

Finding the Right Hill to Die On

A look at Gavin Ortlund's book on theological triage

Chapter 6-Why We Should Not Divide over Tertiary Doctrines

First-rank doctrines are those that are _____ to the Christian message. These doctrines are those that relate to the facts and theological significance of Jesus' life and work. Second-rank doctrines are those that while not being "essential" to the gospel, are very closely tied to it. These doctrines, while not forming the dividing line of orthodoxy, are important enough to warrant the _____ of Christians into various denominations and churches.

Third-rank doctrines (tertiary doctrines) are those biblical doctrines that while being important are of _____ importance and do not warrant the breaking of fellowship with other believers. These doctrines we should hold with conviction but these are not hills to die on.

"I would suggest that a wise theologian, like a wise military general, will be characterized by patience far more frequently than by action. Most of the battles you could fight, you shouldn't. And I'd go so far as to say that the majority of doctrinal fights Christians have today tend to be over third-rank issues."

"Fighting over tertiary issues is unhelpful. But fighting over tertiary issues while neglecting primary issues is even worse."

Ortlund then will give two examples of third-rank doctrines: the _____ & the _____ of creation.

"It is a historical irony that American evangelicals have tended to divide over the peripheral aspects of creation and eschatology while ignoring the more central aspects of these doctrines. Thus, many evangelicals focus more on the timing of the rapture, the identity of the anti-Christ, and the nature of the millennium than they do on the second coming of Christ, the final resurrection, or the final judgment. Similarly, many evangelicals are intimately familiar with the 'creation wars' but have never given any sustained reflection to the more basic questions about goodness and contingency of creation, on which the early church expended so much energy, and which are vital to a Christian worldview."

Why Christians shouldn't divide over the _____ -What a person understands Revelation 20 to be saying is important. However, this is not an issue that needs to _____ the church.

Ortlund gives three things to consider when thinking about this issue to help us understand while this is a third-rank issue: a _____, practical, and _____ argument.

"Biblically, the millennium, is explicitly taught in only one passage, and it is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret, coming in perhaps the most difficult book of the New Testament."

"Practically, the doctrine of the millennium makes significantly less practical difference to the Christian life and church health than do the second rank doctrines."

"Sometimes church history can help us identify where our theological bandwidth differs from other Christians. That is the case with the millennium. Specifically, the default American evangelical posture

toward premillennialism is somewhat eccentric when seen against the backdrop of the global and historical church.”

Why Christians shouldn't divide over the creation _____ -What we believe about Genesis 1 is important. However, there are _____ about the creation account that we can disagree on and still maintain fellowship.

Ortlund spends this section showing many examples from church history of conservative pastors and theologians who have not understood Genesis 1 to be referring to six _____ days (Augustine, Machen, Warfield, Spurgeon, Chalmers, Bavinck, Stott). These men were not all in agreement on how to best understand Genesis 1, but it is interesting to consider that these names are some of the greatest preachers and theologians in the history of the church.

He concludes this section by writing, *“We can happily coexist within the church amid differences on this issue. Our unity in the gospel is not at stake. Instead, we should put more focus on the aspects of creation that Christians have classically emphasized and that are distinctive to a broadly Judeo-Christian worldview, such as creation ex nihilo, the historicity of the fall, and the fact that human beings are made in God's image. These are better hills to die on.”*

“We should eagerly pursue the kind of theological conviction and strength that is willing not only to fight for the truth but also to avoid fighting in order to promote the gospel. This is the best kind of strength.”

Conclusion

We must remember the absolute necessity of _____ in the Christian life.

“The greatest impediment to theological triage is not a lack of theological skill or savvy but a lack of humility.”

“In life and theology, it is usually not sheer ignorance that causes the most intractable problems but ignorance about ignorance...Humility teaches us to navigate life with sensitivity to the distinction between what we don't know and what we don't know that we don't know. This encourages us to engage in theological disagreement with careful listening, a willingness to learn, and openness to receiving new information or adjusting our perspective.”

“Our zeal for theology must never exceed our zeal for our actual brothers and sisters in Christ. We must be marked by love...In the New Testament, humility is the pathway to unity (Philippians 2:2-11).”