Drawing Doctrinal Lines:
Where? And How?

How do we distinguish between the Essentials and the Non-essentials of the Faith?

by

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I have a fundamental premiss I would like to begin with this afternoon, and it is that not all doctrines are equal. In fact, not even all *cherished* doctrines are equal. I, for one, cherish the doctrine of infant salvation for all those who die in infancy. It makes perfect logical sense to me and it is of immense practical value. I have comforted many grieving parents over the years with this truth. But I would not stake my life on it. I'm not absolutely certain of it. Why? Because as an evangelical I have one source of spiritual truth–the Word of God, and the Word of God hardly even touches upon the salvation of infants who die in infancy.

Unfortunately it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between what we believe to be true and what we know to be true, between what we cherish and what we can expect others to cherish. Everyone of us in the ministry has to make choices constantly between the important and the essential. *How* we make those choices greatly influences the attitudes our people will take toward the Bible and toward others in the Body of Christ who may differ from them.

Everyone draws doctrinal lines. That's why we have 33,800 denominations (according to Newsweek Magazine, April 16, 2001); it's why we have a plethora of mission organizations and parachurch ministries; it's why we have different theological systems like dispensationalism and covenant theology. I'm not so concerned here today with the fact that we all draw doctrinal lines but with *how* we draw them. I'm sure you would all agree that we must not draw them willy-nilly; we must not draw them based on church tradition; we must not draw them on some utilitarian grounds. We need some sort of process to enable us to draw doctrinal lines rationally, logically, and biblically, and that is what I would like to address this afternoon.

But first let me back up and address where I believe we are today as a denomination on this issue of doctrinal lines. One of the greatest strengths of the Evangelical Free Church is also an Achilles Heel, namely our wide tolerance of viewpoints not directly addressed in our Statement of Faith. That this is one of our greatest strengths is evident to all who have tried to function under a rigid and detailed doctrinal frame-work. Those of us who came out of a fundamentalist background found that creative or even critical theological thinking is an inevitable casualty when too many issues are nailed down.

If I may, I would like to share some of my own personal journey and how my experiences have impacted my thinking on this matter of drawing doctrinal lines. Your experiences are different, but none of us can crawl out of our skin and view things with total objectivity, so I want to be as honest as I can about the personal experiences that affected my thinking.

I grew up in the IFCA, the Independent Fundamental Churches of America. My father was a national vice president of the association, I attended one of their Bible Colleges, and then went off to the seminary they trusted most (though not fully) –Dallas Theological Seminary. It was in the middle of my seminary career that I realized I would never find a home in the IFCA. One of my most painful memories is being told by a renowned seminary professor (whose name all of you would know) that certain theological conclusions I had drawn were wrong–not because they were based on exegetical error, but because I was "resisting the illumination of the Holy Spirit." The only evidence he offered was that I had arrived at a conclusion contrary to his.

When it came time for graduation I was asked to sign the Statement of Faith, a 15-page document that nails down a great many theological issues and even includes some questionable interpretations of individual passages. There were two items in the doctrinal statement that I could not in good conscience affirm–that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit are no longer available to the Church and that the rapture of the church will precede the Tribulation. Because of this, the seminary refused to allow me to participate in its placement service upon graduation, even though academically I was at the top of my class. In fact, my graduation would have been at risk except for the fact that the Seminary received accreditation that year, and the accrediting association would no longer allow them to deny graduation for such reasons.

I say this, not out of any vitriol for Dallas Seminary. I honor the wonderful scholars who served there and believe I generally received a fine education there. I also hasten to add that my own experience was well over 35 years ago and Dallas is not the same school as it was then. But perhaps you can understand why, after that experience, I found the EFCA to be an incredible breath of fresh theological air compared to the IFCA. The Free Church was uncompromising on the fundamentals of the faith but allowed the individual conscience some breathing room.

However, a spirit of doctrinal tolerance also has its downside. Years ago Allen Tunberg wrote a doctoral dissertation on the views of Free Church people concerning "The Destiny of the Unevangelized." He demonstrated that there was far more divergence of opinion on this topic than expected in our fellowship, and some of the views were quite unorthodox by historical evangelical standards. For example, there was some sympathy expressed for John Stott's agnosticism on the topic, John Sanders' view of wider mercy, and Clark Pinnock's position that God deals with the unevangelized according to his knowledge of how they *would have* responded had they heard the gospel. These ordained Free Church pastors agreed on what is stated explicitly in our SOF (inerrancy of Scripture, deity of Christ, reality of heaven and hell, etc.), but since there is no explicit declaration in our Statement of Faith on the destiny of the unevangelized, these divergent views are tolerated.

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Another issue of doctrinal tolerance that received a great deal of attention in the Free Church 15-20 years ago was the view of TEDS Professor Murray J. Harris on the nature of the resurrection body. Since I was Chairman of the Ministerial Association at the time of that controversy, I was intimately involved in the controversy and had extensive correspondence with the principals– Harris, Geisler, Culver, and others. While Harris repeatedly affirmed the EFCA Statement of Faith "without mental reservation," he did espouse some unusual views on the nature of Christ's resurrection body and the resurrection body of the believer. Since our Statement of Faith speaks only of the "fact" of a bodily resurrection and does not describe the "nature" of that body, Dr. Harris was judged by Free Church leaders to be in compliance (and I think rightly so). But the controversy raised a legitimate question: just how unusual can a view be and still be acceptable?

A third area where doctrinal tolerance has challenged the EFCA is in regard to the time of the rapture of the church relative to the Tribulation. There was a time when the vast majority of our pastors held a pre-Tribulational view. Without question, the reference to "imminency" in our Statement of Faith implied a pre-Tribulation rapture to most, if not all, of those approving the Statement of Faith in 1950. But since imminency *can* be defined in such a way as to allow for other views of the rapture, increasing diversity on this subject was permitted in our ranks.

This occurred not as an event but a process. Under Dr. A. T. Olsen a number of pastors came into the EFCA with other views of the time of the rapture. When Dr. McDill inherited this situation he had two choices: either he could ask all those who embraced a different position to leave the EFCA, or he could broaden the requirement for ordination. He, along with the Committee on Ministerial Standing, chose the latter in 1977.

This, in turn, led to a fascinating National Ministerial Conference in Madison, WI in 1981 when Doug Moo, Gleason Archer, and Paul Feinberg debated the Post-Trib, Mid-Trib, and Pre-Trib viewpoints openly before the Ministerial Association. That was the first open, honest theological debate I had ever witnessed and it impacted me profoundly. It also gave me the courage to come out of the closet as a Post-Trib! (I hasten to add that I was not credentialed in the EFCA at that time). Eventually the National Conference itself sanctioned the broader interpretation of "imminency" by granting tenure to Dr. Doug Moo at TEDS in 1984. This enabled me in good conscience to transfer my ordination to the EFCA.

I am personally very pleased that the Conference took that action, because a lot of us would be serving in some other denomination if Dr. Moo's tenure application had been rejected. But was it really kosher to abandon the strict constructionist approach to our founding documents and permit doctrinal latitude in this area? Would it have been better to vote to amend the Statement of Faith by removing "imminency" (requiring a 2/3 vote) than to make the change by means of a simple majority vote on a tenure application?

Throughout our history we have trumpeted the difference between essentials and non-essentials, claiming that we demand unity on the former and grant freedom on the latter. That's fine. I agree with John Chrysostom and our founders that this is a sound principle: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things Jesus Christ (or charity). But it doesn't immediately solve all problems, because there are always going to be disputes as to what is essential and what is non-essential. I want to ask whether there is any rational way to distinguish between essentials of the faith and non-essentials?

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I believe there is a framework that can help us evaluate the merits of particular theological issues. But first we must accept the fact that all doctrines are not equally important. Some truths are more theologically central than others; some are more exegetically certain; some receive more biblical emphasis; and some have been more universally held in the history of the church than others.

Science has historically distinguished between:
1. Law
2. Principle
3. Theory
4. Hypothesis
5. Speculation

These general categories have differing degrees of certainty attached to them. We speak of the "law" of gravity, because gravity partakes of the highest degree of certainty as a "fact" of the physical universe – no one seriously questions it. On the other hand, we speak of the "theory" of evolution (at least creationists do), because there is much about macro-evolution that is debatable. Whether there is life on other planets, on the other hand, is clearly a matter of speculation (unless you belong to one of the UFO societies that specialize in conspiracy theories).

Similarly, I would propose that there are at least four levels of theological thought. Again, these are general categories only and the names attached to them are somewhat arbitrary:
1. Dogma (scientific law)
2. Doctrine (scientific principle)
3. Theory (scientific theory or hypothesis)
4. Speculation (scientific speculation)[1]

The question is, How do we decide which theological views are "dogma," and therefore indisputable; which are "doctrine," and thus uncompromisable; which are "theory," and open to debate; and which are mere "speculation," and warrant little more than passing curiosity? It is clearly not sufficient to base such decisions on mere feelings or tradition or even on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, for none of these alone provides a sufficient basis for *solving disputes*.

However, there are four factors which, if kept in proper perspective, can help us determine how to categorize ideas properly:
(1) exegetical certainty
(2) theological importance
(3) biblical emphasis
(4) historical agreement in the church

In other words, if we're going to *demand agreement* on a certain issue of faith, then it must be exegetically certain, it must be theologically important, the Bible must give emphasis to it (by where it appears or the number of times it is emphasized), and it must be affirmed throughout the history of the church.

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To illustrate how one might prioritize theological views, let me suggest a four-sided pyramid of theological thought. The apex of the pyramid represents theological dogma; i.e., those truths which have the highest exegetical certainty, the greatest theological importance, the strongest biblical emphasis, and the most uniform historical agreement. The next slice of the pyramid would represent doctrine, the next theory, and the bottom speculation.
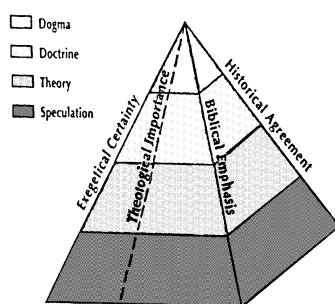
Let's take a few doctrinal issues and see where they might fit on the pyramid. Please understand that I am speaking for myself at this point, not for every member of the Spiritual Heritage Committee. I think we all agree on the principles, but we may differ on some of the application. Consider first the vicarious atonement of Christ. The exegetical certainty of this truth is extremely high; its theological importance is paramount; there are numerous Scripture passages in both Testaments that attest to it; and it has been considered a dogma of the church from the first century. Thus, I would place the vicarious atonement of Christ in the pyramid's apex.

What about the proper mode of baptism? In my assessment the exegetical certainty for immersion baptism is strong, but it is not absolute; the biblical emphasis is relatively low; the theological importance is debatable; and diverse views have prevailed throughout much of church history. I would place mode of baptism somewhere in the "theory" category. Bear in mind that *the fact* of baptism is at least in the "doctrine" category, if not "dogma," even if *the mode* of baptism is not. Please also understand that I am personally strongly committed to immersion. I have never done a baptism by any other mode and I probably never will. But my personal passion for immersion baptism is not matched by the evidence, and over the past six years I have supported the adoption of churches in our own district which practice sprinkling along with immersion.

I already mentioned a third issue: the salvation of infants who die in infancy. I recognize that this subject has a very high level of theological importance, particularly to people who have lost an infant in death. And the orthodox church has nearly always held to some form of infant salvation. However, the Scriptural emphasis is extremely sparse (one or two references), and the exegetical certainty arising from those passages is quite low. As much as I would like to have a "doctrine" of infant salvation, I feel constrained to offer only a "theory" regarding it. I happen to believe that theory as much as I believe some doctrines (due more to theological deduction than to exegetical evidence), but the fact that it is a theory precludes me from expecting others to agree.

Let's take a final example – the issue of divorce and remarriage. The biblical emphasis is once again strong in that the subject appears frequently in both the Old Testament and the New, in the Gospels, and in the Epistles. The theological importance is indisputable, especially as the rate of divorce increases, even among believers. The exegetical certainty, however, is not all we would like it to be. While I am very comfortable with the conclusions on this subject drawn by the Free Church position paper in the early 1980s, I also recognize that honest evangelical scholars have taken other positions (some more conservative and some more liberal), and they have offered reasoned justification. I would place divorce and remarriage in the "doctrine" category. However, I understand why some would place divorce at a "doctrine" level and remarriage at a "theory" level.

The best way to get the hang of this exercise in categorizing issues using the pyramid is to take a list of theological issues and place them where you think they belong. Try it with these:

      1. The inerrancy of Scripture (I would personally put it in the "doctrine" category because of all the caveats we attach to it, while putting the authority of Scripture in the "dogma" category).
      2. The *fact* of the Rapture of the Church (doctrine at least)
      3. The *time* of the Rapture of the Church (the very fact that inerrantists are split just about equally into four camps on this one indicates to me that it is closer to theory than to doctrine).
      4. Dispensationalism or covenant theology ("doctrine" at best, but it is probably better yet to consider these a construct, a sort of theological theory, that help people systematize truth)
      5. The Trinity (dogma for this one and the next two)
      6. The deity of Christ
      7. The Virgin Birth
      8. Animal immortality (I believe in it, even more strongly after reading Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*, but it is theory at best).
      9. Man as a tripartite being (theory at best, heresy at worst)
      10. Eternal security (I won't even touch that one.)

If frustration sets in, it may be helpful to realize that the process is perhaps more important than the result. The process of prioritizing forces us to think rationally and biblically about the factors that determine the degree of dogmatism we are willing to attach to any particular truth. As we practice placing our views on the pyramid we are learning to think theologically.

There is one more question I would like to address, and that is, "What is the practical value of using a rational, biblical process for distinguishing between what is essential and non-essential?" In an article recently reprinted in CT Online entitled, *"Why I'm Not Orthodox,"* (that's Orthodox with a capital "O" as in Eastern Orthodox), Daniel Clendenin writes,

> *. . . we must invoke the spirit of irenic disagreement in the formula: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The genius of this principle is that it allows us to disagree with other believers, even vehemently so, yet in an edifying fashion with a degree of theological modesty and a perspective that seeks a deeper consensus within the bounds of true faith.*

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> *But this really begs another question: "Essential" for what? Do we mean essential for salvation? For church membership? For employment at a seminary? For taking Communion together? Essential for clergy to pray together, to talk, and to encourage one another in Christ? When we realize that every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle or a matter of conscience, then we are freed to engage fully people with whom we actually have profound differences without compromising our own theological commitments.[2]*

I would like to suggest four areas in which this process I have presented can serve pastors and churches well if we will put it into practice. First, we will be able to make informed decisions about appropriate levels of fellowship. One of the difficulties we as pastors face is deciding the degree of cooperation that we should extend to other pastors, churches, and groups that are theologically different from us. A well thought-out position on the levels of theological belief should help us make wiser choices. For example, I may choose to steer clear of any group that denies truth I consider dogma; cooperate in a limited way with those who have different doctrines; and accept wholeheartedly those who differ from me only in areas of theory or speculation.

Second, an understanding of the levels of theological thought can aid us with leadership decisions in the local church. For instance, we may require agreement on both dogma and doctrine issues when choosing pastors and elders, while admitting people to membership may require their agreement only on matters of dogma. Such a distinction is based upon the assumption that agreement on theological issues is more important among the leaders than it is among the rank and file members of our congregation.

In effect, this is the decision that many of our Free Churches have made regarding our current Statement of Faith. They have required agreement on the first six points for new members and on all 12 for pastors and leaders. I am not expressing approval of such a policy, only reporting that it happens. (In fact, Dr. Olson himself spelled out the following groups that had to sign off on the full 12-point Statement of Faith: pastors, missionaries, officers of the denomination, and theological faculty. Others were encouraged but not required to sign off on the whole document).

Third, determining the levels of theological thought may offer a solid basis for doctrinal discipline in a denomination or local church. If a scientist were to deny the validity of a scientific law, he would likely excommunicate himself from the scientific community. In fact, he might eliminate himself altogether, should he act upon his denial by challenging the law of gravity from atop a 20-story building! But a scientist is not normally excommunicated for either questioning or postulating a hypothesis (unless the pressure for politically correct thinking becomes too great, as it is today with evolution and may soon become with global warming). So too, theologians should not be silenced for espousing a theory or offering a speculation which does not contradict the Statement of Faith under which they are operating (e.g., Dr. Murray Harris). Those who contradict accepted dogma *do* merit disciplinary action, however.

Finally, recognizing levels of theological thought is useful when it comes to writing or evaluating a Statement of Faith. In my opinion, a Statement of Faith should include every point a particular group considers dogma (as defined earlier as truths of the highest degree of theological importance, exegetical certainty, biblical emphasis, and historical uniformity). These truths should be spelled out clearly.

In addition, a Statement of Faith should steer clear of all matters which fall into the categories of theory or speculation, as we have used those categories. Historically, writers of creeds have been notorious for inserting viewpoints that were current "hot buttons," but which lacked any basis of theological importance, biblical certainty, biblical emphasis, or historical uniformity.

The Westminster Confession, for example, identifies the Pope as the Anti-Christ; requires that the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper be administered by an ordained person; teaches the "foreordination" of the non-elect to everlasting death; forbids participation in sports on the Christian Sabbath; and claims that the Covenant of Works is a biblical covenant. The Confession is one of the great theological documents of all time, but it got off track in a few areas, and yet some churches today still require agreement with it "without mental reservation." (Most, however, have cheated in that they have adopted a redaction of the original Confession which removes many of the most offensive items).[3]

The most difficult decisions to be grappled with in writing or evaluating a Statement of Faith come in the category of doctrine (defined as truths with a fairly high degree of importance, certainty, emphasis, and uniformity). This category may be a large one, and some of these truths may be very important to particular denominations, churches, organizations, or individuals. But including such issues in a creed or Statement of Faith requires a trade-off. If not only all dogmas but also many doctrines are nailed down, there is a price to be paid in terms of theological freedom, creativity, and critical thinking. The group as a whole may be more uniform, but it will also be more narrow and rigid. On the other hand, if the church or organization wants to keep a Statement of Faith brief by focusing primarily on dogma, it must be prepared to accept a significant level of diversity, even on some issues that are highly controversial.

"Narrow" and "broad" are not easy terms to define. Far too many of us have a tendency to be narrow where the Bible mandates greater breadth (that's fundamentalism or sectarianism), or we have a tendency to be broad where the Bible mandates greater narrowness and exclusivity (that's liberalism). This is a big challenge in Evangelicalism today. On the one hand there are those who are being way too theologically tolerant, and on the other hand there are those who are making non-essentials a litmus test for who is in and who is out. That is why this discussion is so important–so that we will be narrow where the Bible is narrow and allow liberty where the Bible grants greater breadth.

In The Evangelical Free Church of America our relatively brief Statement has generally served us well. It was written 57 years ago, and relatively few doctrinal controversies have plagued us. Perhaps some "fudging" has taken place (on the imminency issue, for example), but few would claim that major theological erosion has occurred. I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet (I

even work for a non-profit organization). But I was prophetic at one time in my life. In 1993 I wrote, and I quote verbatim from my article in The Ministerial Forum, Fall 1993:

> *. . . The next several decades may not prove so peaceful. Issues such as the fate of the unevangelized, the premillenial/amillenial controversy, and women's ordination are coming to the fore in evangelicalism at large, and the limits of our tolerance will be pushed. The EFCA will be forced as never before to think carefully and precisely about a number of theological and biblical issues. It may even be valuable to strengthen our Statement of Faith by adding any dogmas that have been left out (e.g. the existence of Satan, demons, and angels), eliminating any theory or speculation, keeping doctrine issues to an absolute minimum, and removing ambiguity wherever possible.*

The purpose of this talk has been to provide you a philosophical rationale for what the Safeguarding the Spiritual Heritage Committee has been doing for the past two and a half years. We firmly believe we have been carrying out the logical implications of our long-held and cherished commitment to be uncompromising on the essentials of the faith and tolerant on the non-essentials. Since the system of analysis I have provided here is not perfectly objective, there are legitimate arguments about whether we have applied the criteria correctly, but at the very least I wanted to offer you one rationale for the recommendations we have made.

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1. I was first introduced to this comparison between scientific categories and theological categories in the late 60's by John Warwick Montgomery.

2. Daniel B. Clendenin is a graduate staff member for InterVarsity at Stanford University and author of *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective and Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (both published by Baker).

3.
 Dallas Seminary's doctrinal statement demands a pre-trib position and takes a cessationist viewpoint, both of which I would call theory, not doctrine or dogma. It even claims that 1 Cor. 13:10 teaches cessationism, which it almost certainly does not. To my knowledge no one prior to the advent of the modern charismatic movement interpreted 1 Cor. 13:10 that way; it was an interpretation created in order to solve a problem, which almost always just creates new problems.

EFCA