sinning against his body who, at the Table, see their unity in the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17). There is no virtue on display when unnecessary division is introduced into the church.[27]

Doctrinal Minimalism

If doctrinal maximalists can be accused of making too much of doctrine and pursuing unnecessary division, doctrinal minimalists can be accused of making too little of doctrine and seeking unfounded unity. Where doctrinal sectarians might be charged with overvaluing doctrine, doctrinal minimalists might be accused of indifference to doctrine. Both approaches fail to cultivate true unity. Where doctrinal sectarians assign greater significance to doctrines than they deserve, doctrinal minimalists assign less significance to doctrines than they deserve.

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[25] Stackhouse Jr., "Generic Evangelicalism," 139.

[26] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 43.

[27] Sometimes division is introduced because of disagreements over doctrines. Other times, what starts as doctrinal division gives way to social division and "identity politics." Perhaps the situation at Corinth addressed in 1 Corinthians depicts this kind of division. Other times, the division is overtly connected to worldly values, such as when the elites divided themselves from the poor in the assembly (1 Cor 11).

Doctrinal maximalists confuse unity with uniformity, while doctrinal minimalists confuse pluriformity with unity. They rightly understand that unity does not require uniformity. But inclusive pluriformity is unsustainable from the start—there is no unifying center apart from the vague notion that unity is good.[28]

In the same way that there is no quick fix to doctrinal sectarianism, there is no easy solution to doctrinal minimalism. Conveniently, the avoidance of doctrinal minimalism involves similar steps to the avoidance of sectarianism. Doctrinal minimalists should work to find their identity in the gospel of Christ—a gospel that requires doctrinal definition. Biblical interpretation and theological formulation are needed to say who Jesus is and what God was doing through Christ. Although we will distinguish between essential and non-essential doctrines, it would be wrong to conclude that non-essential doctrines don't matter. Many of these non-essential doctrines are significant in Scripture and have influenced the lives of Christians past (church history) and continue to hold sway in the lives of Christians present. For that reason, non-essential matters should not be considered matters of indifference.[29]

Finally, where doctrinal sectarians need to realize that they might be wrong and someone else might be right, doctrinal minimalists need to recognize that apprehension of true doctrine is possible. Doctrinal minimalists might allege that 100% certainty is required for true knowledge. This claim fails to acknowledge human finiteness (not dissimilar to the sectarian) and operates with a deficient epistemology (theory of knowledge).[30] Doctrinal minimalists fall into the trap of imperious ignorance—an imperial declaration that no one can know anything.[31] While it is true that we should calibrate the certainty of our positions to the available evidence, it does not follow that we should not take a position at all.

A Contradiction in Terms

Many Christians are a contradiction in terms— many Christians tend to be minimalists and maximalists simultaneously. They are minimalists in one

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[28] Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 45-46.

[29] Ibid., 58.

[30] Christians have made good progress is wrestling with our epistemological presuppositions. See especially N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) and Dru Johnson, *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

[31] D. A. Carson, "But That's Just Your Interpretation!" *Themelios* 44.2 (2019): 428.

area and maximalists in another. This contradiction is especially evident during election years when Christians divide with one another, not by doctrine but by political party lines. A doctrinal sectarian momentarily transfers his focus from doctrine to politics by uniting with anyone who shares his political views and separating from anyone who doesn't—regardless of doctrinal and gospel commitments. He becomes a political sectarian and doctrinal minimalist. This contradiction shows up in other areas as well, especially when controversies over a particular doctrinal or cultural issue surface.[32]

Doctrine and Mission

Often, guests who visit our church want to know whether we are a liberal or conservative church. The question is not totally without merit, but it is tough to answer because it is hard to tell if someone is asking about American political parties or theological positions, not to mention that there is no standard definition of liberal (outside of those who deny the ecumenical creeds) or conservative (though the term is sometimes used pejoratively by liberals and idolatrously by conservatives).

On the whole, every self-respecting liberal would identify Resurrection Church as close-mindedly conservative: we believe in the Triune God who speaks redemptively and authoritatively in the Bible through the Holy Spirit about Jesus Christ who died as the king of Israel for the sins of his people and was raised from the dead as the king of the world. These beliefs make us staunchly conservative. But a sectarian conservative might accuse us of being liberal, so maybe it's all a matter of perspective.

However, if the gospel is central to our identity as our church, we will always be vulnerable to charges of conservativism and liberalism at the same time. Keller explains,

> Many people have a driving impulse to place every church somewhere on the ideological spectrum from liberal/left wing to conservative/right wing. But the gospel makes a church impossible

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[32] In the SBC, Calvinists generally agreed with each other about everything and Arminians agreed with each other about everything. Identity politics formed in predictable ways. However, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, COVID, and concern about Wokeness/CRT, the lines have been redrawn. Now many leading Calvinists and Arminians overlook whatever disagreements they previously emphasized to unite under new banners (anti-wokeness, wokeness, or some other position).

to categorize in this way, for it brings both deep, powerful changes that convert people from their sin and deep, powerful social changes as well.[33]

If the gospel is central to our identity as a church, then:

1) We will always be bringing into our membership new Christians who will not have been discipled beyond the very basics of the gospel. Clear articulation of the "biblical" view on _____ is not necessary for admission into the kingdom of God—and we don't plan to restrict from membership those who believe in Jesus, repent, and are baptized.[34] The more fruitful a church's gospel-proclaiming efforts, the more theologically diverse a church's makeup will be. We must cultivate a missional drive that is deeply rooted doctrinally but more concerned about advancing the gospel than a particular doctrinal position on non-essential issues.

2) We will always welcome diverse doctrinal positions that can be held together by mutual gospel belief. Many doctrinal positions do not evidence themselves in the church's practices and, for that reason, can be welcomed if they are coherent with the gospel. Some doctrinal positions are coherent with our gospel identity but are necessarily mutually exclusive.[35]

3) We will also be concerned about issues that define conservative *and* liberal churches. We will be concerned about faithful biblical teaching and the need for salvation from sin, *and* we will be concerned that the gospel actually transforms our way of living with the result that we make our society better. I like the way that Tim Keller envisions this gospel-at-center dynamic:

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[33]Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 292.

[34] We have been aware of our need to write a doctrinal statement particular to Resurrection Church even as we have utilized the *Baptist Faith and Message, 2000*. There are probably good reasons to draft a "Basics of Belief" statement that should be affirmed by all members and a more detailed doctrinal statement that must be affirmed by all elders.

[35] For example, biblical arguments could be made for multiple types of church government, but a church has to operate with a singular form of government. As long as someone is willing to respect the form of government in operation at Resurrection Church they can happily join, even if they would prefer a different church polity.

"Rather than emphasizing *mainly* evangelism (as conservative churches do) or *mainly* social justice (as liberal churches do), we intentionally set out to give a very high emphasis to both—employing a holistic approach that connects the people in our church to the city through both evangelistic proclamation and ministries of justice and mercy."[36]

Resurrection Church exists to exalt God, encourage and equip believers, evangelize the lost, and embody the gospel. Each of these "ministry fronts" is important. Each of them is further shaped by our identity as a church replant and involves engaging with people at different places in their development as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We should avoid suggesting that *we* have found the perfect balance to the conservative/liberal conundrum but instead tie into the gospel that defies this overly simplistic categorization altogether.

Theological Triage: Taxonomies of Ranking Doctrines

Two-Tiered Taxonomies

Reaching back to the days of the Apostles, Christians have always categorized doctrines and practices according to their importance. For example, the Apostle Paul described the message of Jesus's death for sin and subsequent resurrection as most important (1 Cor. 15:3). He even seems to elevate his proclamation of Jesus's death and resurrection above baptism (1 Cor. 1:16), noting that the doctrine of Christ's past resurrection and the believer's future resurrection is vital to Christian hope and doctrine (1 Cor. 15:12-19). As such, the doctrine of the resurrection is not a matter of mere cognitive affirmation (orthodoxy); it has implications for Christian practices and affections (orthopraxy and orthopathy).[37]

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[36] Keller, *Center Church*, 292.

[37] Consider the way that this key doctrine shapes the Christian sexual ethic. Apparently, some in the Corinthian church were in the habit of frequenting prostitutes or engaging in some other form of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:16-17). They reasoned that sexual immorality was permissible because of the way they viewed the material and non-material worlds. They believed that the body's relationship to sexual activity was not that different from its relationship to food. They reasoned that God would do away with food, sex, and the physical body someday. All of these are temporary realities disconnected from God's plan to redeem the world. They asserted, "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will do away with both of them" (1 Cor. 6:13). Paul's response draws on the fundamental doctrine of the resurrection: "God

Christians have learned three things from Paul's doctrinal taxonomy. First, doctrine is important, but not all doctrines are equally important. His simple reference to "what was most important" (1 Cor. 15:3) teaches this lesson. Second, some doctrines are more urgent at a particular moment than others.[38] Paul's emphasis on preaching the gospel—even at the exclusion of baptism—indicates that the urgency of the moment calls for greater attention to some matters of doctrine and practice than others. For Paul, the doctrine of Christ's death and resurrection and the promise of a future resurrection for Christians were urgent and important.

Third, doctrinal instruction is constantly undergoing development to account for the broken situation in which the gospel is received. For example, Paul adds to Jesus's category of permissible divorces when writing to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 7:10-16). Doctrine is not static; it develops in the course of the Church's mission in a broken world.

Because disagreement about the meaning of biblical texts and the precise articulation of doctrine is inevitable—remember that every Christian is a flawed interpretation—Christians have drawn on Paul's distinction between doctrines of first and secondary importance. One popular way of articulating this distinction is the motto, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."[39] Here, the distinction is between the essentials and the non-essentials of Christian doctrine. The essentials are the doctrines "necessary to be called a Christian in any meaningful sense," while the non-essentials are "issues where no consensus has been reached."[40] In all cases, charity should govern all disagreements.

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raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power" (1 Cor. 6:14). The doctrine of the resurrection is not merely cognitive teaching that must be affirmed, but central teaching that reconfigures worldviews and that sustains progress in Christian discipleship.

[38] Ortlund notes two lessons to be learned from the presence of doctrinal taxonomies: 1) that "doctrines have different kinds of importance" and 2) that some needs are more urgent than others. *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 17-18.

[39] The origin of this motto is unknown but was popularized among English-speaking Christians by Richard Baxter, a Puritan theologian in the 1600s. The original Latin motto is *in necessariis unita, in non necessariis liberta, in omnibus caritas*. Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 213.

[40] Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 214.

Two-Tier Taxonomy for Christian Doctrine[41]	
Essentials	**Non-Essentials**
Beliefs necessary for salvation *and*	Beliefs not necessary for salvation *including*
Beliefs stated explicitly in Scripture	Beliefs not explicitly stated in Scripture
Beliefs recognized by Christian creeds[42]	Beliefs not shared by all Christian traditions
Beliefs that have reached consensus	Beliefs that have not reached consensus
	Beliefs not necessarily edifying for all

In this two-tier taxonomy, essential beliefs are required for Christian identity and church membership because these beliefs distinguish Christians from non-Christians and heretics. Non-essential beliefs are not necessary for Christian identity or church membership. These beliefs require tolerance and the admission of diverse opinions.

I like the two-tier taxonomy because it keeps everything simple and helps Christians focus on what is and isn't essential. The neat divisions help Christians identify who is and is not a Christian, allowing them to share the gospel and historic Christian teaching in common. Out of all the taxonomies, the two-tiered taxonomy is the most "biblical." It is also the most inclusive and, for that reason, may be the most helpful for new frontier mission settings. Yet, post-Reformation Christianity and the rise of denominations limit the usefulness of a two-tier taxonomy—the Church is no longer in infancy, so a more nuanced taxonomy may prove helpful.

Three-Tiered Taxonomy

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. is credited with the now-popular three-tier taxonomy drawing on the analogy of medical triage.[43] Medical personnel must judge who needs treatment most urgently in emergency medical situations. A

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[41] These descriptions are based on Rupertus Meldeius's distinctions between essential and non-essential doctrines. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christin Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 6:650-651.

[42] In view here are the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds. See Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

[43] Mohler has articulated his system of theological triage in numerous places. For a treatment that is augmented by the analogy of a center-bounded set based on models in mathematics, see "Confessional Evangelicalism," in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, 68-96. For a popular level explanation, see R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," July 12, 2005, https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity.

triage officer brings discipline and order to the emergency room, ensuring that a gunshot victim is treated immediately, even if a patient with a broken nose is first in line. This analogy helps order doctrinal categories because it takes the urgency and significance of doctrinal debates into view in a way that a two-tier taxonomy, which only categorizes life-threatening and non-life threatening issues, cannot. Mohler advocates for three levels of doctrine. The first level mirrors the "essentials" category, while the second and third levels divide the "non-essentials" category into a hierarchy based on urgency and significance.

Three-Tier Taxonomy of Doctrine[44]			
	First Level	**Second Level**	**Third Level**
Explanation	Issues most central and essential to the Christian faith.	Important to Christian fellowship, but not central or essential to the faith.	Disagreements that do not influence Christian fellowship and are not essential to the faith.
Examples	The Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Christ, justification by faith alone, authority of Scripture.	The meaning and mode of baptism, women serving as pastors, and other issues that frame church life.[45]	The timetable and sequence of the end times.
Result of Disagreement	Denial of first-order doctrines represents nothing less than denying Christianity itself.	Significant boundaries are created between believers, often in the form of congregations and denominations.	There should be no influence on fellowship or a sense of compromise over agreeing to disagree.

There are a few weaknesses to Mohler's concept and practice of theological triage. These weaknesses are not unique to Mohler's taxonomy—they will also appear in other systems.

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[44] Information for this chart is drawn from Mohler, "Confessional Evangelicalism," 78-80. Mohler does not provide an exhaustive triage list—a nearly impossible task. Still, it is puzzling why some items make the list and others do not. It isn't clear to me how he would categorize other issues, like Calvinism/Arminianism, Continuationism/Cessationism, Female deacons, etc.

[45] In his chapter on confessional evangelicalism, Mohler only lists baptism as a second order issue. In other places, however, he identifies women serving as pastors as a second-level issue. His explanation of second-level issues as those that "frame our understanding of the church and its ordering by the Word of God" indicates that matters of church structure (polity) would be categorized as second-level issues as well ("A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," 2).

First, his triage method fails to clarify that whole doctrinal categories cannot be holistically located in one tier. For example, while the sequence and events included in the end times should be categorized as a third-level matter (e.g., whether or not there is a rapture, a literal 1,000-year millennium, etc.), the notion that, on the final day, Christ will return in victory and that long-dead saints will be raised from the dead is a first-level matter (see Paul's inclusion of the resurrection as a matter of first importance above).

Doctrinal categorization is not a mathematical formula whereby someone can crunch the numbers on one category of systematic theology and determine its urgency and importance with precision.

Second, Mohler's concept of theological triage requires that doctrines (or particular claims within a doctrinal category) be identified and placed within one of the three categories. Yet, he does not provide a system for determining how to make this decision; he appears to assume that Christians can make these distinctions intuitively.

For example, he suggests that second-level doctrines are important for Christian fellowship but not to the Christian faith. Disagreement on these issues, he argues, will require denominational or congregational separation. Yet, who gets to decide which issues truly require congregational separation? For those who accept dual baptismal practices (recognizing both credo- and paedobaptism), baptism is a third-level issue. For many committed dispensationalists, the pre-tribulation rapture is a second-level issue.

Because Christians do not have a magisterium that dictates doctrinal distinctions, decisions about theological triage—regardless of the precise system—will remain diverse among congregations and denominations.

Third, related to the weakness regarded second and third-level issues, Mohler does not provide distinct criteria for what counts as "essential to the Christian faith." Even though he begins his account of first-level issues as limited to the core doctrines of orthodox Christianity, he slowly builds into the first-level categories additional doctrines.[46] Those who adopt this

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[46] Roger E. Olson accuses Mohler of "packing much more" into the first-level category, "almost as much as a fundamentalist would" in his response to Mohler's chapter in *Four Views of the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* (110).

taxonomy generally suggest that "gospel issues" are those which belong to the first level. Yet, as Tim Keller reminds us that we cannot identify all issues as gospel issues. "The gospel is *not* everything we believer, or do, or say."[47] We cannot pack everything into the gospel, or we will end up making everything a first-level issue, resulting in doctrinal sectarianism.[48] It is easy to smuggle our favorite beliefs into our conception of the gospel— even if it is unintentional.

Fourth, Mohler's triage taxonomy doesn't provide latitude for the complexity of doctrinal articulation, the dynamic nature of doctrine, and the contextualized outworking of doctrine in the church's life. Consider the following examples:

Female Pastors

Mohler categorized the identification of women as pastors as a second-tier issue. Yet, in the contextualized outworking of church life, there may be occasions when the identification of women as pastors should be upgraded to a first-tier issue or downgraded to a third-tier issue.

In some congregations, there may be no godly men who can take on the pastoral functions—imagine a scenario where a missionary encounters an existing congregation in China with female pastors because the godly men are imprisoned. They should not declare the church unfaithful, nor should they encourage them to appoint an ungodly male to fulfill the pastoral duties. In these instances, the urgency of the need for pastoral care might downgrade the issue to a third-tier issue.[49]

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[47] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 37.

[48] For example, churches include in their statements of faith that members must adhere to a literal, 24-hour, seven-day creationism and in their covenants prohibit alcohol and movie attendance. Each of these issues are defined as "gospel issues" even as their articulation of the gospel does not include these beliefs as necessary for conversion.

[49] Another situation in which the appointment of female pastors should be downgraded to a third-tier issue is in churches where pastors are not considered elders. In many churches, pastors are considered a gift to the church (Eph. 4:11) and fill a role equivalent to that of a "ministry leader" or "minister." Harold W. Hoehner makes the most compelling argument for this view in "Can a Woman Be a Pastor-Teacher?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (December 2007), 761-771. In our American context, this is particularly confusing because most churches use the term *pastor* synonymously with that of *overseer* (1 Tim. 3:1) and elder (Titus 1:5-6). Yet, the "pastoral" qualifications lists are connected to the terms *overseer* and *elder* and it is in

On the other hand, imagine a congregation that has determined they will gain social credibility if they don't consider any biblical arguments against female pastors—in this case, the issue should be upgraded to a first-tier matter because it is no longer just about biblical teaching on the topic of pastoral qualification, but on biblical teaching as authoritative.[50]

Millennial Views and Baptism

Another example may help illustrate the limitations of theological triage for establishing normative practices. Some doctrines are more urgent at a particular moment because the Church at large is trying to clarify that issue. But when the Church has wrestled with an issue for decades or centuries, it is usually downgraded when the church recognizes that continued division and debate will not bring resolution. Some matters are eventually recognized as resulting from different (but equally valid) interpretations of Scripture. In this case, the divergent positions do not endanger the gospel or derive from willful resistance to Scripture's authority.[51]

Various millennial views were once more divisive than they are now, mainly because the Church entered a season of debate on the matter. Yet, as no one consensus emerged, the issue was downgraded and, at least by

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those lists that the strongest reasons for not appointing female elders/overseers are found. We should always be aware that "doctrines are maps and models, not mathematical formulas." Cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). We must avoid rejecting people because they fail to use our terminology. It may be the case that people who reject or affirm a certain doctrinal term are simply speaking past one another. For that reason, we should always be careful to investigate what a particular title refers to before making a judgment about whether or not the issue should be upgraded or downgraded.

[50] This issue is complicated further. In a denominational setting it is not altogether clear that churches should be divided over this issue, provided that those churches that permit female pastors do so based on exegetical grounds—and there are faithful Bible scholars and pastors who do so. At the local church level, however, it seems that this issue is necessarily decisive for many. Because of the public nature of a church's decision (no one can ignore it) and because of the way that it will shape the structure of the church, a church has to take a formal position—either they will have female pastors or they will not.

[51] One indication that resolution of a matter is not possible is when proponents from both sides stop making new arguments. When the Church recognizes that all of the data has been examined and that both sides have exhausted all possible arguments, then the matter can be considered unresolvable.

Mohler's categorization, enjoys third-tier status: no division needed. It may be wise to consider whether other issues that have been the subject of urgent debate but have failed to receive consensus can now be downgraded to a tier three status.

For example, it may be that the issue of credo vs. paedobaptism can be downgraded to a third-tier issue—either at the congregational or local church level.[52] Christians have examined this issue for centuries and progressed from executing each other to excommunicating one another to partnering together but maintaining separate denominations and congregations to permitting dual practice at the congregational and denominational level.[53] With the passing of each century, it becomes clear that while no resolution will occur, the gospel is not endangered, and willful resistance to Scripture's authority is not at work.[54]

The method for theological triage must recognize that sometimes a person's limp could be misinterpreted as a stroke (which causes their status

[52] I appreciate the way that the EFCA deals with this issue in *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America* (Minneapolis: Free Church Publications, 2011), 170 fn. 40: "We recognize that the interpretations of Scripture on the relevant points regarding the two positions on baptism differ with one another and are in some way incompatible. We allow different interpretations, not because we think Scripture is intrinsically ambiguous on the matter, nor because we think Scripture provides so little information that it is unwise to hold any opinion, but because some of us think the credobaptist position is in line with Scripture and that the padedobaptist position is mistaken, and some think the paedobaptist position is in line with Scripture and that the exclusively credobaptist position is mistaken. IN other words, both sides hold that Scripture speaks to the matter, but each side holds a view that excludes the other. However, we do not believe that our differing views on thi matter (among others) should prevent our unity in the gospel in full local church fellowship. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that the Statement of Faith 'allows' both views."

[53] The president of Bethlehem College and Seminary, who also serves as an elder at Cities Church, recently argued that "Paedobaptisms may be regarded as valid but improper baptisms." Joe Rigney, "Do Infant Baptisms Count? Reconsidering Open Membership," Desiring God, July 27, 2022, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do-infant-baptisms-count. The lead pastor at Cities Church, Jonathan Parnell, coordinates the church planting arm of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Send Network.

[54] Ortlund is right to recognize that "we must not ignore or downplay the issues that remain on the table. To identify certain issues as unresolved is not itself divisive" (*Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 52), but we should also be willing to recognize when neither side is producing new evidence or arguments for their point of view. When both sides have exhausted their arguments, it may be best to declare an issue unresolvable and then to start figuring out how to disagree without division.

to be upgraded to the first tier) but, after a brief examination, be rightly diagnosed as a sprained ankle (and downgraded to the lowest tier). Whatever the case may be, there should be a recognition that theological triage needs to include both *urgency* and *situatedness* in a doctrine's assignment to a particular category.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have examined the twin danger of doctrinal minimalism and doctrinal sectarianism. In an effort to promote a healthy doctrinal emphasis grounded in a gospel center, we have considered various theological taxonomies that help establish deep unity accompanied by rich diversity. In the next lesson, we will consider how to improve on Mohler's three-tiered taxonomy. Then, we will put these ideas into practice as we consider how to navigate doctrinal disagreement within a local church.