

**O God, Look Down from Heav'n and See**

*Martin Luther (1483–1546); tr. W. Reynolds, R. Massie, and E. Cronenwett*

O God! look down from heav'n and see  
A sight that well may move Thee!  
Thy saints, how few! How wretchedly  
Forsaken we who love Thee!  
Thy Word no more shall have its right:  
And faith itself is vanished quite  
From all this generation.

Fictions they teach with cunning art,  
And lies of man's invention;  
Not 'stablished in God's Word, their heart  
Is full of strange dissension;  
One chooses this, another that,  
And while divisions they create,  
They cant of love and union.

Wherefore, saith God, I will arise!  
My poor they are oppressing;  
I hear their crying and their sighs,  
Their wrongs shall have redressing;  
My Word, endued with saving might,  
Shall suddenly the wicked smite,  
And be my poor ones' comfort.

As silver sev'n times furnace-tried,  
Is found for it the purer,  
So doth the Word, whate're betide,  
But prove itself the surer;  
The cross reveals its worth aright,  
'Tis then we see its strength and light  
Shine far in earth's dark places.

O God, keep Thou it pure and free  
From this vile generation,  
And let us too be kept by Thee  
From their abomination;  
The wicked walk about in ease,  
When loose, ungodly men like these  
Are in the land exalted.



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## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### **Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Six: Why Primary Doctrines Are Worth Fighting For**

*Kevin T. Bauder*

In chapter four of *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Gavin Ortlund makes the case that primary doctrines are worth fighting for. The first part of the chapter is a discussion of how to distinguish primary (fundamental) doctrines from doctrines of lesser importance. He also discusses the difference between types of fundamental doctrines, specifically, those that must be known for salvation and those that must not be denied. He further differentiates confused learners from false teachers. Finally, he distinguishes profession from belief, recognizing that some people who formally deny fundamental doctrines may nevertheless be trusting Christ for salvation, however inconsistently. On all these points I have expressed general agreement with Ortlund and I am glad to see him making them.

During the second part of the chapter, Ortlund applies his principles to two specific doctrines, treating them more-or-less as case studies. One is the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. The other is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

In his discussion of the virgin birth, Ortlund appeals to J. Gresham Machen for a further distinction concerning fundamentals. There is a difference, he says, between affirming the virgin birth as true and affirming that the virgin birth is a fundamental. In other words, Christians must answer two questions with respect to every doctrine. The first question is whether the doctrine is true, i.e., whether they believe it. The second is the question of how important the doctrine is.

In his interaction with people like J. Ross Stevenson and Charles Erdman, Machen encountered Christians who genuinely believed in the virgin birth but who were willing to maintain ties of organizational fellowship with others who denied it. Such Christians believed that the virgin birth was true, but they did not believe that it was fundamental to Christian identity and fellowship. Because Machen did see the virgin birth as fundamental, he denounced people like Stevenson and Erdman as “indifferentists,” accusing them of being indifferent to the role of the virgin birth in defining the boundary of Christianity. Machen saw indifferentism as such a serious error that because of it he left Princeton Seminary to found Westminster Semi-

nary, he left the denominational Presbyterian mission board to found the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, and he was expelled from the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the USA to found the Presbyterian Church of America (later the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). For Machen, how one weighed the fundamentals was itself a condition of Christian fellowship.

Ortlund does not mention this history. Instead, he extrapolates three principles that he believes are implicit in Machen's treatment of the virgin birth. First, doctrines become fundamental as they relate more directly to biblical authority (85–86). Second, fundamental doctrines are “bound up with larger worldview conflicts between historic Christianity and current heresies or fads” (86). Third, fundamental doctrines are so closely connected to the gospel that “if they are denied, the gospel itself is ruptured” (87). I suggest that while all three of these principles are correct, the first two really find their grounding in the third, which, if properly expressed, will encompass them.

Here I must express a minor disappointment. This would have been the ideal place for Ortlund to talk about what should be done with those who affirm the gospel but who extend Christian fellowship to those who deny it. He appears to have read quite a bit of Machen, and this was perhaps the key issue that Machen had to face. I am still hoping that Ortlund will get around to addressing it. I wish that he had done so here.

In addition to the virgin birth of Christ, Ortlund also takes justification by faith as an example of an essential doctrine. Indeed, he names this doctrine as a “quintessential first-rank issue,” but then almost immediately begins to qualify this statement (88). He notes that justification was not clearly distinguished from sanctification until the Reformation. He points to instances in which Protestants have quibbled over aspects of the doctrine. He suggests that the doctrine of justification involves multiple components, not all of which are equally important. In the end, he tries to establish a range of latitude for the expression of justification by faith.

One component of justification is the doctrine of imputation. Ortlund notes that gospel-believers have disagreed as to whether the active obedience of Christ was necessary for justification, or whether Christ's passive obedience is sufficient. So far, so good; it is possible to argue that the active obedience of Christ, while important, is not fundamental.

But then Ortlund points to the New Perspective on Paul and the 1999 Joint Declaration of Evangelicals and Catholics Together. He seems to think that these viewpoints represent differences that do not interfere with “mere justification” (88). In doing so, however, he overlooks the fact that Roman Catholicism still anathematizes justification through faith alone, and that the New Perspective so redefines justification as to make it into a different conversation altogether. You can believe the Council of Trent or you can believe

the gospel, but you can't consistently believe them both at the same time. You can believe E. P. Sanders or you can believe the gospel, but you can't consistently believe them both at the same time (though it may be possible so to attenuate New Perspective thought that it *might* permit a both-and approach).

In the long run, however, Ortlund knows that justification by faith alone has to be important because the writers of the New Testament were willing to fight over it (90). Here he goes directly to Galatians 1:8–9, which (I agree) is a critical text for this conversation. In that text, the apostle Paul calls down damnation upon those who preach “gospels” that incorporate elements of works into justification. What is interesting, however, is the logic behind Paul's argument: a supposed gospel cannot be true if it contradicts an essential element of the true gospel. It becomes a different, false gospel, and those who preach it are subject to condemnation.

So Ortlund thinks that fundamental doctrines are worth fighting for. Good for him! I still wonder, however, what shape he thinks that fight should take. For Machen, the fight included proclaiming the true doctrine, and I'm sure that Ortlund would approve. Machen's defense, however, also included exposing those who taught the false doctrine and eventually severing Christian fellowship with them. In fact, for Machen, fighting for first-order doctrines included severing fellowship with Christians who believed right doctrine but who would not sever fellowship with those who taught false gospels. I am still waiting to learn whether Ortlund would go that far.



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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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