

# Sorting Through Theological Claims – Outline

## **I. Introduction: An Overview of Approaches to Controversy**

### **A. *Two False Approaches***

1. Open-minded
2. Ignorant Close-mindedness

### **B. *The Biblical Approach: Competent Close-minded Interaction***

#### **1. Close-minded Interaction**

- a. Reason: There is only ONE body of truth to defend, and it must be defended well.
- b. Scripture: “That which was from the beginning” is what we are called to believe (1 John 1:1)
- c. Scripture: “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed.” (2 John 10)
- d. Scripture: “An overseer must be blameless... holding fast the faithful word according to the teaching, that he may be able to encourage with sound teaching and refute those who contradict... whose mouths must be stopped... teaching things which they ought not... Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth.” (Titus 2:7-14)

#### **2. Competent Interaction**

- a. Reason: So that we do not misrepresent error when addressing it
- b. Reason: So that we are not mindlessly believing what we do
- c. Reason: So that we can account for both the existence and falseness of erring systems
- d. Scripture: “And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God. But when divers were hardened, and believed not... he departed from them ... disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 19:8-10)
- e. Scripture: “Earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3)
- f. Scripture: “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” (1 Peter 3:15)

## **II. Some Helpful Approaches**

**A. *Thinking Properly About Truth*** – It doesn't matter how many contradicting beliefs there are; when God speaks, that is enough for us.

**B. *Thinking in Categories*** – Practical Help for Examining the Issues

#### **1. Broadest to Most Specific**

- a. DEFINITION: Learning to tackle broadest issues first will dramatically decrease the number of sub-issues to deal with, making the examination process far less

intimidating.

- b. EXAMPLE: Rather than convincing yourself against every single attack of skepticism, establish in your mind the absolute existence of God as an unwavering truth. Then the smaller attacks within skepticism will have already been dealt with, since their main presupposition is the non-existence of God. Or, similarly with world religions, rather than face all religions head on, establish monotheism in your mind; then, the number of religions to deal with shrinks to less than five.

## 2. Thinking in Two's

- a. DEFINITION: *Everything* can be divided into two categories. When sorting through different beliefs, instead of being intimidated by millions of beliefs, deal with them in main sets of two. This is similar to number 1, but different in that it describes *how* number 1 is done. This tool can be used in very specific situations as well.
- b. EXAMPLE: Consider these three steps:
  - i. We are faced with Atheism/Agnosticism v. Theism (Choose Theism)
  - ii. We are faced with Polytheism v. Monotheism (Choose Monotheism)
  - iii. We are faced with Yahweh v. Allah (Choose Yahweh)
  - iv. Now, in only three steps, we have made it to Judaism and Christianity. The same kind of process can be done in filtering Christendom.

## 3. Types of Differences

- a. DEFINITION: Learning to distinguish levels of error will help us in knowing how to interact within Christianity. To handle disagreements well demands we understand the different levels of disagreement.
- b. EXAMPLE: The difference between apostasy and the exercise of Christian liberty will obviously differentiate our approach to each, though both could fall under the category of things we personally disagree with.

### **III. Categories of Theological Camps (from Broadest to Most Specific)**

A. *Religion* – a set of theological beliefs that determines the lifestyle of its adherent

#### 1. Christian vs. Non-Christian Religion

- a. Islam
- b. Buddhism
- c. Hinduism

#### 2. Christian vs. Apostate Religion

- a. Roman Catholicism
- b. Eastern Orthodoxy
- c. Oneness Pentecostalism

#### 3. Christian vs. Cults

- a. Jehovah's Witnesses
- b. Mormonism
- c. Christian Science
- d. Seventh-Day Adventism

#### 4. Christian vs. Secularism

- a. Atheism
- b. Agnosticism
- c. Philosophical and Scientific Camps

**B. Groups Based on Theological Distinctions (Can be broader or more specific than denominational boundaries)**

1. Charismatic vs. Cessationist
2. Calvinist vs. Arminian
3. Liberal vs. Conservative
4. Dispensational vs. Covenantal
5. Evangelical vs. Ecumenical

**C. Broad Denominational Distinctions (Examples)**

1. Baptist
2. Presbyterian
3. Episcopalian
4. Lutheran
5. Methodist/Wesleyan
6. Pentecostal
7. United
8. Non-Denominational

**D. Trans-denominational Distinctions (Examples)**

1. Baptist: Independent, Southern, Reformed, Etc.
2. Wesleyan: Salvation Army, Nazarene, Free Methodist, Etc.
3. Etc., Etc., Etc.

**E. Congregational Distinctions**

1. Differences in Methodology
2. Differences in Administration
3. Differences in Spirituality

**F. Personal Distinctions**

1. Everything under the sun can vary from person to person

**IV. Categories and Levels of Departure from Truth**

Note: This is only a suggestive list. As well, when looking at this, one must understand the difference between ignorantly holding heresy and fully embracing heresy. One can be ignorant about heresy and still be saved, but when Scripture is willfully departed from this is where heretics are made. As one rises on this scale, fellowship with orthodox Christians grow less and less.)

**A. Christian Liberty – Level 1**

1. Definition: Issues of personal conviction/conscience. Neither party is right nor wrong in these issues; but they must obey their conscience depending on what it tells them.
2. Example: (From Romans 14) Whether or not to eat meat.
3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: The one who has a stronger conscience must not stumble the one with the weaker/more sensitive conscience by doing the thing which the weaker brother feels is wrong. Full fellowship can be maintained when there are differences here, but only by sensitivity on both sides. "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak." (Romans 14:21)

**B. Interpretation Differences – Level 2**

1. Definition: Differing views on a passage of Scripture

2. Example: Whether or not the Eternal State is describe in Revelation 21-22 or only in the first 8 verses of chapter 21.
  3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: Hear out reasons of the other, and if one is not persuaded, agree to disagree. Full fellowship can still be maintained here. "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)
- C. *Wrong Doctrine – Level 3*
1. Definition: False understanding of Scripture's teaching
  2. Example: Replacement Theology and Covenant Theology
  3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: This is where fellowship is lessened, since it affects a broad range of Biblical subjects as well as what is taught in an assembly. While it is not sin to hold to these things, we should be willing to prayerfully point out error in such beliefs. "And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." (Romans 15:14)
- D. *Sin – Level 4*
1. Definition: Departure from truth in one's walk
  2. Example: Idolatry – stems from an inaccurate view of God
  3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: Depending on the severity and longevity of the sin, fellowship could be severely lessened, both from our own inability to enjoy the things of the Lord together when there is sin and from possible discipline from the assembly. "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators." (1 Cor. 5:9)
- E. *Heresy – Level 5*
1. Definition: Departure from a major truth of Scripture
  2. Example: That Christ atoned for sins in Hades or that Hell is temporary punishment.
  3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: These ideas have consequences that diminish the pure gospel and must be addressed, as Paul shows in writing Galatians. Fellowship is the goal of addressing the issue, but superficial unity cannot be achieved by overlooking it.
- F. *Damnable Heresy – Level 6*
1. Definition: Departure from a foundational truth of Scripture, which when believed marks out a false teacher. One cannot be saved while holding to a damnable heresy.
  2. Example: Denial of the Trinity or Justification by Faith. Depending on how it is held, attacks on the sufficiency, inspiration, and infallibility of Scripture can fall into this category also.
  3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: When one believes such things, he should be considered a heretic and fully avoided. "Mark them which cause divisions among you, contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them." (Romans 16:17) "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction." (2 Peter 2:1)
- G. *Apostasy – Level 7*
1. Definition: Full separation from Christianity after being enlightened to it and "being part of it" nominally and through participation outwardly. According to Hebrews 6,

apostates cannot be renewed to repentance.

2. Example: Conversion from full embrace of Christian profession to another religion or simply secularism.
3. How To Interact When Differences Arise: There are two categories in dealing with this: apostates and borderline-apostates. Apostates who have fully rejected Christianity are to be avoided completely and reacted against by contending for the faith (Jude 3-4). Borderline-apostates are to be fearfully approached with the gospel message, since we could be drawn in by their snares if we are not careful. "And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." (Jude 22-23)

## V. Interacting With So Many Movements

- A. *We must understand that there are many false teachers in the world; thus we must assume that error will surround us. We cannot take everything we see as credible, not even a small majority of the things we see. We should be thorough in combating Christian ignorance of issues in theology. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)*
- B. *We need to understand man's decision-making process. Yes, we all have the same Bible, but we have different lenses which we look at the Bible through. We don't have to be intimidated by other beliefs just because they are held by people who possess a Bible.*
  1. Influences: Everyone is influenced by some sort of teaching. It is nearly inevitable that people interpret what is around them according to how their influences interpret the same thing, that is, unless those influences are controlled by the person rather than vice versa. Look for the influences people subscribe to, and see how their beliefs are affected by them.
  2. Ignorance: Often people believe things without knowing why. Thus, they have certain claims but have no basis for them. We need to look for these situations and ask whether someone is arguing out of ignorance or conviction.
  3. Presuppositions: Everybody approaches their beliefs with certain assumptions, which are the basis for their conclusions. Look for the foundation people build their theology on. If someone doesn't assume God exists, he would obviously not be able to study theology properly. His bad starting point would bring him to false conclusions.
- C. *We need to challenge our own decision-making process.*
  1. What do you influence yourself by? Are your influences thoroughly Biblical? Do you only subscribe to one teacher? If so, you will probably find yourself replicating most everything he believes given enough time. Be balanced in your influences.
  2. Do you know why you believe what you believe? If not, you won't be able to understand properly why others believe what they do.
  3. Have you established any starting assumptions that you will examine things based on? Scripture will automatically form some of these for you if you immerse yourself in it. Ask yourself the basis you study your Bible on. Do you assume it to be free from error and inspired by God? This is just one question amongst many that could be asked.
- D. *We need to be fully Biblical in any studies we do. A counterfeit is not known by studying counterfeits, but by studying the reality. Know why you believe what you believe from God's Word. Always test every influence by God's own revelation.*

- E. *We need to understand why there are so many movements within Christian circles.*  
(Understanding Church history greatly helps with this)
1. Some are started independently. If a new idea started the movement, we should be skeptical about it. If a new emphasis on Scripture starts the movement, we can give it more credibility.
  2. Some are started as a reaction to some other teaching or system. Often these movements are extreme in their measures to combat their opposition.
  3. Some are started as a division from an initial system. For instance, Eastern Orthodoxy finally broke from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054; thus it replicates many Roman Catholic practices, while remaining its own system. Division is common amongst fallen man; thus we should expect many different movements to exist. And since doctrine unites, it is no wonder we find so many movements unified by a distinguished teaching.
- F. *15 Distinguishing Marks and Questions to Ask Surrounding Teachers and Movements*
1. Are the people marked by wanting to have their ears tickled? And do the preachers preach what sounds nice, or the whole counsel of God? (2 Timothy 4:3 / Acts 20:26-27)
  2. Do they depart from sound doctrine? (2 Timothy 4:3)
  3. False teachers enjoy criticizing the obviously faithful ministers of the Word. (2 Cor. 10:10)
  4. Do they rally behind a fable, that is, a philosophy rather than a Person and His Word? (Colossians 2:8)
  5. Do they fit the description of a lukewarm church? (Revelation 3)
  6. Is their ministry transparent and sincere? (2 Timothy 3:14)
  7. Is the movement marked by manipulation techniques, rather than what Scripture describes the Spirit of God producing? (Ephesians 5:18 / 1 John 2:26-27)
  8. Is the movement marked by monetary incentives? (1 Timothy 6:10)
  9. Is the movement more or less acceptable in the world's eyes? (1 John 4:5-6)
  10. Do adherents and teachers of the movement simply recite their movement's beliefs, rather than exhibit thoughtful knowledge of Scripture's doctrines and true conviction of them? (1 Timothy 1:6-7)
  11. Does the movement exhibit some new, secret, or over-emphasized knowledge, rather than the exposition of the clear, historically-adhered-to truths of the Bible in its orthodox meaning? (1 Timothy 6:20-21)
  12. What kind of people does the movement produce? False converts, emotionalistic followers, and disillusioned rebels? Or truly convicted people of the Word? (Acts 29:29)
  13. False teachers have a stronger grip over their people than Scripture allows. They are lords, not shepherds. (1 Peter 5:3).
  14. False teachings and movements major on minors and minor on majors, or else major on their particular philosophy or version of truth (Matt. 23:23)
  15. Falseness always has reversals: man-centeredness rather than God-centeredness, or philosophy-centeredness rather than Scripture-centeredness, etc. (Galatians 1:10)