

The Danger of Doctrinal Sectarianism

It is easy to lose your balance when you're standing on one foot. The strongest posture is one of balance between both feet: one of *poise*. That's why boxers put so much care into their footwork.

In our theological life as well, we need poise. The character of the gospel is complex. It contains both truth and grace, both conviction and comfort, both hard edges of logic and deep caverns of mystery. It is at one moment as bracing as a cold breeze and the next as nourishing as a warm meal. Faithfulness to the gospel, therefore, requires more than one virtue. We must at times boldly contend and at other times gently probe. In one situation we must emphasize what is obvious, and in another we must explore what is nuanced.

Jesus is the perfect blend of these diverse qualities—"gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29) and yet unafraid to cleanse the temple (Matt. 21:12–13) or denounce the Pharisees (Matt. 23). Most of us, by contrast, tend to tilt toward *either* courage *or*

gentleness, particularly when it comes to theological disagreement. For instance, we might be naturally careful about theological clarity but have a blind spot to the destructiveness of divisiveness. In the other direction, we might be horrified at the lack of love some Christians exhibit but naive about the effects of doctrinal erosion. As Martin Luther noted, “Softness and hardness . . . are the two main faults from which all the mistakes of pastors come.”¹ The same could be said of all Christians.

This chapter therefore addresses the danger of doctrinal sectarianism, and the following chapter addresses its opposite, the danger of doctrinal minimalism. By doctrinal sectarianism I mean any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in the body of Christ. Doctrinal sectarianism often results from the inability to distinguish between different kinds of doctrine. So we must begin by asking what rationale we have to make such distinctions in the first place.

Are All Doctrines Created Equal?

People often claim that “all sins are the same in God’s eyes.” That sounds spiritual because it seems to take sin seriously. And it is certainly true that any sin is enough to make us guilty before a holy God. For instance, James 2:10 says that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.”

But on closer examination, there is much in the Bible that would discourage us from considering all sins equal. The prophets decried some sins as more heinous than others (Jer. 16:12; Ezek. 23:11). Jesus spoke of “the weightier matters of the law” (Matt. 23:23) and of lesser and greater degrees of punishment for different kinds of sin (Matt. 10:15; Luke 12:47–48; John

1. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 139.

19:11). The Old Testament law made provision for different kinds of sins, such as “unintentional” versus “high-handed” sins (Num. 15:22–31). First John 5:16–17 distinguishes “sin that leads to death” from other sins. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism explains, “Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.”²

In an analogous way, it might initially sound good to say that “all *doctrines* are equally important,” but it is a difficult statement to justify biblically. Paul, for instance, speaks of the gospel as a matter of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). On other topics, he often gives Christians greater latitude to disagree. For instance, in Philippians 3:15 he writes, “If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” On certain issues, he goes further and commands Christians not to “quarrel over opinions” (Rom. 14:1). Even on an important topic like baptism, Paul draws a prioritization for the gospel: “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17).

Why is it important to make doctrinal distinctions? What is at stake? For starters, equating all doctrines leads to unnecessary division and undermines the unity of the church.

Unnecessary Division Harms the Unity of the Church

Historically, theologians in the Reformed tradition have often drawn a distinction between essential and nonessential beliefs out of concern for the unity of the church. Writing in the seventeenth century, Francis Turretin provided a series of arguments that certain “fundamental articles” are more important than others.³ As he put it, some doctrines are “primary and

2. The Shorter Catechism, Q. 83, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1966), 309–10.

3. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 1.14.1–27.

immediate; such as the articles concerning the Trinity, Christ the Mediator, justification, etc.,” while others are “secondary and mediate,” and come into view only as a consequence of these primary doctrines.⁴ Turretin also observed that different doctrines serve different functions. Some doctrines are necessary to produce faith; others are necessary to perfect and grow faith.⁵ To support this observation, he drew attention to the distinction between milk and solid food in Hebrews 5:12–14. He saw solid food as a metaphor for more established and nuanced doctrines, and milk as a metaphor for “the basic principles of the oracles of God” (v. 12).

Turretin also maintained that there are different kinds of theological errors, with corresponding levels of severity. For instance, some errors are about doctrinal language or phrases only (he calls these “verbal errors”); others are about the doctrines themselves (he calls these “real errors”).⁶ Additionally, we can be in error about the substance of a doctrine or in error about its mode and circumstances. As an example, Turretin argued that the Greeks (those whom we often call Eastern Orthodox) are in error about the mode of the procession of the Holy Spirit but that this does not constitute an error about the Trinity itself or the divinity of the Spirit.⁷

Why was it so important for Turretin to distinguish between different kinds of doctrine and different kinds of error? In his own context, Turretin was facing two distinct threats. First, he was concerned by Socinian and Roman Catholic claims that their distinctive doctrines were fundamental truths of the faith. But, second, Turretin was concerned about other orthodox Protestant traditions that were dividing over nonessential mat-

4. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.8.

5. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.7.

6. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.12.

7. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.15.

ters of doctrine. In other words, Turretin was opposing not only the elevation of what he regarded as *false* doctrines into necessary articles of faith but also the elevation of *true but secondary* doctrines into necessary articles of faith. This concerned Turretin because it led to unnecessary separation among true Christians. For instance, he faulted “the more strict Lutherans who (to render a union with us more difficult) extend fundamentals more widely than is just, turn almost every error into a heresy, and make necessary those things which are indifferent.”⁸ Here it is evident that Turretin’s concern about elevating nonfundamental doctrines to a fundamental status derives from a deeper concern about the unity of the church. The problem with making every error a heresy is that it “renders union more difficult.”

The Protestant Reformer John Calvin voiced a similar concern. In his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin warned against the error of “capricious separation” from true churches and Christians. He argued that what marks a true church is “the pure ministry of the word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments.” If a church possesses these marks, “we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults.”⁹ Calvin further allowed that there may be errors in the *way* a church practices these two marks, and yet it is a true church: “Some faults may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church.”¹⁰ But how do we know which errors are severe enough to require us to separate from a particular church? Calvin developed an answer to this dilemma by appealing to a distinction between primary and secondary doctrines:

8. Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.14.2.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 4.1.12.

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

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.¹¹

As an example of the latter kind of doctrine—those over which it is not necessary to break the unity of faith—Calvin identifies a difference of opinion among those who think that the souls of believers fly to heaven upon death, and those who would not dare to define the place to which souls go, but acknowledge that they live to the Lord. Citing Philippians 3:15, Calvin insists that such differences of opinion would not be a source of division apart from “unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness.”¹² He goes so far as to assert that churches will not survive apart from a willingness to tolerate errors or lesser matters:

A difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians. . . . We must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.¹³

Calvin argued strenuously and at great length against the sin of schism, emphasizing that the church will always be mixed and imperfect until judgment day, and that much separatism comes from pride rather than holiness.¹⁴

11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

13. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.12.

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.13–22.

The Unity of the Church Is Essential to the Mission of the Church

The concern Calvin and Turretin expressed about unnecessary division stemmed from the value they attached to the unity of the church. We should maintain this concern today. Some of us have a natural bent to worry about doctrinal minimalism. We are eager to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and we are on alert against any watering down of biblical truth in the face of cultural pressure. This is good, but we must be careful that we are not naive about how destructive sins in the opposite direction can be. It is false to think that doctrinal minimalism is necessarily or inherently more destructive than doctrinal sectarianism. Errors in both directions can erode our gospel impact.

The unity of the church is not an optional add-on—something we can get to later, once we’ve gotten our doctrine straight. The church’s unity is foundational to her identity and mission. For example, it is one of the four marks or attributes of the church recognized in the early creeds: *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. But what does it mean, exactly, to say that the church is *one*? How do we reconcile this affirmation with the divisions and rifts we see throughout church history and today?

To affirm the unity of the church is to affirm that there are not multiple, distinct groups that constitute separate peoples of God. Jesus does not have a plurality of brides. He has *one* bride, and her unity is so important that, as Paul stipulates in Ephesians 2:14, it was among the intended aims of Jesus’s atoning death: “he . . . has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” In context, Paul is speaking of the union of Jews and Gentiles, but his point is certainly relevant to all expressions of unity in the body of Christ, including among various estranged Gentile groups. Note the

words *in his flesh*. It was at the cost of Jesus's death that we were reconciled to God and, in the same movement, reconciled with those reconciled to God. If we have peace with God, we have peace with each other. Our unity is so important that Jesus gave his blood for it.

If we value the cross, we should value the unity of the church. When Paul rebukes the factious Corinthians, he does so by pointing them to Jesus's death for them as the object of their ultimate allegiance: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor. 1:13). Not only this, the unity of the church is ultimately grounded in the deeper reality of who God is. Later in Ephesians, Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6; see also 1 Cor. 1:10–17). It is striking in this passage how Paul weaves together the church's unity (one body, hope, faith, and baptism) with God's triune unity (one Spirit, Lord, and God and Father). Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggested that Paul probably structured this passage in order to show that "the unity of the Church is a manifestation of the perfection of the Godhead."¹⁵

There are, of course, different expressions of Christian unity: being ordained in a particular denomination is one thing; becoming a member of a local church is another; attending a prayer meeting is another; and speaking at a conference is another. We should have lower theological criteria for looser forms of partnership. There are a range of nuances involved in knowing how to pursue unity in any given situation, and we cannot resolve every question here. But let me at least make one basic point: the unity of the church is essential to the *mission* of the church.

15. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 49.

We see this, for instance, in John 17:21, where Jesus prays that those who believe in his name “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” It is striking that Jesus correlates the kind of unity that Christians should experience with the unity he has with the Father. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be one with each just as the Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father. And this unity serves a vital purpose for the church: “that the world may believe that you have sent me.” When we think of the church’s unity, we often think of her internal health—avoiding church splits and so forth. That is true, of course, but in this passage Jesus raises the stakes. The church’s unity is essential to the advance of the gospel around us.

One does not need to be particularly well studied in church history to know that churches are not often known for their unity. The Center for Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimates that there are forty-five thousand Protestant denominations as of 2019.¹⁶ Thoughtful Protestants have always lamented this fact. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, for example, commented that “the rise of sectarianism that has accompanied the Protestant movement is a dark and negative phenomenon.”¹⁷ In the context of his treatment of the church’s catholicity (that is, universality), Bavinck stressed the importance of recognizing a distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental truths. He went so far as to claim that the inability to recognize true Christians outside one’s own circle leads to the spiritual detriment and ultimately to the death of that group:

16. “Status of Global Christianity, 2019, in the Context of 1900–2050,” <https://gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianity/>, accessed August 3, 2019.

17. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 247. I am grateful to Timothy Paul Jones for directing me to this article.

No one church, no matter how pure, is identical with the universal church. In the same way no confession, no matter how refined by the Word of God, is identical with the whole of Christian truth. Each sect that considers its own circle as the only church of Christ and makes exclusive claims to truth will wither and die like a branch severed from its vine.¹⁸

It's not hard to see how this can happen. The results of unnecessary doctrinal division—church splits, aloofness from how God is at work in our city, failed opportunities to link arms with other ministries, and so on—are incredibly damaging to the mission of the church. Those who completely wall themselves off from other genuine Christians will not flourish. Within the body of Christ, we need each other—and often we especially need those Christians who lean in a different direction than we do. As Collin Hansen reminds us, seeing our own blind spots and learning to appreciate how God has gifted other Christians often run together:

It's so easy to see the fault in someone else or in another group but so difficult to see the limitations in ourselves. Unless you learn to see the faults in yourself and your heroes, though, you can't appreciate how God has gifted other Christians. . . . Only then can we meet the challenges of our rapidly changing age.¹⁹

Pursuing the unity of the church does not mean that we should stop caring about theology. But it does mean that our love of theology should never exceed our love of real people, and therefore we must learn to love people amid our theo-

18. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 250–51.

19. Collin Hansen, *Blind Spots: Becoming a Courageous, Compassionate, and Committed Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 26.

logical disagreements. As Spurgeon explained, talking about George Herbert:

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 off 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.²⁰

Do we have a “warm corner in our hearts” for every single true Christian, even if we strongly disagree with him or her on various issues? Spurgeon reminds us that if we love Jesus, we must love and embrace all those who belong to him. To leave off loving the people of Christ, as he put it, is to leave off loving Christ himself.

But loving all Christians is not easy to do! Some will inevitably annoy you, and the things some Christians believe and practice may deeply concern you (think of Spurgeon “hating” Herbert’s High Churchism). Nonetheless, we cannot emotionally stiff-arm other members of the body of Christ. If we love Jesus, we must love those who belong to him.

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

Now, again, this love may not ultimately manifest in formal church membership together. There are different expressions of unity. And the healing of division in the church is complicated—where there have been real wounds, for instance, there may need to be confrontation and accountability. But we can start, at the very least, with the attitude of our hearts. Do we *want* unity? Is it a value to us, as it is to Jesus?

A good prayer to pray is this:

Lord, give me a “warm corner in my heart” for other Christians, especially those I am tempted to reject or despise. I know that I cannot solve all the divisions in your church, but show me what the next step might be for me personally to pursue and cultivate and honor the unity of your bride.

Jesus will give us grace where we have failed and help us know how to move forward.

Quarreling about Unimportant Doctrines Harms the Godliness of the Church

We must go even further. Doctrinal sectarianism harms not only the unity and mission of the church but also the holiness of the church. Consider, for instance, the way Paul sets doctrinal priorities in the Pastoral Epistles. Through these letters Paul repeatedly warns both Timothy and Titus against getting involved in foolish disputes about myths, genealogies, and other speculative topics that certain persons are stirring up. It is striking how often Paul grounds his admonition in a desire for the *godliness* of the churches Titus and Timothy are serving. Consider the concerns Paul articulates in the following passages:

- “Remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which

promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim. 1:3–4).

- “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7).
- “He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction” (1 Tim. 6:4–5).
- “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’ for by professing it some have swerved from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20–21).
- “Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers” (2 Tim. 2:14).
- “But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16).
- “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2 Tim. 2:23).
- “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4).
- “Rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:13–14).
- “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9).

Paul never tells us the exact nature of the false teaching Timothy is facing in Ephesus, or Titus is facing in Crete. In both

cases it seems to involve certain myths and genealogies, it seems to be highly speculative and vain (he calls these views “silly” and “irreverent”), and it seems to breed quarreling and dissensions. Repeatedly, Paul commands that Titus and Timothy steer clear of these controversies because they do not produce godliness.

Now, we don’t face the same threats that Timothy and Titus faced. But surely we have all witnessed (or been a part of) theological debates that do not advance the godliness of those involved but instead promote quarreling and vain speculation. We should constantly remind ourselves of Paul’s prioritization of the gospel and his pastoral burden for godliness in these passages. The goal of our theology is “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5); theological debate that is disconnected from this goal must be avoided. As Kevin DeYoung put it, drawing attention to these same passages, “We should steer clear of theological wrangling that is speculative (goes beyond Scripture), vain (more about being right than being helpful), endless (no real answer is possible or desired), and needless (mere semantics).”²¹

One of the ways theological wrangling harms the holiness of the church is by discouraging love among Christians. In his classic book *Cure for Church Divisions*, Richard Baxter cautions us, “They are dangerously mistaken that think that Satan has but one way to men’s damnation. There are as many ways to hell, as there be to the extinguishing of love.”²² Baxter goes on to suggest that an overly strict and fault-finding spirit is one of Satan’s principal means to discourage love among Christians:

21. Kevin DeYoung, “Where and How Do We Draw the Line?,” *Tabletalk* 36, no. 7 (July 2012): 14.

22. Richard Baxter, *The Cure for Church Divisions, or, Directions for Weak Christians to Keep Them from Being Dividers or Troublers of the Church with Some Directions to the Pastors How to Deal with Such Christians* (London: Symmons, 1670), 1.2.6, spelling and capitalization updated.

Satan will pretend to any sort of strictness, by which he can mortify love. If you can devise any such strictness of opinions, or exactness in church orders, or strictness in worship, as will but help to kill men's love, and set the churches in divisions, Satan will be your helper, and will be the strictest and exactest of you all: He will reprove Christ as a Sabbath breaker, and as a gluttonous person, and a wine-bibber, and a friend (or companion) of publicans and sinners, and as an enemy to Caesar too.²³

As a result, Baxter warns that a harsh, critical spirit associates us with Satan:

You think when a wrathful envious heat is kindled in you against men for their fault, that it is certainly a zeal of God's exciting: But mark whether it have not more wrath than love in it: and whether it tend not more to disgrace your brother than to cure him, or to make parties and divisions, than to heal them: if it be so, if St. James be not deceived, you are deceived as to the author of your zeal (James 3:15–16) and it has a worse original than you suspect.²⁴

It might sound harsh to say that a loveless, exacting spirit comes from the devil. Yet the Scripture gives us ground to see that sinful behavior plays into the hands of Satan. Opponents of the gospel have been “captured by [the devil] to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26). Satan is “at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). Even among Christians, sin gives him “opportunity” (Eph. 4:27).

Jesus even calls Peter—the rock of the church—“Satan” for his worldly wisdom (Matt. 16:23). Anyone who has witnessed firsthand the destructive consequences of loveless zeal in the

23. Baxter, *Cure for Church Divisions*, 1.2.6.

24. Baxter, *Cure for Church Divisions*, 1.2.6.

church will understand how such a spirit can serve Satan's purposes. Christians are well capable of "devouring" one another (Gal. 5:15).

Baxter's words remind us that theological zeal must be subjected to the test of love. Not all zeal is from God. Even when the error we oppose is a deadly heresy, our aim must be to heal, not to disgrace. And in all our theological engagements with each other, we must be sure that our ultimate goal is to promote the godliness and welfare of the church.

Finding Our Identity in the Gospel

Unnecessary division is often a heart issue. It is easy for a spirit of self-justification to ride shotgun with our secondary distinctives. Much doctrinal separatism stems from finding our identity in our theological distinctives when we should be finding it in the gospel. As John Newton wisely warned, "Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines, as well as works!"²⁵ John Calvin went so far as to claim that "pride or haughtiness is the cause and commencement of all contentions."²⁶

We know there is a spirit of self-justification about our theology when we feel superior to Christians from other tribes and groups, or when a particular believer, church, or group unduly annoys us. It is one thing to disagree with another Christian. That is inevitable to anyone who thinks. It is another thing when our disagreement takes an attitude of contempt, condescension, or undue suspicion toward those with whom we disagree. If our identity is riding on our differences with other believers, we will tend to major in the study of differences. We may even find ourselves *looking* for faults in others in order to define ourselves.

25. John Newton, "On Controversy," in *The Works of John Newton*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Nathan Whiting, 1824), 160.

26. John Calvin, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 20 of *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 158.

When we notice the unhealthy symptoms of doctrinal sectarianism in our hearts, we need to return our deepest level of emotional loyalty to Jesus himself. He is the one who died for us. He is the one to whom we will ultimately answer, and his business is what we are about in the first place. Jesus alone is worthy of our ultimate commitment, and all other doctrines find their proper place in relation to him. As we return to Christ himself for our deepest placement and identity, he will help us hold our convictions with both confidence and grace.