

**How Precious Is the Book Divine***John Fawcett (1740–1817)*

How precious is the book divine,  
 by inspiration given;  
 bright as a lamp its doctrines shine,  
 to guide our souls to heav'n.

It sweetly cheers our drooping hearts,  
 in this dark vale of tears;  
 life, light, and joy it still imparts  
 and quells our rising fears.

This lamp, through all the tedious night  
 of life, shall guide our way,  
 till we behold the clearer light  
 of an eternal day.

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ***In the Nick of Time***Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Five: Why Primary Doctrines Are Worth Fighting For***Kevin T. Bauder*

Gavin Ortlund has written *Finding the Right Hills to Die On* to work out a theory of doctrinal triage. While I have expressed reservations over the analogy to triage, I am all in favor of every thoughtful attempt to weigh doctrines for their importance. Like Ortlund, I recognize that some doctrines are primary in the sense that they are fundamental or essential to the being of Christianity. His concern in the present chapter is to articulate a way of identifying those doctrines, to distinguish them from doctrines of lesser importance, and to encourage what I can only describe as an attitude of militancy with respect to these most important doctrines.

The task that Ortlund sets for himself is nothing new. Each generation of Christians has recognized that some doctrines are essential. In times of controversy such as the Reformation, identifying the most critical doctrines has taken a special focus. Interestingly, the most thoughtful theologians have consistently denied the possibility of developing an exhaustive list of fundamental doctrines. We articulate doctrines in the face of denials and aberrations, and new denials and aberrations are still taking place. We discover that doctrines are fundamental only when heresies drive us to examine and articulate them. Consequently, we do not yet know what all the fundamentals are.

Fundamental teachings have been articulated at different points in doctrinal history. Trinitarian fundamentals were defined first, followed by fundamentals related to the person and natures of Christ. Certain aspects of human nature were discovered to be fundamental during the Pelagian controversy. The doctrine of justification was not fully articulated until the time of the Reformation. Biblical inerrancy received definition during the century beginning in about 1880. Exhaustive divine foreknowledge only began to receive full attention after the incursions of Open Theism in the 1990s, and I suspect that more remains to be said about this doctrine.

In an important sense we are still discovering new fundamentals. I am not suggesting that the doctrines themselves are new. What is new is that the denial of the doctrines leads to a subsequent focus upon and articulation of them. Every fundamental doctrine has a defining point in history. Before



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that point, Christians do believe the doctrine, but they believe it in a loose, imprecise, and even inchoate way. After the defining point, precision becomes a requirement for orthodoxy.

So how does one identify a fundamental doctrine? Ortlund examines a couple of schemes that he says “are a bit long” (79). Nevertheless, he eventually lands on three criteria that have commonly been articulated in the wake of the Reformation. I’ll summarize them in my language. One identifies fundamental doctrines (1) by their *clarity* within Scripture, (2) by their *centrality* to the gospel, and (3) by the *catholicity* by which they have been received among the true people of God. To these three Ortlund adds a fourth criterion, which he calls “the doctrine’s effect upon the *church today*” (79).

Every fundamental doctrine—or, in the case of complex doctrines like the Trinity, every component of the doctrine—must be revealed with clarity somewhere in Scripture. Every fundamental doctrine must be so integral to the gospel that the denial of the doctrine implies the denial of the gospel itself. Every fundamental doctrine must have been believed, at least implicitly, by true Christians in all generations.

The third test is the stickiest, for two reasons. First, it involves an element of circularity. Fundamental doctrines are believed by all true Christians, but we recognize people as true Christians because they believe the fundamental doctrines. Second, before the doctrine reaches a historic defining point it may be very loosely expressed, and some of those expressions may become unacceptable after the defining point. For example, the relationship of Christ to the Father was not formally defined until the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and even Athanasius expressed himself in ways that would later become unacceptable. Nevertheless, Christians had been worshipping Jesus Christ as God all along. The fundamental doctrine was believed, even if it was not defined.

During his discussion, Ortlund addresses each of the foregoing considerations in one way or another. He also recognizes three other important distinctions. One is the distinction between doctrines that must be explicitly known and believed for salvation versus doctrines that may not be known but must not be denied. In other words, while all the fundamentals are essential to the gospel, some are not essential to sharing the plan of salvation. A new believer will not know all the fundamentals. A growing believer may even be confused about some fundamentals. Yet all the fundamentals are implicit in saving faith, and to deny them knowingly is to deny the gospel itself.

The second distinction is between a learner and a teacher. In the process of learning the faith, some believers may temporarily fail to grasp the significance of some fundamental doctrines. Some learners may even develop wrong beliefs, and they may hold those beliefs until the importance of

the truth is made clear to them. Because such believers are learners, they do only minimal (if any) damage to the faith. The same cannot be said of teachers. Those who put themselves forward as teachers have an obligation to know the faith and to teach it correctly. They are more culpable for error, and they profoundly damage the gospel if they teach falsehoods with respect to fundamental doctrines. As Ortlund puts it, “We must distinguish between confused sheep and active wolves” (81).

The third distinction that Ortlund recognizes is the distinction between profession and belief. Human beings have a massive capacity for inconsistency. In our inconsistency, we may deny speculatively some truths upon which we really rely in ordinary life. In Christian terms, this means that people might deny fundamentals theoretically while nevertheless trusting Christ for salvation.

The upshot is that, except in the most extreme cases, we are not equipped to evaluate whether people are saved, even when they deny important doctrines. We must adopt a double attitude toward such people. In deciding whether to fellowship with them, we must base our choices upon what they say they believe. In doing so, however, we do not usually make any judgment about whether they are headed for heaven or hell. That involves a question of heart beliefs that we cannot readily observe.

Ortlund touches on all the foregoing issues. While we express ourselves in slightly different ways, I believe that we largely agree on these points. In the second half of his chapter, he applies these principles to two particular doctrinal issues. In doing so, he raises other questions that deserve consideration. I want to address those issues in the next discussion.



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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.

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