



# THEOLOGY, ORTHODOXY, AND CERTAINTY

## INTRODUCTION

Right theology matters. We only need to look at the words of Paul in Galatians 1:9 (“As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed”) or Peter in 2 Peter 2:1 (“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”). These passages and others help us understand the seriousness of our responsibility to believe and share *genuine* truth about God to those around us. At the same time, the four pillars of Door of Hope drive us toward theological focus. We strive to be a church that prioritizes Jesus and his Gospel. We want to be a church that keeps the main things the main things. We don’t want to be a church that needlessly divides over theologically secondary issues. However, there are times when separation over doctrine is necessary--but how do we identify those times and those issues?

## JESUS, THE SPIRIT, AND THE BIBLE

The ultimate authority for the Christian is God Himself, most clearly revealed in the incarnation of Jesus (Heb. 1:1-4). Jesus himself established the authority and trustworthiness of both the Hebrew Bible of his day (the Old Testament) *and* of the apostles’ teaching (the eventual New Testament) (see Matthew 5:17-19; Luke 24:27; John 10:31-39; John 15:26-16:15; Acts 9:1-19; Galatians 1:11-24). Jesus authorized the whole Bible as authoritative and true regarding whatever it addresses (when rightly understood, of course). And the Bible itself claims not only to *record* the words and actions of God as he spoke to and through his people throughout history, but to *be* the very words of God, breathed out by his Holy Spirit through human authors (2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:21). And speaking of the Holy Spirit, He not only inspired the Bible, but illuminates it so that Christians are able to understand it and other revelation from God (Ps. 119:18; 1 Cor. 2:14-15; Eph. 1:17-19).

So, in one sense, that old Christianese chestnut of “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it,” is the exactly the right posture to take as we try to do theology. Right doctrine is simply biblical doctrine. But in another sense, things are nowhere near that simple.

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY?

Of course, we don’t merely read the Bible—we have to interpret and apply it. One of the guiding principles for responsible Bible interpretation is to consult history and tradition (there are many other good guiding principles, as well). Sure, we could practice what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery,” assuming our intellectual and interpretive superiority to everyone who came before--but that would be foolishness. We should, in humility, seek to learn at the feet of historic Christian theological “orthodoxy.” Orthodoxy, broken down, simply means “right belief.” More specifically (and more technically), Christian orthodoxy is best summed up as the historic body of Christian teaching that Christians have believed about central matters for all time. Justin Holcomb (see below) argues that we should think of orthodoxy as the theological convictions that resulted from the church’s best biblical thinking during the period of the great ecumenical (meaning unified; i.e. before the major splits between the Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants) councils, summed up in the Apostles’ Creed and the expanded Nicene Creed, primarily. The early Christians should be taken very seriously for countless reasons, but here are two big ones: 1) They followed very closely behind Jesus. They were essentially the disciples of the disciples of the disciples of Jesus Himself. There was little opportunity for the earliest and best understandings of Jesus’s teaching to be forgotten over time. 2) Their conclusions, especially in the early creeds, have been found reliable throughout all the generations since. It’s hard to imagine any work of Christian theology today lasting across 1700 years across countless cultures. We ignore these early believers at our own risk.

Historian David Christie-Murray argues that we should view departures from orthodoxy in two categories. The first is “heresy.” To espouse heresy, in his view, is more-or-less to reject or contradict any of the beliefs outlined in those early creeds. It is to contradict “officially defined” orthodoxy. The second is what he calls “heterodoxy.” This is belief that departs from “commonly accepted teaching” throughout church history. One of his points is that not every theological disagreement between believers should involve the label of “heretic” being thrown around. There are subtler forms of Christian disagreement.

In his preface to *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis mentioned that he was hoping to sketch a picture of basic, orthodox Christianity with the book. But he didn’t want his readers to stay content with the basic picture. He compares his “mere” Christianity to “more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.” The rooms will consist of more specific and robust doctrinal statements or confessions belonging to specific churches or denominations. His point is that living out our faith requires beliefs and practices about far more things than the general Christianity of the Nicene Creed

describes (because the bible speaks about more things). But determining what other beliefs are central, secondary, tertiary, and so on can still be a challenge.

#### FOUR LEVELS OF THEOLOGICAL CERTAINTY

Professor Gerry Breshears at Western Seminary has developed a helpful way of thinking through this issue. He divides all matters of Christian doctrine into four categories of certainty/importance. See his article below for a more thorough discussion of each category.

1. **Beliefs to die for** - What is essential for salvation plus essentials of Christian orthodoxy. This category might include the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the trinity, that Jesus is Lord, Jesus's substitutionary death, the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
2. **Beliefs to divide for** - What is so central to the life of the church that believers with differing views cannot be a part of the same local church or denomination. This category might include the nature of the sacraments (like baptism and communion), the nature of sanctification, the security of the believer, the nature of the mission of the church.
3. **Beliefs to debate for** - What is significant but doesn't prohibit Christians from working and worshipping together in the same church through disagreement. This category might include the age of the earth, convictions around worship and preaching styles, the particulars of the end times.
4. **Beliefs to decide for** - What is so insignificant or vague in Scripture that it doesn't spark much debate. This category might include areas where the Bible is silent. Breshears says that this is where, "acceptance is a virtue and legalism is a real danger."

#### HOW DO WE DECIDE?

Not every Christian will place all of the same doctrines on the same levels, but Dr. Breshears's grid is incredibly helpful, nonetheless. But another important question still remains: how *do* we decide where each doctrine should land? Pastor/theologian Erik Thoennes suggests several questions to help decide in his book *Life's Biggest Questions*. Some of Thoennes's questions are condensed/paraphrased here:

1. How clearly, frequently, and with what significance does the Bible address this doctrine?
2. How relevant to the essence of the gospel and the character of God is this doctrine?
3. How does this doctrine effect other doctrines that are "downstream" from it?
4. Has there been a general consensus throughout history amongst Christians on this doctrine?

According to Thoennes, "We should consider the cumulative weight of these criteria when determining the relative importance of particular beliefs. For instance, just the fact that a doctrine may go against the general consensus among believers does not necessarily mean it is wrong, although that might add some weight to the argument against it. All the categories should be considered collectively in determining how important an issue is to the Christian faith." Another complementary approach would be the Methodists' so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which urges Christians to filter their theology on the basis of four factors: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In the proper order, these can be extremely helpful criteria, as well.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**When Should Doctrine Divide** article by Gavin Ortlund – A great article about navigating theological disagreement in a church and between churches.

[\[https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-should-doctrine-divide\]](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-should-doctrine-divide)

**Gospel Unity and Levels of Certainty** article by Gerry Breshears – Breshears's breakdown of the grid discussed above.

[\[https://www.westernseminary.edu/stories/gospel-unity/\]](https://www.westernseminary.edu/stories/gospel-unity/)

**What Would Athanasius Do?: Is The Great Tradition Enough?** article by Greg Gilbert – A discussion of both the importance and the limitations of the historic early Christian creeds.

[\[https://www.9marks.org/article/what-would-athanasius-do-great-tradition-enough/\]](https://www.9marks.org/article/what-would-athanasius-do-great-tradition-enough/)

**Know the Creeds and Councils** book by Justin Holcomb – This short book gives an overview of the roles that church councils, creeds, confessions, and catechisms have played throughout church history and then devotes individual chapters to key examples from church history. This is a wonderful, accessible introduction to historical theology.

**Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth** book by Alister McGrath – McGrath's books is a super-readable account of the history of the church's defense of orthodox theology against heresy.