

The Three Levels of Authority of Doctrine and Practice **Malcolm Webber**

If we are to be effective and balanced teachers of God's Word and leaders of God's people, we must recognize that our doctrines and practices have various *levels of authority*.

Jesus said there are certain matters that are "more important" than others:

...you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness... (Matt. 23:23)

By implication, this means there are some matters that are "less important." Our doctrines and practices have varying degrees of significance and of authority. They are not all of absolute importance and authority (although, of course, nothing in the Bible is unimportant).

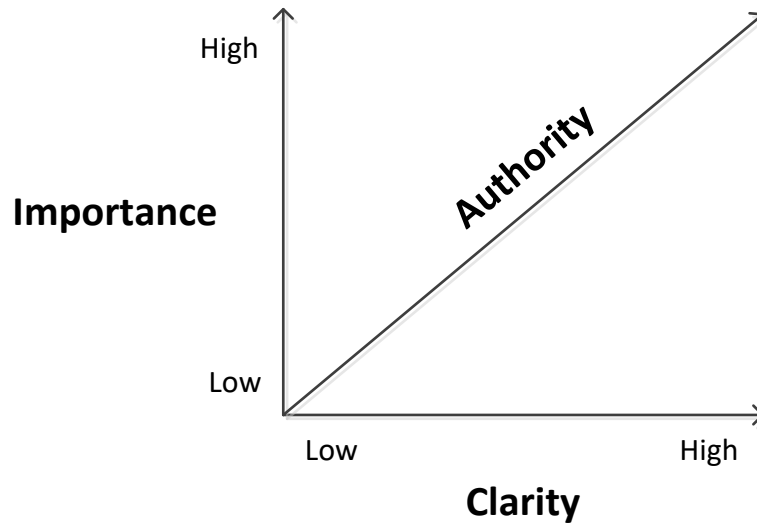
In Romans 14, Paul says that certain issues should not be quarreled over:

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. (Rom. 14:1)

Vital matters that are clearly taught in the Scripture – such as the deity of Christ, the substitutionary blood atonement, Jesus' virgin birth and bodily resurrection, justification by faith alone, the inerrancy of Scripture, the triunity of the Godhead, etc. – must never be compromised. These are the things for which you should be prepared to die and which you should defend even if it means causing division in the church.

However, issues such as the exact method of water baptism, the timing of the rapture, forms of worship, method of taking communion, or the appropriateness of Christians observing Christmas should not be the causes of church divisions. You should not divide churches over disagreements about the historical identity of the king called "Darius the Mede" in the Old Testament book of Daniel! You should be prepared to die for the deity of Christ, but not for someone's personal view about the meaning of the "head covering" in 1 Corinthians 11! In some churches we've worked with over the years, the women sincerely believe they should wear the head covering during public meetings. We respect that genuine conviction on their part.

The following graphic shows the relationship between a particular matter's importance and clarity and its subsequent authority.



As the importance and clarity of the doctrine or practice increases, its authority increases. However, if a matter is relatively less important or clear, then its authority decreases.

There are *three levels of authority of doctrines and practices*:¹

- Level 1: Absolutes
- Level 2: Convictions
- Level 3: Opinions

¹ To say there are exactly “three” levels is somewhat artificial and has no direct biblical basis. The general idea of differing levels of authority of doctrines is, however, thoroughly biblical. The designation of three levels used here helps us to grasp this valuable principle. We previously used a more complicated system of five levels: Level 1: Direct statements in Scripture; Level 2: Direct implications of Scripture; Level 3: Probable implications of Scripture; Level 4: Inductive conclusions from Scripture; Level 5: Speculations from Scripture.

Three Levels of Doctrine and Practice					
	These are...	These define...	Necessary for...	Biblical basis...	Can it change?
Level 1	Absolutes	All true Christians	Salvation	Clear and foundational matters of the Christian faith	No
Level 2	Convictions	Church distinctives	Corporate unity and effectiveness	Significant (sometimes strongly) but not a matter of salvation	Occasionally and carefully
Level 3	Opinions	Issues of conscience	Personal liberty	Peripheral	Yes

Level 1: Absolutes. To the extent that our doctrines and practices are built on direct statements and not on interpretations of Scripture, they have the highest level of authority. They are the direct, clear Word of God. There is little element of human interpretation involved. For example, the fact that Jesus is God is directly stated many times in the Bible:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1; cf. 20:28; Is. 9:6; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1; Heb. 1:8-9; etc.)

Moreover, faith in the deity of Christ is essential for salvation:

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 9)

Another example is justification by faith without the works of the law. Again, this doctrine is both clear and necessary for salvation:

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Rom. 3:28)

You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Gal. 5:4)

Level 1 doctrines are necessary for salvation and are built on direct statements of Scripture. These are doctrines for which we can, and should, be willing to die. These are the doctrines we need to believe to be saved. If we disagree with these doctrines, we are not saved.

Some other examples are Jesus' genuine humanity (1 Tim. 2:5; 2 John 9), His substitutionary blood atonement (Is. 53) and His bodily resurrection (Luke 24:39).

These matters can include "close interpretations" from the Scripture. Such may be interpretations, as opposed to direct statements, but they are very "close" interpretations, as opposed to "distant." These carry a high level of authority and should be taken very seriously. An example of this kind of doctrine is the triune nature of God. There is no verse that explicitly says, "God is three in one," yet there is much clear scriptural evidence for this truth.

Level 1 doctrines and practices are the core issues of the gospel. They are fundamental matters of salvation and of fellowship between believers. Level 1 issues are determined solely by the Scriptures; they are never built on human traditions alone. They are eternal and unchanging. They are the absolutes of the Christian faith.

There are many explicit examples of Absolutes in the New Testament:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! (Gal. 1:8-9)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. (1 Cor. 15:1-2)

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with

fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. (Rom. 16:17-18)

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. (2 John 7-11)

Level 2: Convictions. There is a much greater degree of interpretation involved in the formulation of these positions. The authority of these matters increases as the number and clarity of Scriptures used to support them increase (as long as those Scriptures are interpreted with accuracy and integrity).

Level 2 Convictions often become the particular “distinctives” between one Christian group and the next.

An example of such a doctrine would be the precise relationship of divine sovereignty to human responsibility. While many would argue this doctrine to be fairly clear from a study of the entire Bible, this is probably not a doctrine for which you should die. Another example is the method of water baptism that one uses or one’s position on divorce and remarriage. We all should believe, teach and practice

our convictions on these matters, but, if we differ on these issues, we should still be able to accept each other as believers as long as we agree on Level 1 Absolutes.

Often when we establish these convictions, we look at what the whole Bible says about something, seeking to understand it in the context of history and culture, trying to understand what the author originally intended by his words to those people in that place at that time, and prayerfully considering how to apply it to our lives now. There may be quite a lot of interpretation entailed in these conclusions, and the more interpretation involved, the less authoritative the position becomes. This doesn't automatically mean that such a conviction is wrong, but it does mean that we shouldn't burn someone at the stake simply because he disagrees with it!

Level 2 issues are addressed in the Scriptures in some form or another, but there may be a high level of interpretation involved in these doctrines. Other examples are: one's particular view concerning aspects of the Last Days, the correct mode of women's dress, the precise function of deacons, the role of women in the church, the meaning of the head-covering in 1 Corinthians 11, etc.

Many of our hallowed church traditions are actually Level 2 Convictions. To some believers these doctrines are absolutely clear. However, in reality, they are often not so clear. Problems arise when believers become dogmatic over Level 2 Convictions, and many churches have been divided or destroyed over such issues.

From a pragmatic perspective, Level 2 Convictions often form the basis for people's identification with a particular church or ministry. For example, Lutheran churches have a long tradition of infant baptism whereas Baptist churches generally oppose such a practice; thus, if you have a deep conviction in the appropriateness of infant baptism you'll probably be happier in a Lutheran church than in a Baptist one, and vice versa! At the same time, both Lutherans and Baptists should accept one another as fellow believers in Christ, as long as the absolutes are firmly held to.

In another example, Charismatic churches believe that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit exist and should be practiced today, whereas Christian Fundamentalist churches believe they do not. Again, those with a Fundamentalist conviction are unlikely to be entirely comfortable in a Charismatic church and vice versa.

One New Testament example of Level 2 matters is found in Acts 18:

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (Acts 18:24-26)

Apollos was a Christian teacher who “taught about Jesus accurately” (Acts 18:25). However, he was not properly instructed about Christian water baptism. He was saved, even though his doctrine and practice on water baptism were not correct. Priscilla and Aquila did not reject him because of his error, but, instead, they embraced him as a brother in Christ and “explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26).

This is a clear example of a Level 2 doctrine. It was a significant issue, but it was not a matter of salvation.

Then, in Acts 19:1-7, Paul found certain disciples at Ephesus, who, presumably, had been taught by Apollos, who needed the same kind of help in adjusting their understanding of both water baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Again, these were very important issues, but not matters of salvation. Although these Ephesian disciples were wrong about important things, they were, nevertheless, embraced and served as true brothers in Christ.

Another major New Testament example of Level 2 doctrine and practice relates to the keeping of the Mosaic Law.

The Law was a central part of the culture and tradition of the Jews. It was not wrong therefore that Jewish believers should continue to observe certain parts of it – as long as they did not do so to establish or maintain their righteousness before God.

Consider several passages in Acts that relate to Paul’s observance of certain parts of the Mosaic Law. Paul circumcised Timothy:

Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:3)

Paul took a vow himself:

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. (Acts 18:18)

He also purified himself and the Jews with him at Jerusalem:

The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them. (Acts 21:26)

Some have used these verses to try to prove that Paul “kept the law,” and therefore we should “keep the law” too. However, whatever these passages in Acts mean, they could not mean that Paul “kept the law” or that he intended us to “keep the law.” We know that because of the very clear statements Paul made in his letters that show we are definitely not “under the law” (Rom. 3:21; 6:14-15; 7:4-6; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14, 16-17; etc.). The testimony of the clear, repeated teachings of the New Testament is that we are not under the law. We do not have to keep it to be saved and we do not have to keep it to mature in holiness or spirituality.

When we consider the previous verses from Acts in the light of Paul’s entire teaching, we see that Paul was not, in fact, “keeping the law” to be right with God. Instead, his actions were intended to maintain his witness before the Jews. His concern was that he and the Jewish brothers with him should not bring an unnecessary offense to the Jews by violating the traditions and customs of the Jewish people.

Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:3)

The context of Paul’s purification in Acts 21:26 also makes this clear. Consider the previous verses:

The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that

you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. (Acts 21:18-24)

Thus Paul's concern was not to "keep the law" before God, but to keep the law before man – in the sense of maintaining the Jewish customs and traditions. For Paul this was a pragmatic issue of ministry strategy.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. (1 Cor. 9:20)

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor. 10:31 – 11:1)

On the other hand, it was very significant that Paul *refused* to circumcise Titus (Gal. 2:3-5). Titus was a Gentile and in this case the gospel as freedom for Gentiles was at stake (a Level 1 Absolute matter). Moreover, Paul told the (Gentile) Galatians that if they were circumcised, they would lose their very salvation (Gal. 5:1-4)! In Paul's mind, circumcision of a man with Jewish heritage for ministry among Jews (Timothy) and circumcision of Gentiles in order to have right standing with God as believers (Titus and the Galatians) were two radically different things!

Thus, Jewish believers were allowed, and even encouraged, to keep certain aspects of the Law, while Gentile believers, who had never been under Moses' Law, were not to. Both Jewish and Gentile believers were expected to receive the other in spite of their differences while holding fast to the Level 1 Absolute of justification by faith alone.

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does

so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Rom. 14:5-6)

Level 3: Opinions. These positions may be derived from a single statement or hint in the Scripture. Frequently they come from an obscure or unclear part of the Bible. They may also involve “spiritualization” of the Scriptures. They are “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1). These may be opinions, speculations or theories; they are often guesses. In spite of the fact that doctrines of this nature frequently become big issues in churches, nevertheless, in reality they possess little authority.

Here are some examples of these theories:

- Some say the distance of 2000 cubits between the Ark and the people in Joshua 3:4 represents the 2000 year period between Jesus’ resurrection and that of His people at His return. Of course, this is pure spiritualization and speculation. The difficulty with this interpretation is further compounded by the fact that some Hebrew texts (along with modern translations) say 1000 cubits!
- Some teach that Gideon’s Army in Judges 7 is a prophetic type of God’s “end-time army” that consists of an elite group of believers. One cult in China developed a large following with this teaching, and the leader claimed to be Christ Himself!
- Others combine Peter’s assertion that “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” (2 Pet. 3:8) with the six days of creation to suggest that there will be a total of only 6000 years of human history, before Christ returns to institute the Millennium – the “seventh day” of rest on the earth. This idea is nowhere found in the Scripture and is contradicted by the genealogies of Genesis (the difficulty of determining the exact time periods indicated by the genealogies in Genesis is compounded by the omission of links in them), which indicate a period of time somewhat longer than this, and also by the Early Church’s belief that Christ would return in their generation (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:17). If one reads Psalm 90:4, from which Peter quoted, it is obvious that the “thousand years” is intended to be understood poetically: “For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.”
- The “Gap theory” that says there was a “gap” between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis 1, during which time God created and then destroyed a “pre-Adamic race,” is another speculation that is nowhere taught in the Scriptures.
- Certain groups handle deadly snakes and drink poison as part of their worship times in “obedience” to Mark 16:18!

- The identity of the Antichrist.
- The meaning of the “baptism for the dead” in 1 Corinthians 15:29.

Even if your particular speculation is true it should never become the basis for accepting or rejecting others as Christians. Moreover, your church may have a particular tradition of some kind that you choose to hold to, but this should be recognized for what it is – a tradition. Again, it is not an Absolute and should not become the basis for division between God’s people. Human traditions can be changed and, many times, they need to be.

We must recognize the difference between Absolutes (Level 1), Convictions (Level 2) and Opinions (Level 3). This is where things can get particularly dangerous. It becomes a very serious problem when speculations are presented as possessing the same degree of authority as Level 1 Absolutes. Due to a lack of sound training, many church leaders and Christians do not have a balanced view of the degrees of doctrinal authority, but they have a “flat” theology in which everything they believe is considered to possess the same *absolute* authority. In such churches, aberrant speculations are believed and held to as zealously as direct statements of the Scriptures, and sometimes even more so.

Strangely, in some churches, Level 3 Opinions are stated and pursued as pure and absolute revelations from God, whereas foundational Level 1 Absolutes are disregarded as unimportant (“That’s just ‘doctrine,’ and ‘doctrine’ is not so important!”). Of course, the opposite is the truth: foundational doctrines are vitally important, opinions are not.

Obviously, you should not give your life for someone’s speculation. Unfortunately, however, in small, “cultic” churches, many believers have done just that.

We need to know the Word of God, and we need to know it in a balanced manner:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God’s work – which is by faith. (1 Tim. 1:3-4)

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do

with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned. (Tit. 3:9-11)

To both Timothy and Titus, Paul says, in essence, to avoid speculation and focus on sound doctrine that is solidly based on the Scriptures. Stop worrying about peripheral issues and get into the Word – into matters that count, matters that will build you up and help you fulfill God’s purpose.

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain. (Tit. 1:9-11)

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. (Jude 3)

Jude says to contend for “the faith.” He is speaking of foundational doctrine – the Absolutes. We should not contend for someone’s theory, however compelling it may seem.

For us to discern and fulfill the purpose of God for our lives, we need to know the Word, and to know the Word in a balanced way. We need to know the difference between a direct authoritative statement of Scripture on the one end of the scale, and a speculation from human reasoning or tradition on the other end. We need to rightly divide the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

People waste years and sometimes their whole lives, never coming close to their purpose in God, because they get caught up in their own or someone else’s religious speculations. This frequently happens in churches.

Furthermore, when a believer has a “flat” theology and he embraces all doctrines as Level 1 for which he should die, then he will be in trouble when someone points out the error of one of his (in reality Level 3) beliefs. This will frequently happen because Level 3 Opinions do not have a solid biblical basis and may be disproved easily. Since everything he believes forms the bedrock foundation of his Christian life – instead of only the Absolutes forming his foundation – he will suffer a spiritual crisis and will not know what to believe anymore. His entire belief system will unravel. On

the other hand, a believer who has a clear understanding of the different levels of authority of what he believes will be able to examine, adjust and occasionally reject, his lower-level beliefs, while safely holding to the doctrines that matter the most.

The Unity of the Spirit

It is a Level 1 Absolute that we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1-6)

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Cor. 1:10)

We should be patient and kind to one another as we strive for this. Significantly, Paul says we *maintain* the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) while we *grow* into *maturity* (Eph. 4:13):

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:3, 13)

Moreover, consider Paul's words in Philippians 3, after he has taught about the deep things of God:

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (Phil. 3:15-16)

Clearly, Christians in any church are at various degrees of maturity and understanding. There are many different levels of teaching they have received and experiences they have had. Some will not understand the deep things Paul has just

taught in previous verses. Significantly, Paul does not speak “down” to them, but as a friend. They may disagree with him, and if they do, Paul trusts God to help them see the Truth. Significantly, this refers to the deeper things of God. On the core issues of the faith, Paul does not allow such flexibility (e.g., Rom. 16:17-18; Gal. 1:8-9)!

Concerning the many *minor* issues about which Christians differ, you should:

1. Learn to distinguish between major issues and minor ones (Matt. 23:23). Build your life on the major issues.
2. Learn to distinguish between matters of command and matters of freedom (Rom. 14:14, 20).
3. On debatable issues, cultivate your own convictions (Rom. 14:5). In Philippians 3, Paul shows us the balance: live according to your own conscience (v. 16) but give your brother the freedom to grow in his convictions (v. 15).
4. On peripheral matters, allow your brother the freedom to determine his own convictions – even when they differ from yours (Rom. 14:1-2).
5. Let your liberty be limited, when necessary, by love (Rom. 14:13 – 15:2).
6. Follow Christ as the Model and Motivator of servanthood (Rom. 15:1-3; Phil. 2:1-11).
7. Pursue unity among the brethren (Rom. 15:5-7). This appeal for unity is a direct and clear commandment of Scripture!

In particular, Romans 14:1 – 15:7 and 1 Corinthians 8:7-13 provide detailed examples of how we should treat one another when it comes to Level 2 and 3 matters.

Church Traditions

It would be wonderful if all our church traditions were based directly on Level 1 Absolutes! However, that is simply not the case. Many of our church traditions are, in fact, Level 2 or 3 positions and they should be recognized as such. Our many Level 2 Convictions are not necessarily infallible and they should be able to be evaluated and changed if necessary—especially the strategic convictions. Moreover, our many Level 3 Opinions should never become the basis for disfellowshipping or alienating fellow believers.

God has commanded us to work hard to maintain the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3).

Determining Which Is Which

Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive, systematic list in the Bible of which doctrine or practice is which level. Moreover, Romans 14:1 – 15:13 shows that one man's Level 1 issue may be another man's Level 3!

Consequently, we should not become legalistic about this, but instead use this approach as a framework to help us think, teach and act in a healthy, balanced way, avoiding the extremes that have been so destructive in the church.

In determining the Level 1 Absolutes we must look directly at the Scriptures, learning from the hard-won lessons of 2000 years of church history of doctrine and practice. Don't be too hasty to declare new Level 1 Absolutes that are not *already* universally accepted as such by the broader Bible-believing church. Our Absolutes should be confirmed by others. It's highly unlikely that God has waited 2000 years to give you a brand new core revelation of indispensable truth!

Generally, Level 1 Absolutes should be matters of salvation and clearly taught in the Scriptures. We should be willing to die for such matters. If necessary, these are things the church should be divided over.

Moreover, as a general rule, if *everything* in your set of beliefs and practices is Level 1 then your system is *certainly* imbalanced!

Regarding Level 2 Convictions, we should be careful about transforming local traditions or preferences into universal standards of fellowship. It's fine to hold to our convictions while recognizing there are other true believers who have different ones. We should be realistic about church and ministry partnerships in view of our varying Convictions, while openly engaging with others to share with them and learn from them. If we realize that we're wrong in some areas and that we need to change our Convictions, then this can be done prayerfully and carefully.

Even if our Level 2 Convictions are clearly established upon the Word of God, we should still acknowledge and respect those who truly serve God in spite of their differing views.

Regarding Level 3 Opinions, we must be able to tell a "wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14) from the core truths of the Gospel. We must avoid elevating pet ideas to the level of Absolutes, refusing to use doctrinal difference as a means of competitive self-

exaltation or causing hurt towards others. In all things we should be motivated by self-giving love toward those for whom Jesus died, putting their interests before our own (Phil. 2:3-4).

Let us not be guilty of the sins of Diotrephes (3 John 9-11) when we should rather be following the examples of Gaius and Demetrius (3 John 1-8, 12).

Some Examples

Following are a number of examples of the three levels of doctrine and practice.

Examples of the Three Levels of Doctrine and Practice				
	Revelation	Inspiration of Scripture	The Godhead	Creation
Level 1 Absolutes	We can only personally know God through His own self-revelation	Scriptures are inspired and inerrant in the original documents	The eternal triunity of God. The deity and humanity of Christ. The deity and personality of the Holy Spirit.	God alone, the Living God, is the Creator of all things. Nothing is co-eternal with God. Jesus is the Creator.
Level 2 Convictions	Are the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit present in the church today?	Preferred texts and translations	Emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit today. Progress of the Son's self-awareness of Deity.	Did God use any form of evolution? Old earth or young earth?
Level 3 Opinions	Discerning the specific direction of the Holy Spirit	Preferred translation theory – literal or dynamic equivalence	Should we address God as "Father" or "Abba," or "Mighty God"? The use of formal language (Thee and Thou) in worship.	Exactly how old is the earth? The "Gap Theory" What was the "mark of Cain"?

Examples of the Three Levels of Doctrine and Practice				
	Jesus' Death and Resurrection	Worship	Spiritual Warfare	Eschatology
Level 1 Absolutes	<p>Jesus paid the penalty of our sins by giving His sinless life as a sacrifice in our place.</p> <p>Then He rose bodily from the dead.</p>	<p>We should worship God.</p> <p>We should practice water baptism and the communion of the bread and cup.</p>	<p>We're in a daily battle with a real spiritual enemy over whom we have victory through Jesus' death and resurrection.</p>	<p>Jesus will return, bodily, to the earth.</p>
Level 2 Convictions	<p>Use of a "sinner's prayer" in receiving Christ.</p>	<p>Particular methods of practicing water baptism, and the communion of the bread and cup.</p>	<p>Can a Christian have a demon?</p>	<p>Various views regarding the Millennium: Premillennialism, Postmillennialism and Amillennialism.</p>
Level 3 Opinions	<p>Exactly what happened to Christ between His death on the cross and His resurrection?</p> <p>The specific timing of our participation in the resurrection.</p> <p>The specifics of our glorified bodies.</p>	<p>Style of worship and order of events in the church's meetings.</p>	<p>Specific forms of prayer used in spiritual warfare.</p> <p>The specific hierarchy of the demonic kingdom.</p> <p>The origin of demons.</p>	<p>The timing of the rapture.</p>

Examples of the Three Levels of Doctrine and Practice				
	Salvation	Women	Church Life	Children
Level 1 Absolutes	We are saved by grace through faith.	Men and women are equally sinful and in need of a Savior. Both Christian men and women are equally saved through Jesus' blood. Both have equal access to God, and are equally loved and valued by Him.	God has set all believers in the Church.	Children can know God, love God and serve God.
Level 2 Convictions	The relationship of grace to the Mosaic Law.	The specific role of women in leadership in the home and church.	There are many different churches around the world with varying convictions but they're still believers.	What the right age is for a child to be baptized.
Level 3 Opinions	Specific forms of dress for Christian men and women	The practice of the "head-covering."	Should the local church have a membership roll?	What sort of toys children should play with. How children should be educated.