

How Great the Wisdom*Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795)*

How great the wisdom, power, and grace,
Which in redemption shine!
The heavenly host with joy confess
The work is all divine.

Before His feet they cast their crowns,
Those crowns which Jesus gave,
And with ten thousand thousand tongues,
Proclaim His power to save.

They tell the triumphs of His cross,
The suffering which He bore;
How low He stooped, how high He rose,
And rose to stoop no more.

With them let us our voices raise,
And still the song renew;
Salvation well deserves the praise
Of men and angels too.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Four:
Ortlund's Journey on Secondary and Tertiary Doctrines***Kevin T. Bauder*

Gavin Ortlund has written a book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, that aims to develop a theory of doctrinal triage. He opens his third chapter by reviewing his strategy in the first two: "It is generally safe to locate yourself between two extremes. That is essentially what I have done in the [previous] two chapters." This strategy is going to demand evaluation. First, however, a description of the present chapter is in order.

Most of the chapter describes Ortlund's personal spiritual journey. Reared in Presbyterian circles, he attended an Evangelical Free church for at least a while. As a student at Covenant Seminary in Saint Louis, he abandoned his belief in infant baptism for a commitment to believer baptism. He was subsequently immersed, joining a Baptist church. While Ortlund accepted believer baptism, however, he also concluded that immersion was unnecessary. Furthermore, he remained unconvinced that baptism was essential to either church membership or participation at the Lord's table.

At present, Ortlund holds an amillennial view of the kingdom of God and of Christ's return. He combines this with a preterist understanding of the tribulation. He rejects young-earth creationism, though he does not say which version of old-earth creationism, progressive creationism, or theistic evolution he holds. He has taken ordination in the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, which, he notes, accepts a variety of views on the millennium, women in ministry, and spiritual (by which he presumably means *miraculous*) gifts.

Ortlund recognizes that each of his theological choices has deprived him of some circle of fellowship. The combination has placed him nearly in a theological no-man's-land. It is so unique as to be idiosyncratic. The result is that he finds himself outside many circles of fellowship at many levels.

The experience has not been easy. He claims that it has led him to reflect extensively on the question of when doctrines should divide. In other words, his experience of severed fellowships is what has led Ortlund to consider whether evangelicals have evaluated doctrinal importance in the right ways.



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He expresses the core of his concern in a paragraph that will (I am guessing) become pivotal for the book.

But through it all, I have become deeply convinced that in the church we need to do a better job at navigating theological disagreements. Unfortunately, it is common for Christians to divide from one another over relatively insignificant matters. In the worst cases, Christians part ways, often uncharitably, over the most petty and ignorant disagreements. In the other direction, many Christians wink at serious theological error, as if doctrine were unimportant. A balanced attitude about theology is much rarer. We desperately need to cultivate the skills and wisdom to do theological triage so that even when a doctrinal division becomes necessary, it is done with minimal collateral damage to the kingdom of God. [70]

This statement is rather a sweeping indictment. It is remarkable, not so much for what Ortlund says about “the worst cases,” or even about what “many Christians” do, but about what he says is “common for Christians,” and that is to “divide from one another over relatively insignificant matters.”

But this assessment puts the cart before the horse. Ortlund has not yet established that the matters over which Christians commonly divide are relatively insignificant. He has provided a listing of issues over which he has found his own fellowship to be truncated, but he has failed to address several issues. He has not shown which levels of fellowship are affected by these differences. He has not justified the claim that they are insignificant. Furthermore, he has not established his competence to make such an evaluation.

My goal in raising this point is not to attack Ortlund personally. I like him and respect him. But I have to ask—why should we accept Ortlund’s word that the mode of baptism is insignificant? Or the timing and nature of God’s mediatorial kingdom? Or the nature and timing of God’s creative work? Or, if these are not the doctrines that he means to dismiss as insignificant, then which ones does he?

Of course, Ortlund may get around to answering these questions. After all, most of his book still lies ahead. For the moment, however, the pivot statement of his book (“it is common for Christians to divide from one another over relatively insignificant matters”) stands as an unsubstantiated assertion. It is not so much a measured opinion as an expression of prejudice.

I grant that prejudices, if they are trained well, can sometimes provide a hedge against error. The question is whether Ortlund’s prejudices are trained well for weighing doctrines. Here, his experiences count against him. They are the theological equivalent of the kid who wanders through a buffet and picks up a taco, an egg roll, a pile of French fries, and a slice of

kringle, but who then balks when his parents express concern over a balanced diet. “It is balanced,” he says, “Just look at how many cuisines I’m including.”

Ortlund’s personal doctrinal menu includes samples from multiple theologies, but his mix-and-match approach gives him no particular authority to spank the majority of Christians for dividing “from one another over relatively insignificant matters.” It provides his readers with little assurance that Ortlund knows how to identify a “balanced attitude.” Furthermore, Ortlund hampers his argument with his opening gambit: “It is generally safe to locate yourself between two extremes.”

I call foul over this statement. The fact is that we cannot judge what is extreme until we know where the truth is. We do not discover truth by averaging out the errors, let alone the extremes. By triangulating from the extremes we allow our enemies to define our position for us. Instead, we must begin with the truth, after which we can discover what is extreme by measuring its distance from the truth that we know.

When it comes to theology, beginning with the truth consists of two elements. The first element is to find the correct, biblical answer to any given theological question. The second element is to judge the overall importance of the question itself. It is possible to fall into error with respect to either of these elements. One error is to hold the wrong doctrine. The other error is to hold the right doctrine in the wrong proportions. Either error can be serious.

It should be borne in mind that the above observations are a stream-of-consciousness commentary. I am responding specifically to what Gavin Ortlund has said in this particular chapter. Maybe he will respond to my specific concerns in subsequent chapters. I hope that he does, because in most ways I am on his side. I think that developing a calculus of doctrinal importance is critical for Christian wellbeing. I think that a similar calculus needs to be developed for levels of Christian fellowship, and that Christians must find reasonable ways to integrate these two grids. The fact that Ortlund takes these questions seriously is encouraging, and I would genuinely like to see him succeed in articulating an answer.



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.
