

EIBCC MONTHLY MEETING: JANUARY 18, 2024
**FOSTERING BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH WISE
THEOLOGICAL TRIAGE¹ (Matt Magee)**

1. Building Community

- a. In and amongst churches: As we engage with those *in* our churches, we have the opportunity to *lead* by example, using the influence God has given us, in the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21
- b. From the EIBCC "About" page: What makes biblical counseling biblical? What are essential convictions that identify a person as a "biblical counselor"?
 - i. When the Biblical Counseling Coalition launched, they gathered together **three dozen biblical counseling leaders** who **worked together for nearly a year** to answer those questions.
 - ii. The end result was the Biblical Counseling Coalition's Confessional Statement. The **BCC's Confessional Statement outlines 12 marks of biblical counseling.**

2. Triage is the action of sorting according to priority and urgency.

- a. Medical triage: urgency to wounds or illnesses to decide in what order to treat a large number of patients.
 - i. Low level triage: think of an ER
 - ii. Grand scale triage: natural or other large-scale disasters
- b. Theological triage (doctrinal triage): Some Bible teachings are more important than other Bible teachings. Paul writes in 1 Cor 15, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." Those words, "first importance," imply that although everything in the Bible is important, not everything is equally important. Some doctrines are more important.
- c. Examples:
 - i. Jude 1-3: common salvation; contend for the faith
 - ii. 1 Cor. 15 (above)

¹ R. Albert Mohler introduced me to theological triage and, with Gavin Ortland, has significantly shaped my thinking. This outline is largely a distillation of their teaching (see last page for sources).

iii. Gospel witness

1. In John 17:21, where Jesus prays that those who believe in his name “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”
2. Matthew 28:18-20

3. **Levels of theological triage.** People refer to these three levels in different ways: first-level issues, second-level issues, third-level issues, fourth-level.

a. First-level (primary) issues/doctrines

- i. Description: The most central and essential truths for Christianity. You can't deny these teachings and still be a Christian in any meaningful sense. If one of these doctrines is denied, it would eventually undercut one's profession of faith, therefore showing that they are not a Christian.
- ii. Examples:
 1. One God eternally existing in three persons
 2. Jesus is fully God and fully human;
 3. Jesus sacrificially died for sinners;
 4. Jesus rose bodily from the dead;
 5. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone;
 6. Jesus is coming back.
- iii. Considerations
 1. Not everyone will know all of these doctrines before becoming a Christian, nor are they necessary to become a Christian.
 2. However

b. Second-level (secondary) issues/doctrines

- i. Description: responsible guard rails for unity in church membership, or boundaries between Christians of different denominations or local churches.

Christians can disagree on these doctrines and still maintain good fellowship with one another as believers, but these doctrines will guide what sort of church you're able to join in good conscience according to your best understanding of the Bible.

- ii. Examples:
 1. What biblical baptism is and how to administer it (maybe even two separate issues)
 2. View of the Lord's Supper and how to administer it
 3. Aspects of church government (congregational vs. elder-governed (different from elder-led congregationalism))
 4. God's sovereignty in salvation
 5. The role of men and women in the church and home
 6. Certain aspects of spiritual gifts (miraculous/sign gifts)
- iii. Consideration: Within mainstream Christianity you don't have to hold a certain view **to be a Christian (the key)**, but it is difficult for a church to have vibrant unity when leaders disagree (conscience or conviction vs. preference).

c. Third-level (tertiary) issues/doctrines

- i. Description: "Matters of indifference" or "matters of conscience." These are less significantly less important doctrines (less important ≠ unimportant.

However, Christians should be able to disagree on these issues and still have close fellowship with one another, serving together meaningfully within the same congregation. Third-level doctrines should not cause disunity in the church family.

- ii. Examples:
 1. How should Christians view the Sabbath? ...The Lord's Day?
 2. The length of a "day" in Genesis 1-11.
 3. One's view on the rough age of the earth (Thousands? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Millions?)
 4. The millennium in the doctrine of last things (eschatology).

d. Fourth-level issues/doctrines (Ortlund)

- i. Description: Unimportant to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration.
- ii. Examples:
 1. Musical styles or the kind of instrumentation for

corporate worship

2. The number of angels that exist

4. Criteria to consider “in a pinch.” (Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 79-80). Erik Thoennes and Wayne Grudem suggest longer lists.
 - a. How clear is the Bible on this doctrine?
 - b. What is this doctrine’s importance to the gospel?
 - c. What is the testimony of the historical church concerning this doctrine?
 - d. What is this doctrine’s effect upon the church today?
5. Biblical dispositions
 - a. Love for the Lord and others
 - b. Humility, humility, humility
 - c. Passion for God’s truth
 - d. Wisdom to prioritize for biblical reasons
6. Ditches to avoid
 - a. Fighting for everything important to you (doctrinal sectarianism)
 - b. Being fearful to stand up for anything significant (doctrinal minimalism, or pursuing unity for the sake of unity)
7. Counseling implications
 - a. How does your own theological triage affect your focuses in counseling?
 - b. How can theological triage help you
8. Questions to consider
 - a. How does the Bible guide your personal commitment to doctrines?
 - b. Who has so marked your spiritual journey that you hold them in such high regard? Which of their views do you take largely because of your endearment to them for their godly influence in their life (this is not a comment on the veracity of their views, just an admission of their influence to you)?
 - c. What issues/doctrines do you get emotional about (whether you show it or not)? What is the emotion associated with each?

d. How might theological triage help you as a counselor?

“About” Pages for the EIBCC and BCC:

1. Eastern Iowa Biblical Counseling Coalition, <https://eibcc.org/about/>
2. The Biblical Counseling Coalition, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/about/>

Theological Triage-Related Resources

3. R. Albert Mohler Jr., *A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity*, <https://albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity> (Published July 12, 2005).
4. Gavin Ortlund, “When Should Doctrine Divide?,” The Gospel Coalition, August 14, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-should-doctrine-divide>
5. Gavin Ortlund, “3 Reflections on Cultivating Theological Poise,” The Gospel Coalition, August 10, 2015, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/cultivating-an-ethos-of-poise>.
6. Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage*, The Gospel Coalition Booklet Series. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).
7. Andrew David Naselli, *BI206 New Testament Exegesis: Understanding and Applying the New Testament*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
8. Rhyné R. Putman, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God: An Evangelical Approach to Theological Diversity*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).