

Behold, How Good a Thing*Charles Wesley (1707–1788)*

Behold, how good a thing
 It is to dwell in peace;
 How pleasing to our King
 This fruit of righteousness;
 When brethren in the faith agree--
 How joyful is such unity!

Where unity is found,
 The sweet anointing grace
 Extends to all around,
 And consecrates the place;
 To every waiting soul it comes,
 And fills it with divine perfumes.

Grace, every morning new,
 And every night we feel
 The soft, refreshing dew
 That falls on Hermon's hill!
 On Zion it doth sweetly fall:
 The grace of one descends on all.

E'en now our Lord doth pour
 The blessing from above,
 A kindly, gracious shower
 Of heart-reviving love,
 The former and the latter rain,
 The love of God and love of man.

In Him when brethren join,
 And follow after peace,
 The fellowship divine
 He promises to bless:
 His choicest graces to bestow,
 Where two or three are met below.

The riches of His grace
 In fellowship are given
 To Zion's chosen race,
 The citizens of heaven;
 He fills them with His choicest store,
 He gives them life for evermore.



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In the Nick of Time

Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Two: The Danger of Doctrinal Sectarianism

Kevin T. Bauder

Gavin Ortlund's book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, divides into two sections. The first asks, "Why theological triage?" The second chapter in the book begins to answer that question by warning against "doctrinal sectarianism." Doctrinal sectarianism means "any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ" (28). This definition matches what Christians have usually called *schism*, which even we fundamentalists recognize as a sin.

Ortlund lists five reasons why doctrinal sectarianism is a danger. The first is that it reflects a failure to distinguish "different kinds" of doctrine (28). He offers several biblical evidences for recognizing levels of doctrinal importance. Some sins are more heinous than others (Jer 16:12; Ezek 23:11). Some matters are weightier than others (Matt 23:23). Different sins carry differing degrees of punishment (Matt 10:15; Luke 12:47–48; John 19:11). The Old Testament distinguishes unintentional from highhanded sins (Num 15:23–31). Not all sins lead to death (1 John 5:16–17). Paul labels the gospel as "of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3). Paul also gives Christians latitude to disagree on some things (Phil 3:15). The apostle commands Christians not to quarrel over opinions (Rom 14:1). Paul himself was sent to preach the gospel and not to baptize (1 Cor 1:17).

This section, which is the best argued in the chapter, agrees with what fundamentalists believe: biblical teachings differ in levels of importance. The fundamentals are boundary doctrines that distinguish Christianity from non-Christianity. Within that boundary, teachings differ in importance. While I fully agree with this notion, some of Ortlund's evidences are less persuasive. Philippians 3:15 hardly constitutes permission to reject apostolic teaching, and Romans 14:1 is not about *biblical* doctrines at all, but about extra-biblical opinions.

Ortlund's second section warns that unnecessary division harms the unity of the church. He again emphasizes the difference between fundamental and non-fundamental teachings, drawing historical support from Francis Turretin and John Calvin. Echoing Calvin, he reasons that, "churches will not survive apart from a willingness to tolerate errors on lesser matters" (32).

The question for Ortlund is which errors should be tolerated at which levels of fellowship. His treatment does not adequately account for the difference between teachings that are essential to the being of a church versus those that are essential to its wellbeing. Even non-gospel differences, if they are important enough, may mean that genuine unity is best promoted by separate organization (as when Presbyterians organize their own churches rather than submitting to Baptist practice). Believer baptism may not be fundamental to the gospel, but Baptists believe it is essential to Christian obedience.

In his third section, Ortlund asserts that the church's mission depends upon its unity. He grounds Christian unity in the cross-work of Christ and the nature of God (33–34). He cites several texts, focusing particularly upon John 17:21. He argues that believers are called to display the kind of unity Jesus had with His Father, and that this kind of unity is essential to the advance of the gospel (35). Importantly, Ortlund recognizes the existence of "different expressions of Christian unity" requiring different degrees of doctrinal agreement (34, 38). Still, he insists that unnecessary doctrinal division damages the mission of the church (36).

Few would disagree that unnecessary division is damaging. The problem lies in deciding which divisions are unnecessary. More importantly, I wish that Ortlund's argument dealt more with the difference between inner unity and outer unity. Even the bitterest outward divisions cannot damage the inner unity for which Jesus prayed. Perhaps Ortlund missed the fact that John 17:21 is a prayer to the Father, not a command to the church. If the Father has answered it, then the church does not have to. If the Father has not, then the church cannot. But He has, and all believers during the present age are permanently and irrevocably united in one body. That is the unity that Jesus saw as an essential precondition of the world believing that the Father sent the Son. This inner unity, which is grounded in the gospel, is fundamental and cannot be shaken. It must not be confused with outer unity, which reflects it, and which believers are called upon to preserve (Eph 4:2–6).

Ortlund's fourth section cautions that quarreling about unimportant doctrines harms the godliness of the church. He cites several texts in which Paul warns against obsessing over "speculative topics" (38–39). Ortlund draws the lesson that Christians should prioritize "the gospel and a . . . burden for godliness" (40). He warns believers against an overly-strict and critical spirit, which stifles love and associates believers with Satan (40–41). Since a loveless spirit comes from Satan, Christians must subject doctrinal zeal to the test of love (42).

Ortlund is right: we need to be warned against mistaking our speculations for biblical teachings. We also need to be warned against disagreeing in a bitter and factious way. Those warnings, however, did not stop Paul from confronting Peter to the face, nor did they preclude the New Testament

writers from offering strong rebukes to other believers (e.g., 2 Cor 11:20). As Ortlund notes, Jesus even addressed Peter as Satan. A discussion about unity is out of balance when it leaves scant room for vigorous disputation over deeply held differences, let alone for reproof and rebuke.

In his concluding section, Ortlund warns that Christians should find our identity in Christ rather than in theological distinctives. He recognizes that Christians disagree about some things, but these disagreements do not authorize self-justification, annoyance, contempt, condescension, or undue suspicion (42). We should not major on our differences, because "Jesus alone is worthy of our ultimate commitment, and all other doctrines find their proper place in relation to him" (43).

Here, Ortlund is making an either-or out of what ought to be a both-and. All Bible doctrines *do* find their proper place in relation to Christ. Exactly because they are related to Him, we must take them seriously. We are not free to dismiss any of Jesus' teachings, whether delivered by Him personally or through His apostles. *All* doctrine is important. Even when it is not fundamental, it is still vital for a full-orbed Christianity. We are not free to ignore any of it.

For myself, I am happy to name all those who believe the gospel as my brothers and sisters in Christ. I embrace them in the Lord Jesus, whatever our lesser differences, and I delight in every evidence of God's grace in their lives. At the same time, I recognize that our differences *within the faith* represent areas that we do not hold in common. We literally do not have fellowship in those areas. When those areas are at stake, our outward cooperation will be hindered. We are always united at the most fundamental level. We will sometimes be separated at levels where we do not hold the faith in common. Among believers, fellowship and separation are not always either-or, but sometimes both-and.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
