

Learning to Distinguish Between Degrees of Certainty
Gerry Breshears, Ph.D.
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Leaders know the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. They have a nose for significance, creating a climate of unity around central issues while moderating and directing discussion over secondary issues. They see how seemingly insignificant matters may undercut the central points of the gospel even as they appear so benign, so cultured, so loving. They sense that other issues which appear so fundamental are actually seeds of division planted by the enemy of our souls.

Leaders understand Paul's admonition to "avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless" (Titus 3:9) but also know to "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10). They balance that with his advice to Timothy and us, "Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:24-25).

Is there a way to help us choose which battles to fight? Is there a way to differentiate between wolves in sheep's clothing and sheep in wolves' clothing?

If I am vigilant about essentials, I am less likely to fall for the cultural accommodations of Christianity which lead to liberalism. That also helps me keep secondary issues in perspective and avoid the divisions they create.

I have found it most helpful to distinguish levels of certainty. Then I can differentiate what's really essential from that which is merely controversial.

I break this down into four levels: First, things I would "die for." Knowingly deny these and you show that you are outside the realm of evangelicalism and perhaps exclude yourself from the salvation in Christ. Second, things I would "divide for." We are Christians, fellow members of the body of Christ. But we won't be in the same local fellowship. Third, things I would "debate for." We are in the same church, but we will wrestle with these issues, sometimes heatedly. Fourth, things we "decide for." These are issues where differences are little more than personal opinion.

Let's discuss each in turn.

Die for: These are the evangelical essentials, the fundamentals of the faith. To knowingly deny them would demonstrate that you are not a Christian.

They include the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the Trinity, one God subsisting in three co-eternal persons, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity in the God-man, Jesus,

including his virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection and personal return. They also cover justification by grace alone through faith alone, the personal Spirit's indwelling believers constituting the one body of Christ, and the final judgment leading to hell and heaven.

These are the foundations of the faith once delivered to the saints. These things we contend for earnestly (Jude 3). If necessary we would die for the truth of the gospel incorporated in these propositions.

Humility concerning these items can never be a virtue. Calling a person who knowingly denies evangelical essentials a brother or sister in Christ for the sake of "unity" truly denies the unity which is founded on the truth of Jesus Christ.

Divide for: Everyone who affirms the evangelical essentials is a fellow member of Christ's body, one whom we call brother or sister in Christ. However, there are other important issues which are so foundational to our life with God that we will divide fellowship over. In ancient times it led to the division between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39). In modern terms, these are the foundations of the denominational differences.

Wesleyans will divide from Reformed over the issue of entire sanctification. Both may divide from Pentecostals over the nature and timing of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Does God speak only through Scripture or does He speak today through prophetic revelation today? Is baptism the sign and seal of membership in the covenant community appropriate for infant children of believers or is it a sign of Spirit baptism and personal faith appropriate only for believers? Should the mission of the church include reshaping society as a major component along with winning the lost and worshipping God. Separate churches will form depending on whether the Sunday morning church service should be liturgical, expositional, or celebrative.

It seems to me that such differences are legitimate so long as the over all unity of the body is affirmed and the dividing points are truly central issues.

They become problematic when the dividing walls are so high that there is little contact between different groups, when arguments between the groups drain significant energy from our worship of God, building godliness or proclaiming the gospel.

When we recognize that these "divide for" not "die for" issues, we can pray for each other and cooperate in issues of Christian life, worship and evangelism.

Unfortunately many of these less important issues cause division and divisive spirits. We see an emerging neo-fundamentalism which seeks to define issues more narrowly and focus on what we deny more than what we affirm.

Because Jesus calls us to unity, we should pursue evangelical ecumenism, a spiritual unity which still respects the important differences. This kind of ecumenism promotes true understanding between instead of caricatures of the other groups intended to point up the differences and errors of the other group. It speaks first and primarily of our unity in Christ and approaches the

differences as fellow believers.

In recent years we evangelicals have reduced the number of issues in the “divide for” category. The result is that many denominational labels have lost dividing significance. Often this is because there is an attempt to look for unifying points and see the differences within that light. When the power of the Spirit’s work and the fulness of the gifts is emphasized, the evidentiary significance of speaking in tongues which used to divide Pentecostals and charismatics is much less significant. When a whole person spirituality including mind, will and emotions, body and spirit is emphasized, Pentecostals give more attention to careful exposition of the Word and non-Pentecostals expect an emotional response to the exposition of the Word. All affirm the powerful work of the Spirit even as we differ significantly on the specifics.

Debate for: These are the issues we wrestle with inside a church or denomination. The wrestling may be prolonged or painful, but we do it while maintaining regular fellowship, joining together in worship and proclamation. Debated issues may include the leadership roles appropriate for women, the extent of involvement the church should have in compassionate ministries in the community, the balance between elements of a worship service to accomplish the purposes of the gathering of believers.

The list here can become quite long as we bring in cultural and traditional elements associated with our particular church.

It seems to me that we must keep “debate fors” from escalating into “divide fors.” The best leaders keep the unity of the body at the center of our thinking as Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 4:3. These leaders are also able keep the focus on the essentials even when the wrestling is strenuous.

I find that when we try to control the debates by silencing the wrestling or smoothing things over with “nice” words, we actually empower divisive folk. The divisive people continue to promote their wrangling without being called to responsibility by the wisdom of the group.

The ground rules of Acts 15 seem appropriate here. Paul took the divisive people back to their body, Jerusalem, where everyone spoke for themselves before the whole church. They spoke what they believed and to the issue at hand rather than to the errors of the other group and to irrelevant issues. The whole congregation listened and recognized the wisdom of James as he stood for essentials (salvation by faith alone) and proposed compromise on secondary issues (eating blood, etc).

Leadership is leading the group in wise decision making rather than making decrees and enforcing decisions by weight of authority.

Decide for: These are the *adiaphora* of Romans 14-15, the areas of belief and behavior about which there is no law. This is where acceptance is a virtue and legalism a real danger.

Paul’s instructs us to stop judging one another over such issues, to stop contempting others because they differ here. Rather he directs us to accept each other. He urges us, “Let us

therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14:19).

Note well, this attitude applies only in the non-essentials. Difference in essential matters “brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them” (Acts 15:2).

How do you discern the differences between these levels of certainty? In my judgment the discernment revolves around the centrality and clarity the issue takes in Scripture and the significance of the issue for our faith.

We can illustrate the different levels in our understanding of Christology. The sinless of Christ is a “die for.” Whether Jesus possessed all the divine attributes or left His incommunicable ones behind when He took on humanity might be a “divide for.” Jesus’ possession of a sin nature could be a “debate for.” Whether Jesus truly struggled internally with Satan’s temptation (Matt. 4:1-11) probably would fall into the “decide for” category. How long Jesus’ hair was would be even lower -- a “who cares!”

Scripture is absolutely clear that Jesus did not sin. Those who affirm that He did in order to establish His full humanity may appear sensitive to human problems. But they exclude themselves from evangelical orthodoxy when they do. Understanding such divine attributes as omnipresence in the incarnate Lord stumps everyone. But those who say He laid them aside, the kenotic Christology, compromise the church’s foundational “fully God” affirmation. Because they affirm the full pre-existent deity of the second person of the Trinity, I could accept them as evangelicals, but would have great difficulty ministering with them. Scripture does not have direct statements about omnipresence, but the affirmations of His deity are unmistakable. While Hebrews 7:26 leads me to believe that He did not have a sin nature, others see Romans 8:3 indicating that He overcame “sinful flesh.” We would wrestle with this difference, but I would not divide over it.

Divisive people are ones who elevate lower level issues. For example, I see groups raising the issue of limited atonement from a “debate for” to a “divide for.” Others make the practice of tongues a divide for issue when Paul only rates it a “do not forbid” level of certainty (1 Cor. 14:39).

As we comprehend these levels of certainty and begin to employ them as a community of believers, we can avoid the trap of being unnecessarily divisive on one hand and compromising the faith on the other.