

**My “Theological Triage”: P.J. Davis**  
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## **I. Introduction**

“Theological Triage,” - a term coined by Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary - is a process whereby we work to discern degrees of importance (or criticality) in the doctrinal positions we hold. It may apply to one’s own individual positions and convictions, or to the positions and convictions of any “group” entity (including, and especially, a local church).

I offer you the following as part of our study of biblical eldership, in part so that you can understand how I view this issue in my conception of church life [see *Issues of Secondary Importance (Important and Central)* below].

Undertaking a process of “Theological Triage” for Felton Bible Church as a whole (or beginning what will be an ongoing and continuous process of triage) is one task awaiting a future team of pastor-elders.

## **II. Helpful Preliminaries from Martyn Lloyd-Jones**

*Note:* The full version of this document has about 1.5 pages of good material from Martyn Lloyd-Jones. If you’d like to read it, let me know and I’ll send it to you.

## **III. Levels of Triage**

*Issues of Primary Importance (Essential and Non-negotiable)* – These are beliefs *essential* to the Gospel and to corporate and individual worship of God. If a church does not hold to this truth, it is likely not a true church. If an individual misses this truth, he or she may well stand outside of salvation, destined for eternity in Hell. This is the core of right doctrine. Miss this and one risks missing the Gospel. There is either no unity of faith with those who do not affirm these beliefs, or any such unity is defective and broken. We cannot make common cause with local congregations who do not hold to this truth.

- Orthodox Christianity – as expressed in the Apostles’, Nicene, and Chalcedonian creeds (helped by the Athanasian Creed).
- Doctrine of God – Triune Creator *ex nihilo* (and much more)
- Doctrine of Scripture – Inerrant, infallible, authoritative
- Doctrine of Humanity – *Imago Dei* as men and women; fallen in sin (Note: Human sexuality should fit under this heading)
- Doctrine of Christ – Fully God, fully man; his saving work
- Doctrine of Salvation – By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone
- Doctrine of the Holy Spirit – God who indwells (and much more)

- Necessity for Christian Living – Faith without works is dead

Border Region Issues (See Note 2 Below) – *A literal Adam and Eve* (Note: Believing in a literal Adam and Eve is essential to the Gospel. But, we should be slow to summarily “condemn” someone one who is mistaken in their apprehension of this point); *Doctrine of Hell* (Note: Not affirming a biblical view of Hell often comes hand-in-glove with compromise in other areas of key doctrine. That said, some confusion or misapprehension of the Bible’s teaching on Hell may not always indicate a corresponding misapprehension of the Gospel).

Issues of Secondary Importance (Important and Central) – These are beliefs both *important* to the Gospel (though perhaps not essential to salvation) and to the right worship of God in the church or an individual life. An anemic or sub-biblical understanding in these areas may hamstring the life of a congregation, or cause an individual’s faith to be less than what it can or should be. We must stand here with strong but circumspect conviction; holding fast to our faithful study of God’s Word, even as we do so with charity for others and a realistic view of ourselves. Some of these issues are clearer in Scripture and less debatable than others. As an elder-pastor I will unabashedly (often without qualification or equivocation) preach, teach, counsel, and lead consistent with my biblical convictions and understandings here. As a matter of judgment and discernment, we will often make common cause with other people or congregations that disagree with us in this arena. That does not mean we hold all beliefs here as equal (i.e. yes, someone is probably right, and someone is probably wrong), but only that disagreement will not always prevent a degree of cooperation between churches or persons. We should note that distinction is not division. For reasons of conviction, coherence in the body, and our ability to minister effectively, we may stand distinct from a congregation with whom we disagree on these points, even as we fundamentally acknowledge them to be brothers or sisters in Christ. The necessity of such distinction serves as a testament to our biblical convictions, our human finitude, our deep need for a Savior, and our earnest desire for Jesus to return and set all things right.

- Biblical (“Reformed”) Soteriology – God’s sovereign election
  - “Now I am a Calvinist; I believe in election and predestination; but I would not dream of putting it under the heading of essential...I say that that [i.e. an understanding of how one comes to belief] is a matter of the understanding of the *mechanism* of salvation, not of the way of salvation. And here, while I myself hold very definite and strong views on the subject, I will not separate from a man who cannot accept and believe the doctrines of election and predestination, and is Arminian, as long as he tells me that we are all saved by grace, and as long as the Calvinist agrees, as he must, that God calls all men everywhere to repent.” – Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical*, 89-90.
- Assurance of Salvation – hand-in-glove with perseverance of the saints
- The Necessity for Baptism and the Lord’s Supper
- The Necessity for Church Discipline
- An Elder-Led Polity
- View on God’s Creative Activity – What about evolution and the “six days”?

- Gender Roles – in the home and in the church
- Position on the “Miraculous Gifts” of the Spirit – tongues, prophecy, healing

*Border Region Issues* (See Note 2 Below) – *Timing and Mode of Baptism* (“Another matter I would put into the same category [i.e. of non-essentials] is the age and the mode of baptism...I have been reading books on this subject for the last forty-four years and more, and I know less about it now than I did at the beginning. Therefore, while I assert, and we must all assert, that we believe in baptism, for that is plainly commanded, yet we must not divide and separate over the age of the candidate or over the mode of administration.” – Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical*, 91.)

*Issues of Tertiary Importance (Significant but Flexible)* – These are beliefs or practices that are *significant* to the life of the church or the life of an individual, but about which Scripture may not be determinatively clear (or not as determinatively clear as on other matters). They may also represent areas of disagreement between believers of otherwise similar convictions. What’s more, these issues are often points of Christian freedom; freedom dependent on love and moderated by wisdom. In their most innocuous form, these differences stem from preferences of style, “accidents” of history, the specifics of God’s calling and equipping, realities of culture and geography, etc. Usually, but not always, disparity here should not prevent us from joining in corporate worship together, or from making common cause in most aspects of church life. That said, for reasons of peace, stability, and consistency, a local congregation should choose a particular stance and hold to it.

- The Precise Nature of the Lord’s Supper – Real presence; meaning and affects; method of celebrating
- Practice of Church Membership
- The Specific Structure of Polity
- Worship Service Style and Location – Liturgical or non? Other issues of corporate gathering.
- Specific Views on Eschatology and the Role of Israel post-Pentecost

*Note 1* – While it is possible to “categorize” various elements of doctrine into this three-ringed approach, it is also important to remember the many interconnections of belief. These matters adhere to one another – both through explicit statements in Scripture, and/or the implications of logic – such that they are not discrete, independent elements. Sometimes erring in that which is tertiary may quickly cause deleterious results in that which is primary. It is the responsibility of local elders-shepherds-pastors to be alert for such times and respond accordingly. To be tertiary does not mean “unimportant.”

- “It is the glory of the Christian truth that it has many parts, but they are all interrelated...Every part belongs to every other part, and the result is that if you make what appears to be a minor change somewhere on the circumference it will soon have its effect even upon the centre.” – Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *What is an Evangelical*, 11.

*Note 2* – Some issues fall in the “border regions.” Not everything fits neatly into a category of importance. Some questions of belief are better represented on a spectrum. While they may be certain biblically speaking (i.e. a literal Adam and Eve), our response toward those in error will differ depending on the specifics of each situation.