

9. DIVISIVE DISAGREEMENT

Thesis: Christian oneness calls for theological triage and relational wisdom.

I. The Call for Theological Triage

“The word triage comes from the French word trier, which means ‘to sort.’ Thus, the triage officer in the medical context is the front-line agent for deciding which patients need the most urgent treatment. Without such a process, the scraped knee would receive the same urgency of consideration as a gunshot wound to the chest. The same discipline that brings order to the hectic arena of the Emergency Room can also offer great assistance to Christians defending truth in the present age. A discipline of theological triage would require Christians to determine a scale of theological urgency that would correspond to the medical world’s framework for medical priority.”¹

A. Levels of Doctrine/Practice are Necessary

“If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9).

“Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions” (1 Tim. 1:6-7).

“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him” (Rom. 14:3).

“All truths are not of the same weight. Some have a greater, others a lesser degree of necessity.”²

“For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith....A difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians.”³

“...we do not mean, in insisting upon the doctrinal basis of Christianity, that all points of doctrine are equally important. It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion.”⁴

1. Primary doctrines: truths that Christians cannot disagree over.
2. Secondary doctrines: truths that Christians may disagree over and that warrant an ecclesiastical divide.
3. Tertiary doctrines: truths that Christians may disagree over and that don’t warrant an ecclesiastical divide.

¹ Al Mohler, “A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity.”

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1.14.5.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.1.12.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 40-41.

B. Levels of Doctrine/Practice are Not Easily Determined

“Everyone wants to be unified in what really matters, to agree to disagree on what isn’t as important, and to exercise love in all things. But no one seems to agree on what really matters a lot, a little, or not at all. As hard as it can be determining the content of our faith, it can be even harder figuring out where to put up our fences.”⁵

- “1. How clear is the Bible on this doctrine?”*
- 2. What is this doctrine’s important to the gospel?”*
- 3. What is the testimony of the historical church concerning this doctrine?”*
- 4. What is this doctrine’s effect upon the church today?”*

These biblical, theological, historical, and practical questions are not all that need be asked, but they are a helpful start for doing theological triage.”⁶

II. The Call for Relational Wisdom

A. Humbly Reckon With Your Finitude and Fallibility

“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?” (Job 40:4).

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (Rom. 11:34).

B. Humbly Listen and Ask Good Questions

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (Jas. 1:19).

C. Humbly Persuade or Abstain

“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11).

“The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out” (Prov. 17:14).

D. Humbly Love and Embrace

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7).

““Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints. Now I hate High Churchism as my soul hates Satan; but I love George Herbert, although George Herbert is a desperately High Churchman. I hate his High Churchism, but I love George Herbert from my very soul, and I have a warm corner in my heart for every man who is like him. Let me find a man who loves my Lord Jesus Christ as George Herbert did and I do not ask myself whether I shall love him or not; there is no room for question, for I cannot help myself; unless I can leave of loving Jesus Christ, I cannot cease loving those who love him. I will defy you, if you have any love to Jesus Christ, to pick or choose among His people.”⁷

⁵ Keven DeYoung, “Where and How Do We Draw the Line?”, *Tabletalk* 36, no. 7 (July 2012).

⁶ Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 79.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, “Unity in Christ,” in *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 12, *Sermons 668 to 727* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2013).