WHICH THEOLOGICAL HILLS ARE WORTH DYING ON?

Pastor Gavin Ortlund Guides Pastors through Navigating Theological Disagreements

WHEATON, Ill.—In theology, just as in battle, some hills are worth dying on. But how does one know which ones? When should doctrine divide, and when should unity prevail? And what happens when theological disagreements hurt relationships or cause church divisions?

In his latest book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Crossway, April 2020), pastor Gavin Ortlund makes the case that while all doctrines matter, some are more essential than others. Speaking from his own experience in ministry, he considers how and what to prioritize in doctrine and ministry, encouraging humility and grace along the way.

“I have become deeply convinced that in the church we need to do a better job at navigating theological disagreements,” writes Ortlund. “Unfortunately, it is common for Christians to divide from one another over relatively insignificant matters. In the worst cases, Christians divide from one another, often uncharitably, over the most petty and ignorant disagreements. In the other direction, many other Christians are swerving away from the importance of doctrine altogether. A balanced attitude about theology is much rarer. We desperately need to cultivate the skills and wisdom that is involved in doing theological triage so that even when a doctrinal division becomes necessary, it is done with minimal collateral damage to the kingdom of God.”

To help pastors navigate the varying levels of importance of different doctrinal issues, Ortlund suggests four basic categories:

- First-rank doctrines are *essential* to the gospel itself (e.g., the Trinity)
- 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 church, denomination, and/or ministry (e.g., baptism)
- Third-rank doctrines are *important* to Christian theology, but not enough to justify separation or division among Christians (e.g., the millennium)
- Fourth-rank doctrines are *unimportant* to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration

Ortlund also addresses the two biggest errors that Christians make in ranking the importance of various doctrines. The first is *doctrinal sectarianism*, which is any attitude, belief, or practice that contributes to unnecessary division in...
the body of Christ. The second is *doctrinal minimalism*, which is the tendency to reduce all secondary or nonessential doctrines to a matter of indifference.

*Finding the Right Hills to Die On* helps new and seasoned church leaders alike wisely labor both to uphold doctrine and to preserve unity. “Theological triage is not primarily an intellectual exercise, but a practical one,” Ortlund writes. “Theological wisdom does not consider doctrines in the abstract, concerned mainly with technical correctness. Instead, it considers doctrines in their ‘real life’ influence on actual people and situations and churches. Even in our theological polemics, we must exhibit a self-restraint that subordinates our personal likes and dislikes to the concerns of the kingdom.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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