



Theological Triage¹

Just as your local emergency room sorts medical emergencies according to urgency, it, too, can be helpful for the church to sort doctrines according to theological urgency as an aid in how we discuss current doctrinal debates. In fact, many have turned to the practice of theological triage to help the church navigate the waters of doctrinal disagreement.

Gavin Ortland in his book “Finding the Right Hills To Die On” gives us four ranks or triers of doctrinal differences to help us think through:

- 1) First-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel itself.
- 2) Second-rank doctrines are urgent for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to separate at the level of local church, denomination, and/or ministry.
- 3) Third-rank doctrines are important to Christian theology but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians.
- 4) Fourth-rank doctrines are unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.

Here are examples of certain doctrines and their urgency to the ministry at Gospel Hope Church:

Tier One. Doctrines that are essential to the life and ministry of Gospel Hope. We hold these beliefs with a tight fist.

- **The Trinity.** God exists eternally as one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **Full Deity and Humanity of Jesus.** He is the second person of the Trinity, fully God, eternally begotten of the Father, not created. He became fully human, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, and made His dwelling among His people, living a full life without sin.
- **Justification by Faith Alone.** Salvation comes through exclusive faith and belief in Jesus Christ alone.
- **Authority of the Bible.** The Bible was written by men, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore fully authoritative, clear, sufficient, and necessary in all matters for followers of Christ.

Tier Two. Doctrines that are important to the life and ministry of Gospel Hope. While these beliefs do not determine whether you are a Christian or not, we do hold these beliefs with conviction. They might affect whether Gospel Hope is the right church home for you or not.

- **Believer's Baptism.** Baptism is reserved for those who have made a public profession of faith and are submersed by the baptismal waters, enacting our union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.
- **Church Government.** Gospel Hope is a Christ-centered, elder-led, deacon-served, and member-maturing church.
- **Gender and Ministry Roles.** Gospel Hope affirms women as witnesses and ministers of the gospel and play a crucial role in the life and ministry of the church. At the same time, we affirm that the role of elder / pastor in the church is reserved for a plurality of qualified men.
- **Gospel-Centered Ecclesiology.**² Fundamentally, God intends the local church to be a corporate display of his glory and wisdom, both to unbelievers and to unseen spiritual powers (John 13:34–

¹ See Gavin Ortland, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Joe Rigney, *Triage in the Trenches: When Do Second-Tier Issues Divide?*, and Albert Mohler, *A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity*.

² See Mark Dever, *How to Build A Healthy Church*, Jared Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, Ray Ortland, *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ* and *How To Build A Gospel Culture In Your Church*

35; Eph. 3:10-11). More specifically, we are a corporate dwelling place for God's Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17), the body of Christ in which he magnifies his glory (Acts 9:4; 1 Cor. 12). The Greek word for church is *ekklēsia*, a gathering or congregating of people. The church is God's vehicle for displaying his glory to his creation. The uniqueness of the church is her message—the gospel.

So here is how we at Gospel Hope see the relationship between the gospel of Jesus and our gospel ministry:

- 1) **Theology drives method.** Whether we realize it or not, our thinking on the gospel will shape the way we share it. Our theology of the good news will be brought to bear on how we build the church.
- 2) **God's methods determine ours.** The methods we use to plant and water in God's vineyard must be subservient to and in complete harmony with the working of God's growth method—the gospel, as faithfully preached by his servants. Working contrary to God's processes often means working contrary to his purposes. A common saying around Gospel Hope is: We do God's work according to God's means. Or said another way, we must do the Lord's work in the Lord's way because only this will lead to Lord himself entering into our work with his glorious power!³
- 3) **The gospel both enables and informs our participation in God's purposes.** We are not even able to enter the kingdom of God, much less minister in it, unless his gospel first does its work in us; nor do we know how to minister in his kingdom unless his gospel first provides the parameters for doing so. As such, the gospel alone must both shape and evaluate any ministry method we use.
- 4) **Faithfulness to the gospel must be our measure of success, not results.** The power of God for spiritual life and genuine holiness is in the gospel. So faithfulness and devotion to the gospel is paramount, not innovation, and not immediately observable results. Simon the Magician drew a crowd—he even had them calling him the Power of God; but his power, motive, and message were fraudulent (Acts 8:9-11). Our call is to faithfulness as messengers. Only God causes real growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7), and he does so by the gospel (Rom. 10:14-17; Gal. 3:1-5). As Hudson Taylor says, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's provision."

The gospel alone (Gal. 1:6-9) is the one we are commanded to preach (2 Tim. 4:2). This gospel alone contains the theology that must drive our ministry methods. This gospel alone is the one God uses to create a people for himself. This gospel alone both enables and informs our participation in God's redemptive purposes. Therefore, this gospel alone deserves to shape and evaluate both our methods and our ministries.

In short, we believe that a healthy church is built on the foundation of the gospel, so Gospel Hope Church prepare yourself for a cross-shaped life and ministry, because the gospel is the gospel of the cross.

Tier Three. Doctrines that, while still important, allow for differences or disagreements even among members at Gospel Hope.

- **End Times.** There are a variety of positions held regarding the sequence of events at Christ's return. While these are not trivial matters, they are not to be divisive issues in the life of our church.
- **Spiritual Gifts.** There is room at Gospel Hope for either camp—continuationist and cessationist.
- **Gospel Freedom Issues.** There will be differences at the level of conscious when it comes to our freedom in the gospel. This should not be divisive but an opportunity for us to love one another.
- **Length of Creation.** Young earth vs. old earth theories, too, are not a divisive issue at Gospel Hope.

³ see Francis A. Schaeffer, "The Lord's Work in The Lord's Way." He says, "The Lord's work in the Lord's way is the Lord's work in the power of the Holy Spirit and not in the power of the flesh."