

# Sorting Through Theological Claims

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When studying theology, there will always be a level of interaction with differences of opinion, to say the least. There are two false approaches to this fact. One is open-mindedness, that is, treating all theological claims as equally meritorious and worthy of consideration. This is what academia fails in, as well as ecumenism. The other false approach is to practically deny the existence of controversy and blindly uphold the tradition one has been raised with, because the approach is less threatening. This is what the religious cults fail in, as well as many self-acclaimed “laypeople.”

The Biblical approach is what we could call “competent close-minded interaction.” The Christian's approach should be close-minded in that there is only *one* body of truth to defend, and it must be defended thoroughly. But there should also be competent interaction so that three goals can be accomplished: (1) we do not misrepresent error when addressing it, (2) we do not mindlessly believe what we do, (3) we can account for both the existence and the falseness of erring systems so they do not serve as a threat or intimidation to our convictions.

This approach is supported in Scripture. Acts 19 records the apostle Paul's disputing with both Jews and Gentiles, the religious and the pagan: evidently, he was competent when interacting with both. The same is confirmed in Jude, when he calls every believer to “earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered unto the saints”: one cannot contend with either an open mind or incompetence. Or with John, we find a call to believe only “that which was from the beginning” and never to bid false teachers “Godspeed.” As well, we find these words in Titus:

“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...”

This is our obligation. To equip ourselves in this, we will look at some tools that will both simplify the process of filtering different views and make us competent in dealing with them. The goal is to arrive at personal conviction of the truth, while not being intimidated by those who may oppose that conviction for unbiblical reasons.

## Some Helpful Approaches

When dealing with different views, the question often comes to mind, “How can so many people believe so many different things? And am I really to believe the majority is wrong, while I am right?” On the surface, it seems arrogant to claim possession of *the* truth. But that actually isn't an issue for two reasons: (1) It is a simple fact of logic that to believe truth X, one must disbelieve everything that contradicts X. Everyone believes something, and that means deep down they don't believe everything else. To believe something is to declare it as true and everything else false. So then, arrogance in claiming to have truth is *not* the issue. Everyone does

this. (2) It is not our truth we are called to believe: it is God's. Thus, it is arrogant *not* to claim possession of the truth when we have His Word. God has spoken, and when He speaks it matters nothing that there are a billion contradicting voices. Truth is of God, separate from ourselves. Therefore, it is absolute and necessary to be believed.

Only on this basis can we come to proper conviction. But having laid that foundation, there are three practical tools we can use in filtering through theological claims, whether those claims be inside or outside of Christianity. (As a disclaimer, these are tools for confirming personal conviction; they are not apologetic tools.)

Firstly, we must establish broader truth in our minds before we approach the specifics. Learning to tackle the broadest issues first will dramatically decrease the number of sub-issues to deal with, making our interaction with different views far less complicated. Suppose you were given the task of destroying a skyscraper. You could approach that task many different ways. You could destroy each room individually with a sledge hammer. It would take years to destroy the whole building, but it could be done. Or you could destroy each level with a wrecking ball. Or you could, with one effort, obliterate the foundation with explosives and watch the whole building crumble. Similarly, we can waste much time opposing specific errors, when we could attack the foundation and be done with the whole system and all the errors it includes. If we can tackle the foundational claims of a system first, dependent claims will no longer be a threat. For example, 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. This same idea can be used for groups within Christendom and the cults as well.

Secondly, it is helpful to think in categories of two, because literally everything can be divided into two categories. So then, when filtering through different beliefs, instead of being intimidated by millions of intricate differences, deal with them in main sets of two, based on their foundational tenet (what they rise or fall on). Here is an example that might help. Suppose that currently there are 6 billion people in the world who contradict Christian belief structure. We could approach that as 6 billion different beliefs to deal with, or we could use categories to quickly establish in our minds a ground for our beliefs. How? Take the following four steps:

1. Two options: Atheism/Agnosticism or Theism. Choose Theism.
2. Two options under Theism: Polytheism or Monotheism. Choose Monotheism.
3. Two options under Monotheism: Yahweh as God or Allah as God. Choose Yahweh.
4. Now we are faced with Judaism and Christianity after only three steps. We have successfully dealt with 6 billion different individual beliefs by rejecting their overall categories first.

Now, when interacting with people from specific religions, we will need to be well-versed in their beliefs and not just "categorize them to death" (although we can never go wrong with attacking foundations first). But when arriving at *personal* conviction of the truth, these category tools can be very helpful.

Finally, in handling different views (specifically within Christianity), we must understand the different levels of error. Not every disagreement is as severe as another. When there is a Christian liberty issue, we don't need to feel threatened by another believer's conviction. When there is a heresy being promulgated, then we should be much more defensive. We would create disaster if we treated every disagreement the same. On the one

hand, we could downplay the severity of heresy. On the other hand, we could divide God's people over small differences of opinion. Wisdom in handling disagreement and error is essential when sorting through theological claims.

### Categories of Theological Camps

Having that foundation, we move on to actual categories in which we can think. These categories are not final, and there are many additions that could be made. But they should give us a good footing as we apply what has gone before.

The first and broadest distinction one could point out is obviously whether one is saved or lost. This will determine how accurately he can handle truth, since the difference is between having the mind of Christ and being utterly blind.

Such blindness results in a seemingly numberless set of beliefs, which we call religions. A religion is a set of theological beliefs that determines the lifestyle of its adherent. For us as Christians, we face several types of religions. If we can grasp these different types to narrow our sphere of assessment, filtering through their faults becomes much easier. Firstly then, we have to face *non-Christian religions*, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the thousands of tribal religions. The blindness of these religions should make clear to us how invalid they are. We also have to face *apostate religions* that masquerade as Christian, such as Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even Oneness Pentecostalism. These come from a background which had a form of truth, but they totally departed from Biblical orthodoxy at some point. Then we also have *religious cults* to deal with, which never had the truth and follow a false teacher, while still claiming the Bible to be authoritative. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science fall into this category. Finally, there are *secular religions*, such as atheism and Agnosticism, as well as other philosophies. Though secular, these are indeed religions, because they have a set of beliefs about God, and those beliefs determine the lifestyle of their adherents. The vastness of these systems contributes nothing to their validity, as an honest assessment of them will show. Thus, even though they represent many beliefs, we do not need to feel intimidation from them.

Being convicted of Christianity, then, we move on to categorizing differences within it. These categories allow us to more efficiently sort through the many different groups and claims that come up as we study theology.

*Theology Distinctions.* Whether broader than or more specific than denominational boundaries, there are several key doctrines or approaches which people define themselves by. Some are liberal with their theology, while some are conservative. Some identify as Calvinist, some as Arminian, and some as being in between. Some are continuationists (they believe in tongues, healing, and such), while some are cessationists (they believe the sign gifts have ceased). Some are dispensational, while some are covenantal. Some are strictly evangelical; some are ecumenical (find no problem mingling with Roman Catholicism and similar false systems). When filtering through theological claims, these distinctions serve as helpful dividing lines between truth and error, while bringing needed conviction on a wide range of issues.

*Broad Denominational Distinctions.* Examples of these would be Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist/Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Anglican/Episcopalian, and non-denominational. Of course, there are many more examples than these.

*Trans-Denominational Distinctions.* Within broad denominational headings, there are more specific denominational headings. For instance, Baptists can be divided into southern Baptist, independent Baptist, reformed Baptist, etc. Or with Wesleyan churches, there exist the Salvation Army, Free Methodists, the Church of the Nazarene, etc.

*Congregational Distinctions.* Even with a common building name, there will always be differences from church to church, mainly in methodology, administration, and spirituality.

*Personal Distinctions.* But even within the same congregation, there exist personal beliefs that will never be identical to another set of personal beliefs.

### **Categories of Departure from the Truth**

In dealing with these differences, we must understand the different levels of departure from God's truth. Not every error is extreme, and not every disagreement is pivotal. However, many times they can be. A suggestive list of categories may help us in distinguishing the extremity of certain views, depending on what they are. To understand this list will help us to more competently assess and interact with different movements claiming to be "religious" in any sense of the word. It will be our obligation to define which category each issue falls into and interact with it accordingly.

1. The first level of difference is *Christian Liberty*. This category deals with personal convictions, which may vary from person to person. When two disagree on personal conviction concerning which Scripture hasn't given a clear answer, neither are automatically right nor automatically wrong. Rather in this case, their conscience is their guide and the glory of God their goal. Brothers in Christ can have full fellowship even in disagreement on these things. But they must be careful not to offend or criticize the other regarding his convictions. (See Romans 14).
2. On the second level, something a little more weighty presents itself, that is, *Interpretation Differences*. Some may see a Scripture passage as meaning one thing, while others see it as meaning another thing. For instance, some disagree whether the Eternal State is described in the whole of Revelation 21-22 or just in the first eight verses of chapter 21. Since there will be a right and a wrong in this case, this disagreement is more extreme than with Christian Liberty. Even so, such a disagreement does not need to hinder fellowship on any level.
3. On the third level, there is *Wrong Doctrine*. This is a false understanding of Scripture's teaching on a more foundational level than differing interpretations. This is where fellowship can start to be hindered, since it concerns a broad range of Biblical subjects, as well as what is taught publicly in an assembly. While it may not be sin to hold these things, they do tend toward further error. (Error generally multiplies). For instance, whether one is amillennial or premillennial will affect his theology in other areas, like a Christian's relationship to political activism. Romans 15:14 provides a solution to this plausible error: "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."
4. The fourth level – more extreme still – is *Sin*. This is a departure from truth in one's walk. For instance, idolatry, though not a belief *per se*, does stem from false or missing belief surrounding the preeminence of Christ. Fellowship, depending on the greatness of

the sin, can be hindered even further than with wrong doctrine. At times, the assembly will have to take public action, as laid out in 1 Corinthians 5 and other places.

5. Fifth we find a very extreme form of error, *Heresy*. This is not simply a misunderstanding of Scripture, but a departure from one of its major truths. For instance, a heresy would include the idea that Christ atoned for sins in Hades or that Hell ends in annihilation. These ideas have consequences that diminish the pure gospel and must be addressed, as Paul showed by writing Galatians. Fellowship and correction are the goals of addressing the issue: superficial unity cannot be achieved by overlooking it.
6. Sixth, there is what we could call *Damnable Heresy*. This is departure from a foundational truth of Scripture. One cannot be a saved person while embracing a damnable heresy. These kind of heresies would include a denial of Christ's Deity or a denial of Justification by Faith. Depending on how the belief is held, attacks on the sufficiency, inspiration, and infallibility of Scripture can fall into this category also. (These could also fall into simple heresy, depending on how adamantly the error is propagated and believed). 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)
7. Finally, and most extremely, there is *Apostasy*. This is full and final separation from Christianity after being enlightened to it and being part of its professing community. The reason this is the most extreme of errors is this: apostates cannot be saved after committing to their apostasy. That is what Hebrews 6 teaches. Now, there are two categories in dealing with this: full 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 – approached, because they need to be saved, and fearfully approached, because we could easily be drawn into their snares. "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)

### **How to Interact with So Many Movements**

With so many categories and camps, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. "How can so many people be in opposition? Can there really be so many people in the wrong? Don't they have the same Bible? How can they read it and come to different conclusions than I do?" While these questions are common, they have at their foundation a faulty assumption. They assume too much good in people. These questions make the general populous in Christendom sound like devout Bible students, when that simply isn't the case. Scripture promises that *many* false teachers will be in the world; thus we should expect to see both false teachers and ignorant followers in many places we look. We have no right to assume the best of people's theories. That approach is a great disservice, not only to us, but to our theology.

So then, we need to understand the basic decision-making process of each person. No one is completely unbiased and objective in their beliefs. That is impossible in a human with a fallen nature. Rather, the average person's beliefs are usually founded on one or more of these three factors.

1. *Influences.* Regardless of how unbiased one may think he is, everyone sees through a mental lens which has been given to them by their influences. These influences will affect how comfortable they are around certain claims, whether those claims be true or false. So then, it is nearly inevitable that people interpret their surroundings by how their accepted influences interpret the same thing, unless the person controls his influences and not vice versa. This is why we see so much tradition-based belief in Christendom: people are comfortable with what they were first and primarily influenced by.
2. *Ignorance.* Often people believe things without knowing why. This is the case with most of the world, because a majority of people don't like to do meaningful research into why they believe what they do. Whether secular or religious, most are happy with what they grew up with or with what their education taught them. Thus the standard proofs they hear for their own system are good enough for them, regardless of how bad the proofs are.
3. *Presuppositions.* Everybody interprets the world and the ideas around them by certain assumptions about life. Many of those assumptions are formed subconsciously. Depending on how Biblical those assumptions and starting points are, they will determine one's conclusions when faced with a certain teaching. When we encounter a teaching from someone that sounds, for lack of a better word, "fishy," it is probably because we have a different set of assumptions – a different foundation for our beliefs. Our job is to assess whose presuppositions are right before we ask whose beliefs are right.

Along with this, we need to understand how collective systems have originated. This will aid us in knowing what they base their theology upon. To fully understand the origin of different beliefs, some research into history will have to be done, but it will be worth the effort. Not every view can be right, and often the background of certain views can help identify just how far it is from truth.

1. Some movements are started independently. If an independent movement comes from a new idea or "revelation," we can definitely dismiss it. But if that movement is a rediscovery of old truth, it may have more merit.
2. Some movements are started as a reaction to some other teaching or system – sometimes for Biblical causes, sometimes not. With these groups, often their views are too extreme one way or another, since it is difficult to be fully balanced when directly and constantly opposing some teaching.
3. Some movements are started as a division from an initial system. For instance, Eastern Orthodoxy broke from the Roman Catholic Church in 1054; thus, today it seems very Catholic in many of its practices and forms, though it definitely remains its own system. Division is common amongst fallen man, which means we should expect many different movements to exist.

These factors also apply to us and our backgrounds, and we need to challenge our own decision-making process: only this will bring us closer to objective theology. So then, what influences do you have? 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 Biblical and balanced in your influences. We also need to ask whether or not we are ignorant about why we believe what we do. Have you thoroughly studied Scripture for your convictions? Or do you just believe what is easiest and what suits your emotions? Lastly, we need to ask what foundation, what presuppositions, our theology will start on. Scripture will automatically form some of these for us if we immerse ourselves in it. But there must also be a thoughtful determination of how we will study doctrine. These are just a few, among many, foundational questions that need to be established before we do any sorting through theological claims.

So then, competently viewing the theological world around us will make our path to the truth far less intimidating and complicated. In all of these things, the foundational question is this: what is the center, man and his word or God and His Word? Do we subscribe to clear explanation of Scripture passages for our beliefs, or do we need obscure passages and unbiblical frameworks to vaguely prove our conviction? There are clear differences between what is true and what is false. It is not impossible to distinguish between these. *But we must be people of the Word.* We can't simply follow a teacher. We can't simply have our set of books. We need the breath of God Himself burning in our souls. Otherwise, there will be no guarantee that what we believe is right. God has promised to guide us Himself into truth by His Spirit (1 Jn. 2:27). It is not that we don't need theology books and Bible teachers (otherwise, you shouldn't be reading this); rather we are to put the emphasis in the right place, which is on the Word of God. Movements and belief-systems are by man; truth is from God. What will we subscribe to? Will we assess man in light of God, or God in light of man? The choice will affect the entire prospect of our own discernment.

=====APPENDIX: 15 Distinguishing Marks/Questions to Ask of False Teachers and Movements=====

1. Are the people marked by wanting to have their ears tickled? And do the preachers preach what entertains, or do they preach 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 adherants 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)