

## The Bible, Dogmatic Rank, and a Statement of Faith: Part 1 Spiritual Heritage Committee



During our discussions related to our [motion to amend](#) Article 9 of our Statement of Faith (SOF), reference has been made to one of the Free Church distinctives – that of majoring on majors and minoring on minors. This statement reflects how we approach doctrine and doctrinal matters in our SOF and in our corporate confession and life in the EFCA. Sometimes this discussion on doctrinal matters has also been referred to as a distinction between essentials and non-essentials.

Some have asked about how to determine if a doctrine is to be considered an essential or a non-essential matter. On the one hand, this simple either/or can be helpful in addressing some doctrinal matters. But in these kinds of discussions we are having, we believe more delineation and nuance are required in order to grasp the fuller teaching of the Scriptures as articulated in doctrine and doctrinal statements affirmed.

In response to the important question, we answer by focusing on five key issues: (1) God and his word/Word, (2) creeds and confessions and statements of faith, (3) historical theology, (4) dogmatic rank, and finally, (5) the EFCA.

### God and the Word

God and his word, the Word or Scripture, go together and cannot be separated without damaging both. God is and he has revealed himself as a “talking” God.

We affirm the fundamental principles or foundations of theology.<sup>1</sup> These foundations of theology consist of two *principia*, Scripture and God. The first *principia* refers to Holy Scripture, which affirms that Scripture is foundational epistemologically for knowing God and theology, as there is no true knowledge of God or theology apart from Scripture. The second *principia* refers to God and the doctrine of God, which affirms that God is the objective ground of theology, without whom there would be no revelation or theology.

Richard Muller notes that the essential foundation is God and the cognitive foundation is the Scripture, and “both are necessary: without God, there can be no genuine or authoritative word concerning God, no theology; without the scriptural revelation, there can be no genuine or authoritative word concerning God and, again, no theology.” This articulates how we understand God and his word/Word, the Scriptures.

### Creeds, Confessions and Statements of Faith

The Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the absolute authority, the absolute norm (*norma absoluta*), which is applicable only to Scripture as *principium theologiae* (Scripture and God, revelation and the one who reveals himself). Because Scripture alone is the absolute norm, it is also the standardizing norm (*norma normans*), which is applied to Scripture as that norm standing behind the standardized confessions. The Scripture serves a *magisterial* role.

There is also a place for creeds and confessions, but it is important to remember they are standardized by the Scriptures. Thus, confessions and statements of faith serve as a standardized norm (*norma normata*), which is applied to church confessions as they set forth the truths of Scripture. Any and all confessions

---

<sup>1</sup> The fundamental principles or foundations of theology are referred to as *principia theologiae*, which consist of two *principia*: *principium cognoscendi*, Holy Scripture, and *principium essendi*, the doctrine of God.

and creeds serve a *ministerial* role, being standardized by the norm, the Scriptures, both the absolute and standardizing norm.

## Historical Theology

History and historical theology, or the history of Christian doctrine, serve an important but not definitive role in understanding the Christian faith and how the “faith once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) has been articulated, defended and applied by the church through time. A crucial and fruitful way to understand historical theology is that of a commentary on the Scriptures, which sheds light on the interpretation of the Bible throughout history. It is not an absolute authority, which is the Bible alone. The Bible is the magisterial authority. Even with these distinctions, historical theology does serve a ministerial role for reading the Bible and understanding theology and doctrine.

## Dogmatic Rank

Reformation and post-Reformation scholars, theologians, and pastors delineated dogmatic rank in three ways, in order of importance. The first, the fundamental articles of faith or doctrine,<sup>2</sup> focused on “the basic doctrines necessary to the Christian faith [which] are distinguished from secondary or logically derivative doctrines.” These are the “doctrines without which Christianity cannot exist and the integrity of which is necessary to the preservation of the faith.”

The second, the secondary fundamental articles, recognizes that some of the fundamental articles “such as those concerned with baptism and the Lord’s Supper, might be lacking in a person’s faith, or at least lacking in correct definition, and that person still be saved in the promises of the gospel, since forgiveness of sins rests on faith in Christ, as witnessed in the Word, and not on acceptance of the doctrines of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” Despite these differences and divides, the conclusion was that adherents of the other view were “Christian and participated in the promise of salvation in Christ because of their acceptance of the primary fundamental doctrines of the person and work of Christ,” even though they voiced concern that the other person’s doctrinal system was considered endangered.

The third, the nonfundamental articles, focuses on “articles the denial of which does not endanger salvation since they are not fundamental to the maintenance of Christian truth and are not concerned with the objects of faith,” e.g., identity of the Antichrist and the nature of angels. “Such doctrines, nonetheless, are scriptural and, therefore, if rightly stated, edifying.”<sup>3</sup>

## The EFCA

In the EFCA, even though most affirm the notion of dogmatic rank, many do not have a sense of how to determine dogmatic rank and where various doctrines ought to be placed.<sup>4</sup> Certainly this does not mean it

---

<sup>2</sup> The Protestant Scholastic Reformers referred to these three levels of dogmatic rank in the following way: *articuli fundamentals*, the fundamental articles of faith or doctrine, the *articuli fundamentals secundarii*, the secondary fundamental articles, and the *articuli non-fundamentales*, the nonfundamental articles.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 40-41.

<sup>4</sup> For a few examples of others who have provided helpful means of determining dogmatic rank, cf. R. Albert Mohler Jr., “[A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity](#).” See also the excellent treatment by Erik Thoennes, *Life’s Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says About the Things That Matter Most* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), “Essential vs. Peripheral Doctrine,” 35-37. Mohler’s “theological triage” is probably the most widely known,

is cut and dried, in that if we all agree with the notion of dogmatic rank, and we even all agree on the taxonomy of discerning and determining where various doctrines ought to be classified, that we will all agree on where to place certain doctrines. There will be differences of opinion. But at least there is some criteria that is more objective to determine that, and then we can discuss why some doctrine is placed at a certain level and the criterial reason for it.

The whole Bible is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Everything in the Bible is true and essential. Nothing in the Word of God is inconsequential. When we acknowledge dogmatic rank, it in no way questions or undermines any of these truths about the Scriptures. However, the Scriptures themselves reflect different weight or rank placed on different doctrines and doctrinal truths. For example, Paul can identify the resurrection as of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3), and he can also consider certain foods or certain days to be “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1).<sup>5</sup>

We in the EFCA affirm dogmatic rank.<sup>6</sup> We have long lived with the notion of the “significance of silence,” viz., we will debate a theological/doctrinal issue, but we will not divide over non-essential theological/doctrinal issues. The EFCA is reflected in two key statements. The first is our Statement of Faith. The second is how we live out the Statement of Faith, which we describe as our doctrinal and practical ethos, that of majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors.

*Evangelical Convictions* consists of the “theological expositions” of our Statement of Faith. We are now in the process of writing a book on the second area, one which will be called *Evangelical Unity*. Of course, in this second area, we both affirm dogmatic rank and also a means of discerning and determining dogmatic rank.

In the EFCA, we are tethered to the text of Scripture, the inspired inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word of God. We are also grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, “the gospel . . . as of first importance (1 Cor. 15:1-3), which leads to “sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel” of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted” (1 Tim. 1:10-11), which results in “your manner of life be[ing] worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27; cf. contra Gal. 2:14).

With the Bible and the gospel foundational to our doctrine and life (1 Tim. 4:16), we have identified four categories of dogmatic rank, which is the notion that not all doctrinal claims stand on the same level:

1. Of First Importance
2. Of Second Importance
3. Of Third Importance

---

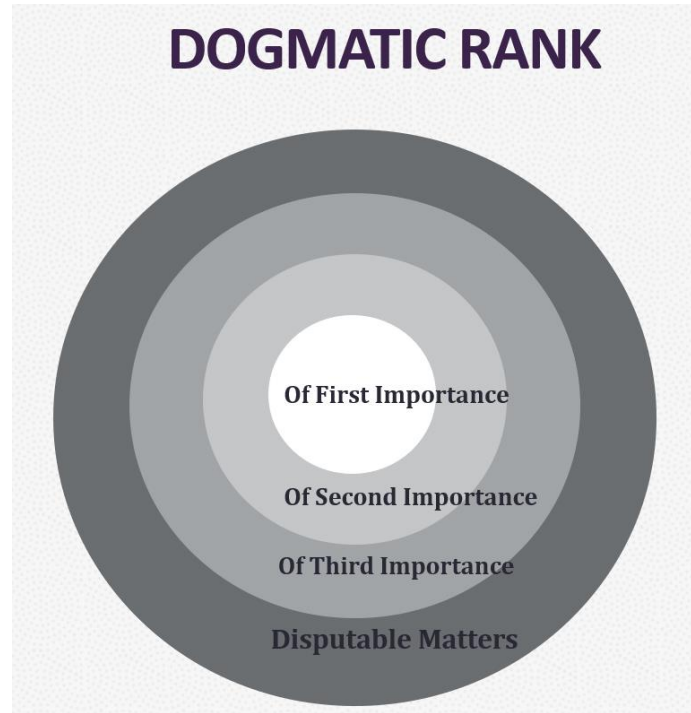
but Thoennes’ taxonomy is likely the most helpful. Finally, Gavin Ortlund has written an exceptional book, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Please see below where this is specifically delineated. Critical issues and nuances are missed if one simply classifies issues as either essential or non-essential. That simple and simplistic classification can work. Something is either essential for salvation, or it is not. But the Scriptures include more than just soteriological essentials, so many important aspects of doctrine are missed with this simple classification. One has pointed out that even non-essential doctrines are significant – in Scripture, to church history, for the Christian life, to essential doctrines – even though they are significant for different reasons than essential doctrines. Further delineation of dogmatic rank is both needed and helpful, which explains why we have included four levels of dogmatic rank, not just two.

<sup>6</sup> For an earlier version of dogmatic rank in the EFCA, cf. Michael P. Andrus, “[Drawing Doctrinal Lines: Where? And How?: How do we distinguish between the Essentials and the Non-essentials of the Faith?](#)”

#### 4. Disputable Matters

This is helpfully depicted as a series of concentric circles that identify those doctrines which are “of first importance,” those that are at the closest to the center of the Bible and the gospel, those doctrinal issues that are considered essential.<sup>7</sup> And as one moves further out, one identifies doctrines of second and third levels of importance, and finally those issues that are considered “disputable matters.”



This four-level framework has been selected because it allows for enough nuance and distinction between levels without becoming overly complex. The two poles of this four-level framework are drawn directly from Scripture. Paul says, “For what I received I passed on to you as of *first importance* ...” (1 Cor. 15:3). In Romans 14:1 Paul also says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over *disputable matters*.” (emphasis mine)

We have also developed a taxonomy/grid by which we determine this rank, the category in which a certain doctrinal issue most appropriately fits.

1. *Relevance to our understanding of the nature and character of God:* To what extent does this doctrine or practice reveal the person and nature of God?
2. *Connection to the gospel and the overarching narrative of the Bible:* How directly is this doctrine or practice connected to the gospel and to the storyline of the whole Bible?
3. *Exegetical clarity:* To what extent does Scripture unambiguously affirm this doctrine or practice?

---

<sup>7</sup> Some refer to our EFCA Statement of Faith (SOF) as a minimalist doctrinal statement. Rather, it is more accurate to refer to our SOF as essentialist. This explains why we require all those who are credentialed in the EFCA to affirm the SOF “without mental reservation.” In this sense we are “strict subscriptions.” Some ministries and denominations have a longer and more detailed SOF in which they allow “good-faith subscription,” rather than strict subscription, which allows *acceptable* dissent on certain issues, as determined by approved leaders.

4. *Biblical prominence*: How prominent is this doctrine or practice in Scripture?
5. *Historical consensus*: How widespread is the consensus on this doctrine or practice in the Church of both the past and present?
6. *Application to the church and the believer*: How relevant is this doctrine or practice to us today?

God and his word/Word are uniquely connected. What God says is grounded in his nature. His nature is revealed and reflected in his speech. As noted above, we affirm the *principia theologiae*, the fundamental principles or foundations of theology, affirming the intimate connection between God and his word/Word.

The Bible stands alone as God's inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word. It is not included in the grid. Instead, it is foundational to the grid. There is no disagreement or equivocation on this understanding of the Scriptures. Beginning with the Bible as foundational, we then consider these six issues to determine dogmatic rank. While affirming the truth and truthfulness of the whole Bible, there will be differences of understanding. This is when we begin to apply the principles to discern dogmatic rank.

As an exercise, see how this is applied to the doctrine of election: [The Bible, Dogmatic Rank, and a Statement of Faith](#): How do we determine what is a major doctrine?