

The Bible, Dogmatic Rank, and a Statement of Faith: Part 2

How do we determine what is a major doctrine?

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One of the most well-known sayings of our Free Church movement is this, “We major on the majors, and minor on the minors.” This phrase is often repeated but raises the question: [how do we determine between major and minor doctrines?](#) I propose we ask six diagnostic questions.¹ But before that, let it be clearly said: we do not subject any part of Scripture to these six questions. All of Scripture is God’s inerrant and authoritative Word. No, the matters we subject to these six questions are theological formulations that arise out of, but are not part of, Scripture. An obvious example is our EFCA Statement of Faith. We trust it is solidly biblical, but we acknowledge it is not the Bible.

One of the [arguments](#) in favor of replacing “premillennial” with “[glorious](#)” in our Statement of Faith is that premillennialism is not a “major” doctrine on the same level as other doctrines affirmed there. Since we “major on the majors” in the EFCA, our Statement ought to contain major doctrines.

To see how these six questions work, let us subject the doctrine of *election* to the test. I choose election precisely because there are differing views among Evangelicals, and our Statement of Faith allows for freedom between the two main views: Arminian/Wesleyan and Reformed/Calvinist.²

1. *To what extent does this doctrine or practice reveal the person and nature of God?*

Election shows us that God is sovereign in that he elects, and that he is merciful and loving, in that he elects for salvation. These and other divine attributes can be seen in the doctrine of election. Result: positive.

2. *How directly is this doctrine or practice connected to the gospel and to the storyline of the whole Bible?*

Election is found throughout the Old Testament in the history of Israel as well as in the New Testament. Here are just a few examples. Israel is the chosen people (Deut. 7:6-9, Isa. 44:1-2). The gospel is connected with election in the New Testament (Eph. 1:4-10, 2 Thess. 2:13-14). Result: positive.

3. *To what extent does Scripture unambiguously affirm this doctrine or practice?*

Godly scholars disagree on the basis of election, either conditional (Arminian/Wesleyan view) or unconditional (Reformed/Calvinist view). But both camps agree that election is clearly taught in Scripture. Result: positive.

4. *How prominent is this doctrine or practice in Scripture?*

¹ These six criteria will be spelled out and applied more thoroughly to our Statement of Faith in *Evangelical Unity*, a forthcoming book written by the Spiritual Heritage Committee. Four of these six criteria are very similar to those of Michael P. Andrus, “[Drawing Doctrinal Lines: Where? And How?: How do we distinguish between the Essentials and the Non-essentials of the Faith?](#)”

² One could also add a theological nuance as espoused by Lutherans, though it is, a lesser-known view. But it is also somewhat odd to seek to discern whether or not Luther was Calvinist or Arminian, when he preceded them both.

Election is a repeated theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Result: positive.

5. *How widespread is the consensus on this doctrine or practice in the Church of both the past and present?*

Election has been taught and defended across 20 centuries (Augustine vs. Pelagius, Anselm, the Reformation, etc.). It continues to be taught today. Result: positive.

6. *How relevant is this doctrine or practice to us today?*

Election has direct relevance to us, giving us assurance of who we are in Christ. Result: positive.

Election registers positive on all six questions, which means it is a major doctrine. Yet we allow varying views of this doctrine within our movement. An open question is this: if we were to subject premillennialism to these six questions, what would the result be?

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