

A LOOK AT OUR

ESSENTIALS

Distinguishing between essentials and nonessentials of the Christian faith

BY DR. MICHAEL P. ANDRUS

One of the greatest strengths of the Evangelical Free Church of America may also be an Achilles' heel: namely, its wide tolerance of viewpoints not directly addressed in its Statement of Faith.

Those of us with a fundamentalist background have learned that creative or even critical theological thinking is an inevitable casualty when too many issues are nailed down. We find the Evangelical Free Church to be an incredible breath of fresh theological air—uncompromising on the fundamentals but allowing our consciences some desperately needed breathing room.

However, a spirit of doctrinal tolerance also has its downside. In 1992, Dr. Allen Tunberg completed a project for the School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in which he surveyed 132 EFCA leaders on the topic of "The Destiny of the Unevangelized." (Tunberg's report can be seen at www.efca.org/today.)

There was far more divergence of opinion on this topic than I expected in our fellowship, but since there is no explicit declaration in our Statement of Faith on this issue, divergent views (within acceptable parameters) were tolerated. (See "EFCA Doctrinal Tolerance" on www.efca.org/today for more examples.)

The underlying issue for all doctrinal controversies is where and how to draw the boundaries of acceptable beliefs. Throughout its history, the EFCA has trumpeted the difference between essentials and nonessentials,

claiming that we demand unity on the former and give freedom on the latter. But how do you decide what is essential and what is not?

CATEGORIES TO CONSIDER

I believe we must first accept the fact that though the Bible is inspired, inerrant and authoritative, and all of it is equally true, not all doctrines are equally important. In fact, there are levels of theological thought that correspond roughly to the categories of scientific investigation. Science has historically made distinctions between *law*, *principle*, *theory* and *hypothesis*.

These general categories have differing degrees of certainty and importance attached to them. We speak of the *law* of gravity, because gravity partakes of the highest degree of certainty as a fact of the physical universe. The *principle* of relativity or quantum mechanics is accepted by the scientific community, but perhaps not with as much certainty as gravity. On the other hand, we speak of the *theory* of evolution (at least creationists do), because there is much about it that is debatable. Whether there is life on other planets or galaxies is clearly a matter of *hypothesis*.

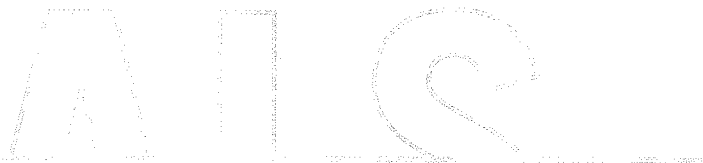
By way of analogy only, I would propose four levels of theological thought:

- > **dogma** (corresponding to scientific law)
- > **doctrine** (scientific principle)
- > **theory** (scientific theory)
- > **speculation** (scientific hypothesis)

The question is, how do we decide which theological views are *dogma* and therefore indisputable; which are *doctrine* and thus well-established; which are *theory* and open to vigorous debate; and which are mere *speculation* and warrant little more than curiosity?

It is clearly not sufficient to base such decisions on mere feelings or tradition, or even on a claim of personal illumination by the Holy Spirit. None of these alone provides a sufficient basis for solving disputes.

However, four factors exist that, if kept in proper perspective, can help us determine how to prioritize theological views:



(1) exegetical certainty, (2) theological importance, (3) biblical emphasis and (4) historical agreement in the church.

To illustrate, let me suggest a four-sided pyramid of theological thought. The apex of the pyramid represents theological dogma; i.e., those truths with the highest exegetical certainty, the greatest theological importance, the strongest biblical emphasis and the most uniform historical agreement. As a theological view decreases in certainty, importance, emphasis or agreement, it also "slides down" the pyramid, from dogma toward speculation.

As application, take several doctrinal issues and see where you think they belong on such a pyramid: vicarious atonement of Christ, mode of baptism, infant salvation, eternal security, dispensationalism or covenant theology, the time of the Church's rapture. (See "A Pyramid of Doctrinal Issues" on www.efca.org/today for several examples considered by the author.)

Keep in mind that the process is perhaps as important as the result: The process of prioritizing forces us to think rationally and biblically about the factors that determine the degree of dogmatism we are willing to attach to any particular truth. As we practice placing our views on the pyramid, we are learning to think theologically.

THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT APPLIED TO LIFE

What are some of the benefits of this exercise? First, you are able to make *informed decisions about appropriate levels of fellowship*. For example, you may avoid close cooperation with any group that denies truth you consider dogma; participate in a limited way with those who have different doctrines; and accept wholeheartedly those who differ only in areas of theory or speculation.

Second, an understanding of the levels of theological thought can aid with *leadership decisions in the local church*. For instance, we may expect agreement on both dogma and doctrine issues when choosing pastors and elders, while general membership may require agreement only on matters of dogma. In effect, this is the sort of decision some Evangelical Free Churches have made regarding the current Statement of Faith—requiring agreement on only the first six points for new

members, but on all 12 for pastors and leaders.

Third, this exercise may help provide a *rational basis for doctrinal discipline*. If a scientist were to deny the validity of a scientific law, he would excommunicate himself from the scientific community. However, he is not normally treated as a pariah for either questioning or postulating a hypothesis (unless the pressure for politically correct thinking becomes too great).

So, too, theologians should not be silenced for espousing a theory that does not contradict the Statement of Faith under which they are operating. Those who contradict accepted dogma, however, *do* merit disciplinary action.

Finally, recognizing levels of theological thought is useful when it comes to *writing or evaluating a Statement of Faith*. In my opinion, a creed should state clearly those issues we believe are spelled out by Scripture to be dogma (truths of the highest degree of theological importance, exegetical certainty, biblical emphasis and historical uniformity). In addition, a Statement of Faith should steer completely clear of all matters that fall into the categories of theory or speculation, even if they are current "hot buttons."

The most difficult decisions in writing or evaluating a Statement of Faith come in determining what is doctrine. The more doctrines that are nailed down, the higher the price in theological freedom, creativity and critical thinking. The group as a whole may be more uniform, but it will also necessarily be more narrow and rigid. On the other hand, if the church or organization wants to keep a Statement of Faith brief by focusing primarily on dogma, it must be prepared to accept a significant level of diversity on certain controversial issues.

In the EFCA, our relatively brief statement has generally served us well; relatively few theological controversies have plagued us. The Spiritual Heritage Committee believes we should strengthen our Statement of Faith by adding any dogmas left out, eliminating any theory or speculation entirely, keeping doctrine issues to a minimum, and removing ambiguity wherever possible.

The ancient credo, "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity," should not be treated as a mere historical slogan. When properly understood and applied, it has the potential of keeping the church balanced and focused on proper priorities. ■

The Spiritual Heritage Committee has endeavored to carry out the logical implications of the EFCA's commitment to be unified on the essentials and yet tolerant on the nonessentials. This article offers a philosophical/theological basis for many of the committee's recommendations.



Mike Andrus is pastor of First EFC of Wichita, Kan., and a member of the Spiritual Heritage Committee.