"Pastor's Point of View: Theological Triage"
By Joel R. Breidenbaugh, PhD

You are probably aware of the term "triage" used in medicine or the military. It refers to a system of assigning priorities based on urgency, the chance of survival, and any state of emergency. If an accident or battle injury occurs, taking care of one's heart or stopping the bleeding of a major artery, takes precedence over setting a broken leg, because if you postpone the former, death may occur. Once the medical team completes the more urgent (essential) matters, the surgeons can begin to handle other (important, but not essential) issues. In medical terms, Code Blue takes precedence over most other emergencies, whether Code Brown or Code Purple.

I am proposing to you that just like medical triage recognizes different levels of importance, so the Bible contains doctrines (theology) that rank in levels of importance—a theological triage if you will. I see three levels of doctrine that we must distinguish so that we understand each other better:[1]

> Primary—Essential and Important
> Secondary—Not Essential, but Important
> Tertiary—Neither Essential nor (Very) Important

Primary doctrines are both essential and important for the Christian faith. While history never carries the same authority as the Bible, how Christian leaders throughout Christendom have understood the Bible's main teachings help us see what must never be lost in the basics of the gospel. Primary doctrines for evangelical Christianity focus both on Christian orthodoxy (right belief) and evangelical (gospel-centered) faithfulness. Such primary doctrines include biblical authority, the Triune God, the Person and work of Jesus Christ (including His fully deity and humanity, the complete sufficiency of His atoning death, His resurrection and His ultimate return), the sinfulness of man, justification by faith, the need for both repentance from sin and faith in Christ for conversion, eternal joy in heaven for believers and eternal judgment in hell for unbelievers, and doctrines that relate to these. These first-level theological issues center on theology (who is God), Christology (who is Christ), and soteriology (how is one saved). Many of the earliest attacks against Christianity were leveled at these core doctrines, resulting in the production of creeds and the convening of Church councils. Basic creeds were nothing new to the Church for several such confessions of faith appear in the pages of the New Testament (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3-8; Ephesians 4:4-6; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16). Later creeds and councils re-affirmed these central beliefs whenever they came under attack, and the results include the Apostles' Creed (ca. AD 150), Nicene Creed (325), Constantinopolitan Creed (381), and Chalcedonian Creed (451).

To deny first-order doctrines is an actual denial of the gospel itself. In today's world, whenever we consider these primary doctrines, we recognize that they cross denominational lines under the wider umbrella of evangelicalism.
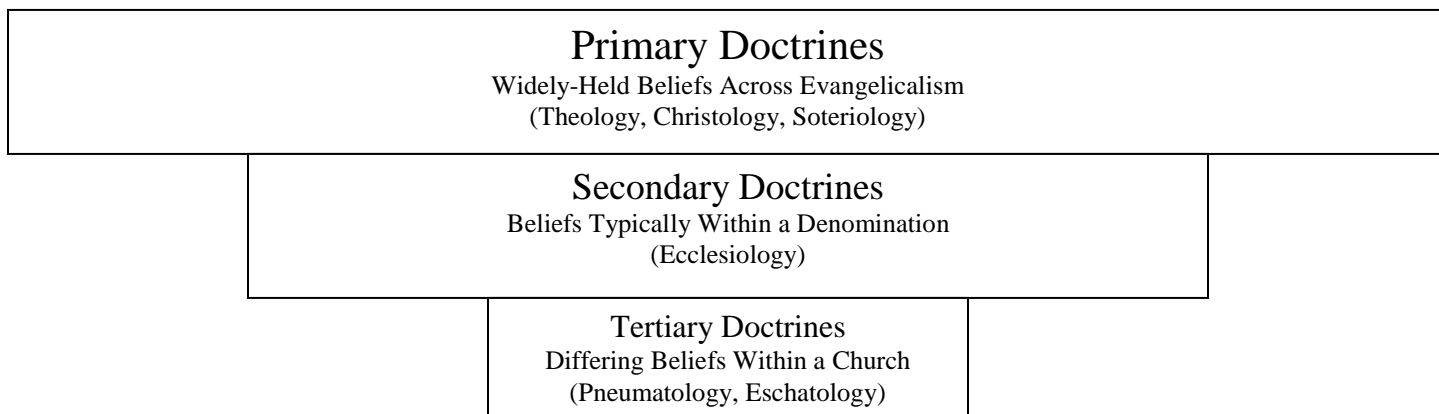
When I speak of secondary doctrines, I'm talking about beliefs that aren't essential to the Christian faith but are important. Theological matters which fall into this category would include ecclesiology (what is the church) and some lower-level issues related to primary doctrines. The nature of the church, church government, baptism, the Lord's Supper, as well as religious liberty and church-state relations are common secondary issues. Historically, second-level issues have defined denominational differences. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians will disagree over the make-up of the church, church polity, and the meaning and mode of baptism. As important as these issues are within a biblical ecclesiology, they are not essential to salvation. Although denominational lines continue to blur today, as long as historic Protestantism exists, certain lower-level doctrines will create boundaries.

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[1] While other theologians have categorized doctrine, the greatest influence for this article comes from R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity" (May 20, 2004), available at http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2004-05-20.

Third-order beliefs are those doctrines that are neither essential nor (very) important to the basic Christian faith. Tertiary doctrines include lots of end-times issues: when will Christ return, when will the rapture occur, is there a millennial reign, etc. They could also include certain gifts of the Spirit (are the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues still in use today?). Varying views of predestination (and Calvinism/Arminianism as a whole) probably fall here, as does the timing of the Spirit's work (does regeneration lead to conversion or vice versa). Tertiary doctrines usually create varying viewpoints within a congregation (and possibly individual families). While you may consider any one of these matters to be important, you should realize that there are numerous viewpoints even within denominational leadership, let alone any single church. Bible-believing Christians have certain convictions about these issues, but those who have been able to see beyond them recognize more important doctrines (even essential ones) in cooperating for the advancement of the gospel.

The following image may help you see these three-levels of Christian doctrine in terms of greatest importance:

Primary Doctrines
Widely-Held Beliefs Across Evangelicalism
(Theology, Christology, Soteriology)

Secondary Doctrines
Beliefs Typically Within a Denomination
(Ecclesiology)

Tertiary Doctrines
Differing Beliefs Within a Church
(Pneumatology, Eschatology)

I write this article to help you think through these issues with me and to see the difference. Also, please understand that I will occasionally preach a message, or make a statement in a sermon, that deals with a secondary or tertiary issue. It's the way I see and interpret the Scripture. Just because I'm saying something is biblical doesn't necessarily mean that I'm saying it is essential to the Christian faith (or that it is even very important!). I believe it is fair to say that 80-90% of everything I preach falls under primary doctrines. The occasion does arise, however, due to an issue in the biblical text, where it is appropriate and necessary to preach secondary or tertiary doctrines. I don't expect everyone to agree with me, but hopefully, like the Bereans, we can all examine the Scriptures together to see if such things are so (Acts 17:11).

Evangelical leaders like Charles Spurgeon, a Baptist pastor, and John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, were known to utter the popular 17th-century wisdom in dealing with other Christians on doctrinal matters: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." May that be our motto!

What I'm saying is this: let's agree that we will disagree on some doctrines without becoming disagreeable with each other. You probably won't agree with every belief I have, and others wouldn't agree with yours. In the end, however, if we can recognize the varying levels of doctrine, we can lock arms together as a church family and win as much of the world as possible to Christ. Let's work toward that end!

It's a joy serving Christ with you,
Joel Breidenbaugh