

Head of Thy Church Triumphant

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Head of Thy Church triumphant,
We joyfully adore Thee;
Till Thou appear, Thy members here
Shall sing like those in glory:
We lift our hearts and voices
With blest anticipation,
And cry aloud, and give to God
The praise of our salvation.

While in affliction's furnace,
And passing through the fire,
Thy love we praise which knows our days,
And ever brings us nigher:
We lift our hands exulting
In Thine almighty favor;
The love Divine which made us Thine,
Shall keep us Thine for ever.

Thou dost conduct Thy people
Through torrents of temptation;
Nor will we fear, while Thou art near,
The fire of tribulation:
The world, with sin and Satan,
In vain our march opposes;
Through Thee we shall break through them all,
And sing the song of Moses.

By faith we see the glory
To which Thou shalt restore us,
The cross despise for that high prize
Which Thou hast set before us;
And if Thou count us worthy,
We each, as dying Stephen,
Shall see Thee stand at God's right hand
To take us up to heaven.



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Three: The Danger of Doctrinal Minimalism

Kevin T. Bauder

Upon turning to chapter two of Gavin Ortlund's book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, one encounters this opening sentence: "Doctrinal separatism is a real problem" (45). On its own, this statement stands without qualification or limitation. Nevertheless, Ortlund soon begins to hedge. The rest of the chapter turns into an extended argument that doctrinal minimalism is as severe a problem as doctrinal separatism. Ortlund even declares, "Ultimately, doctrinal division cannot be avoided" (46).

Before explaining this *volte face*, Ortlund returns to the subject of essential versus secondary doctrines. He suggests that this binary distinction is inadequate for his discussion. Rather, he believes that doctrines must be evaluated at four levels of importance: essential, urgent, important, and indifferent. He further clarifies that each of these levels may be significant for *something* in the Christian faith, even though Christians ought not to divide over indifferent doctrines.

It turns out that, for all Ortlund's heartburn over doctrinal separatism, the real burden of the second chapter is to defend the value of the middle levels of doctrine (47). Ortlund wants to show that some doctrines, while not essential to the gospel, are important and even urgent. He offers four reasons why some nonessentials cannot be placed in the category of indifferent doctrines.

His first reason is that "nonessential doctrines are significant to Scripture" (48). Citing Scottish theologian Thomas Woodrow, Ortlund recognizes that even non-fundamentals may be essential to some aspect of Christianity (49). Indeed, most of the detail that the Bible communicates is not directly essential to the gospel. Christians sometimes disagree about what the Bible teaches in those areas. Nevertheless, the teachings may be valuable (51).

Ortlund next argues that nonessential doctrines may be important for church history (51). Some Christians of the past have sacrificed much—even their lives—to uphold doctrines that are important but not directly essential to the gospel. Ortlund observes that genuine unity cannot be achieved "by

a nonchalant posture toward theology that trivializes or bypasses the issues that have caused separation in the first place” (53).

According to Ortlund, the third reason nonessential doctrines are important is because they are significant to the Christian life (53). Here Ortlund observes that what Christians believe, even in nonessential areas, can affect how they live. For example, he says that his understanding of divine sovereignty affects how he prays. Obversely, some doctrines (e.g., Christ’s heavenly intercession) may turn out to be *part* of the gospel, even though they are not essential to *receiving* the gospel. Such doctrines should not simply be brushed aside (54). Ortlund insists that not every difference needs to lead to a truncation of fellowship. For example, those who hold Calvinistic and Zwinglian understandings of the Lord’s Table can still serve on the same church staff (53).

As part of this discussion, Ortlund explores J. Gresham Machen’s claim that Christian fellowship may persist in the face of doctrinal differences of opinion (55). Ortlund considers Machen a good model for doing theological triage. Apparently, he even accepts Machen’s observation that being overly particular about doctrine is better than being too indifferent (56).

Ortlund’s final reason for seeing nonessential doctrines as important is that they may be significant to the essential doctrines (56). He asserts that some nonessentials picture the gospel, some protect the gospel, and some pertain to the gospel. This is so because doctrines interconnect, and none is “hermetically sealed off from the rest of the Christian faith” (57). Consequently, downplaying nonessential doctrines sometimes softens the effect and importance of essential ones (58).

While Ortlund insists that “a pugnacious, mean-spirited attitude toward theological controversy is antithetical to the gospel,” he equally rejects an unwillingness to engage in doctrinal conflict. He points out that the apostle Paul was willing to anathematize angels who departed from the gospel (58). Both the glory of God and the wellbeing of the church depend upon theology being rightly done (59). Thus, Ortlund acknowledges that at times one must defend nonessential doctrines.

* * *

In his discussion of doctrinal minimalism, Gavin Ortlund says little with which historic, separatist fundamentalists can disagree. They might apply some principles differently. They might wish for greater refinement of some concepts, such as Ortlund’s four levels of doctrinal importance. Still, Ortlund offers at least a minimal case for distinguishing the importance of doctrines that are not directly definitive for the gospel. He appears to acknowledge that differences over at least some of these matters may affect fellowship between genuine believers. What Ortlund has not provided at this point is a mechanism either for determining the level of importance for

a given doctrine or for determining its effect upon various levels of fellowship.

Ortlund is right to appeal to Machen as a model. His appropriation of Machen, however, could be more thorough. Machen rejected the possibility of any level of fellowship with those who deny the gospel. He affirmed the reality of at least minimal fellowship between all those who believe the gospel. He also insisted upon the necessity of limiting fellowship at various levels, depending upon the degree of shared doctrinal commitment between believers.

Machen advocated complete separation from those who denied fundamental doctrines. This stance marked him as a fundamentalist, but he was never only that. He was also committed to a particular system of faith, and he yearned for full fellowship with those who embraced and implemented that system. Once he was separated from religious liberals, he labored to erect a church that was exclusively devoted to that system. Simultaneously, he managed to maintain certain levels of fellowship with true Christians outside that system. Furthermore, he articulated a robust theory of ecclesiastical fellowship, grounded in both Scripture and history, that explained each of these choices.

For Machen, religious liberals were enemies of the gospel. Next to them were “indifferentists,” gospel believers who extended Christian fellowship to gospel deniers. Machen admitted that indifferentists were Christians, but he saw them as traitors to the faith. Indifferentists did not deny the *content* of the fundamentals, but they denied their *importance*. One wonders how Machen’s convictions would fit into Ortlund’s system. To this point, at least, Ortlund has not provided the conceptual tools for evaluating the significance of indifferentism. He has not indicated where this error would fall in his theological triage. Perhaps he will answer this question in later chapters.

In the meanwhile, it is worth remembering what John says about those who allow a platform and recognition for apostate teachers. According to John, such indifferentists receive a share in the evil that the false teachers do (2 John 10–11). This cannot be a matter that Bible believers see as incidental.



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.
