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## Levels of Belief in the Pauline Epistles

### A Paradigm for Evangelical Unity

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In *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis attempts to present a "core" of Christianity that is transdenominational and transcreedal.

So far as I can judge from reviews and from the numerous letters written to me, the book, however faulty in other respects, did at least succeed in presenting an agreed, or common, or central, or "mere" Christianity. . . . The [result] turns out to be something not only positive but pungent; divided from all non-Christian beliefs by a chasm to which the worst divisions inside Christendom are not really comparable at all.<sup>1</sup>

In the remainder of the book Lewis in essence establishes two categories of views; those which are a part of "mere" Christianity and those which are not.

But is not this sort of distinction unbiblical? Is not everything in Scripture equally essential? Should not believers, once they understand a passage, hold its truth as firmly as they do that of any other passage? In this sense should not every teaching of Scripture be a part of "mere" Christianity?

The answer to each of these questions must be a firm "no." The New Testament writers themselves held more than one category of "belief strength." They held some beliefs as non-negotiable for all Christians, others as matters of individual conscience on which believers could have diversity of belief without disunity, and others as solely matters of personal preference.<sup>2</sup>

Today here are dozens of claimants to "essential belief" status.<sup>3</sup> The need in for restoring a unity based on a distinction between what is central in the Christian faith and what is secondary is as great as it was when Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* nearly fifty years ago.

But how can this distinction be consistently accomplished? The solution would be a means of sorting out and agreeing upon what is crucial and central to orthodox doctrine and distinguishing what is valuable but secondary. To this end, we propose a three-fold paradigm based on precedents in Paul's epistles. The remainder of this article will delineate this paradigm and examine two examples of potential application.

## I. Pauline Levels of Belief

In determining a means of sorting out and agreeing upon what is vital and central to orthodox doctrine and distinguishing what is valuable but secondary, the crucial question is, "Does the new Testament ever indicate a method of determining the importance of levels of doctrine, or do the writers ever employ such a method?" We think the answer is, "yes," and that Paul provides a paradigm which will be useful for contemporary evangelicals.

One level of belief can be found in Romans 14. In verse five Paul states, "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully persuaded [plerophoreo] in his own mind." It is important to observe that while each person is to be fully persuaded, Paul is not insisting on uniformity of view between "fully persuaded" believers. Each person is to have his or her own belief, yet the group is to express unity.

"Persuaded" [plerophoreo] in the noun and verb forms occurs only eight other times in the New Testament, always carrying the sense of "full assurance" or of being "fully persuaded." In Romans 4:21 Paul describes Abraham's great faith in God as "...being fully persuaded, that what He had promised, He was able also to perform." In Colossians 2:2 the Apostle grieves for the Laodiceans "that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding . . ." Here Paul's wish is for comfort and unity combined with full assurance [plerophoreo]. Plerophoreo, therefore, is a strong term meaning, "having a filled-in, settled belief."<sup>4</sup> Under initial inspection it might seem that Paul is speaking here of the very strongest possible level of theological conviction.

However, as his argument continues it becomes clear that this "full persuasion" should not be used as a basis of dividing personal fellowship with another believer or even thinking ill of him. Paul goes on to say,

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the the judgment seat of God. . . . Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. (Romans 14:10-13)

It is possible to have a "full persuasion" concerning a matter of faith or practice and yet not feel the need to break personal fellowship with those in the Body of Christ who strongly disagree. Biblically no negative action is required; we are called to fully accept the person of our brother or sister and let God be the judge. If the freedom to have separate churches or various Christian leads a believer to have contempt for or to think less of his brothers and sisters in Christ, then he is using his freedom in an unbiblical way.

Some might object that what Paul has in mind in this passage are matters of Christian behavior that are in themselves indifferent<sup>5</sup> and that these principles cannot necessarily be applied to doctrinal

controversy. But, as Shedd states, commenting on verse five, "... this is the general principle of action, in reference to points not essential to salvation."<sup>6</sup> In this broader view Shedd follows Luther and more specifically, Calvin:

So Paul is saying that there are many issues on which an individual mature believer may have a settled full persuasion and yet not be justified in judging his brother. The principle he draws is larger than any single issue: "Who are you to judge the servant of another"( vs. 4).<sup>7</sup>

But certainly some reasonable limitation must be placed on how far the principle of this passage can be generalized. Paul is definitely not endorsing an undiscerning, vague tolerance in all doctrinal matters, nor is he affirming that truth in doctrinal matters is unimportant or unobtainable.

As noted above, for Shedd the dividing line is that which is not essential for salvation. He concludes about Martin Luther concludes similarly:

Thus, Luther believed that there were matters worth disputing and even those which warrant breaking Christian fellowship, as he showed in his life. He broke with the Roman church over salvation issues, but refused to break with other protestants over lesser issues.<sup>8</sup>

This brief study of Romans 14 has shown that Paul held a category of belief that was a "firm persuasion" where he wanted each person to have a firm belief, yet nonetheless advocated a tolerant acceptance of those who disagreed.

Following Shedd and Luther, we also propose that the proper dividing line between such persuasions and deeper convictions, which would warrant confrontation and a risk of division, should be whether the beliefs in question are essential to having a right relationship with God.

Once it is established that Paul had a category of belief that may properly be called persuasions, the belief level of "convictions" must likewise be explored. Is there any evidence that the Apostle Paul was willing to risk dividing the body over "conviction" level issues, for example when a salvation or gospel matter was at stake? Exactly such a case can be found in Galatians.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "if you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Galatians 2:11-14

While the issue of eating or abstaining from non-kosher food might be, in itself, a matter Paul would

leave to individual persuasion (Romans 14:1), a far more serious issue was at stake in Antioch.

Peter's behavior, whether it was intentional or not, was threatening the unity of the body of Christ and confusing the means of salvation. Peter's motive and means of withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles challenged the "truth of the gospel" that Paul had been preaching. Specifically Peter was tacitly challenging the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, as the apostle makes clear in verse 16.<sup>9</sup> Paul was willing to take a strong public stand because the issue was "essential to salvation." John Brown comments that the conduct of Peter and the other Jews seemed "calculated to throw obscurity and doubt on the true gospel".<sup>10</sup>

The phrase, "the truth of the gospel" also occurs in verse 5 where it is used in a nearly identical fashion.<sup>11</sup> In this instance Paul is again making a "conviction" level stand, not yielding in subjection "for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you." Ridderbos states:

At issue, after all, was not merely the question of whether or not Titus ought to be circumcised, but also that of the truth of the gospel: that is, its true, unmodified content. ... Paul indicates that in taking this stand he had the churches of Galatia in his mind's eye. He wanted no damage done to the essence of the gospel once preached to them.<sup>12</sup>

Paul was willing to stand and fight, even risking a public controversy, because the issue of circumcision struck at the heart of the gospel and any compromise at this point would be tantamount to a loss of the gospel itself!

Thus, in both of the instances recounted in Galatians 2, Paul is acting from convictions concerning matters crucial to salvation. These are not "mere" persuasions where the Apostle, although certain he is right, can allow other believers to disagree. Paul is willing, in such cases, to risk the very unity he had spent so much of his life to build. The rationale for such a deep risk is that it concerns the very heart and truth of the gospel.

A final "level" of belief can be discovered in Paul's treatment of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. In dealing with the question of celibacy he says:

This I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. (vs. 7-8)

The word for wish is *thelo* which in this context expresses "desire" or "design." *Thelo* is a common word, being found more than 200 times in the New Testament. Frequently it simply means "will" or "would" but on occasion the word takes on the more tentative nuance of a wish or desire. The apostle uses the word three other times in this chapter. In verse 36 Paul says a man may do what he wishes with regard to his virgin and let her marry. Clearly this is not what Paul wishes he would do but he is giving

permission for the man to carry out his own preference. Again in verse 39, Paul says a widow may marry whom she wishes and in verse 32 he says, "I want (*thelo*) you to be free from concern." In each case Paul is using the word in the sense of desire, a personal element with a meaning certainly far removed from the idea of a conviction.

In chapter 14 of I Corinthians, Paul says, "Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you prophecy." (v. 5) Here is a theoretical or hypothetical usage of *thelo*. Paul knows that his wish cannot come to pass; he has just said, "All do not speak in tongues, do they?" He is saying, in effect, "It would be nice if everyone could have all the gifts, but . . . ." The focus is a personal wish, even a desire contrary to known fact.

A similar, though far more serious, usage of *thelo* comes from the lips of our Lord in Gethsemane. When Jesus prays, "let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will (*thelo*) but as Thou wilt," it certainly was not His conviction or even his persuasion that the cup would pass; it was simply His own wish to avoid the suffering that was before Him.

Therefore, while *thelo* can have a more general meaning, it frequently carries the sense of a strictly personal or even hypothetical wish. So when Paul says, "I wish all were like me," it is best understood as his expression of an opinion that the celibate state is the best.

Perhaps an even clearer example of Paul expressing an "opinion" is found in 1 Corinthians 7:40. In advising the widow he says, "But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think I also have the Spirit of God." "Opinion" is *gnoman* (from the verb *ginosko*, to know) and used this way could mean a "judgement" or "opinion." But to interpret this word as "judgement" in the sense of authoritatively handing down a directive does not make sense in the context. Paul has just said that she is free to marry (v. 39), so this is not a command, simply a friendly opinion from Paul.

The apostle undoubtedly expected his directives in verse 12 to be obeyed for he concludes the subject in verse 17 with "and thus I direct (*diatassomai*) . . ." There is no hint of a disclaimer, no room left for individual conscience. But verses 25 and 40 are quite different. Clearly neither of these is in the nature of a universal directive; each carries a disclaimer in a nearby verse. It is important to note that the levels being delineated in this article do not refer to the psychological or subjective "strength" with which one holds a belief, but with a complex of the surety of the belief's certainty and of the importance of the belief in comparison with other true beliefs. An individual might feel very strongly about an issue and still choose, based on biblical or theological criteria, to class his view as a persuasion or an opinion rather than a conviction.

In three chapters of different Pauline epistles, the apostle displays three levels or strengths of beliefs. While "convictions," "persuasions" and "opinions" are not all in evidence in the same passage and so the tri-level paradigm cannot be shown to be specifically taught, it is clear that the believer has a strong biblical basis for not holding all his views at a conviction level. Thus, not all issues warrant the breaking of personal or corporate fellowship. In fact in some issues we are commanded not to judge other

believers.

When there is disagreement regarding convictions it must be brought to the church's public attention, via the elders or leaders, and the orthodoxy of the view either established or denied. If one party is unorthodox and will not change, we are to separate personal fellowship over this as a matter of the purity of the gospel. In institutional practice we often separate membership from a local church or a Christian agency over convictions.

If there is a difference of belief content on a persuasion level issue, then we are each to be fully persuaded and to hold on to our beliefs and practices. These are not sufficiently important to openly break the unity of the church. However, if these persuasions are sufficiently important to the instituting body that they have been written into a statement of faith, then a person should be denied membership or dismissed from membership if he disagrees. In this case a persuasion may serve as a 'boundary statement' even though the issue may not be one of the purity of the gospel. In creating or recognizing differences we must be careful not to impugn the spirituality or integrity of those with whom we disagree at a persuasion level.

Finally, on matters of opinion we are to allow everyone to have his or her own opinion and to live together in loving harmony.

## II. Application

Three levels of belief have been explored. Convictions are those beliefs which are crucial to the doctrine of salvation. A believer must be willing to confront and, if necessary, break fellowship with those who disagree. Persuasions concern secondary matters of faith and practice about which the Christian has firm, settled beliefs. These may lead us in the initial choice of a church fellowship, but they are not of sufficient weight that we will judge another Christian or break personal fellowship. Finally, opinions are beliefs which a Christian feels are correct, but where he feels that there may not be one right answer for all believers and thus gives great latitude to other believers in their faith and practice.

We want to examine two current examples of doctrinal controversy which have implications for both faith and practice and see what the paradigm will direct us to do. These and other similar issues are an important test of the utility of this paradigm.

1. Inerrancy. In the heat of the debate that followed the publication of Lindsell's *Battle for the Bible*, Carl Henry wrote disapprovingly that:

Christianity Today has come to make inerrancy the badge of evangelical authenticity. Francis Schaeffer projects it as the watershed of evangelical fidelity and deplors a "false evangelicalism" that minimizes inerrancy.<sup>13</sup>

Henry then explains that this was not Christianity Today's founding philosophy under his own

leadership. Although the magazine was editorially committed to inerrancy, its contributors "were drawn from the broad evangelical spectrum to wage literary battle against non-evangelical perspectives."<sup>14</sup> Henry quotes Hodge and Warfield to support his position.

Lindsell treats inerrancy as a conviction level belief. Henry treats it as a persuasion level belief, and holds the larger issue of the overall authority of the Bible as a conviction level belief. Both men are committed to inerrancy, but they differ over the appropriate level of belief to hold the doctrine and, therefore, over how to treat non-inerrantists. We can more clearly frame the question as:

What should be the stance of an individual or institution which holds inerrancy as a belief? Is it a conviction (essential to salvation) level belief or a persuasion (very important but non-essential to salvation) level belief?

This raises the secondary question of how we treat non-inerrantists who claim to be evangelicals but deny, or refuse to affirm, inerrancy. If inerrancy is taken as a conviction, then the person who refuses it is perverting the gospel and must be excluded from fellowship. If inerrancy is a persuasion, then we are to be fully persuaded in our own minds but not to break fellowship with someone who disagrees.

It also raises a third question of how we treat evangelicals who hold to inerrancy but disagree that it is a conviction level belief. Henry firmly holds that the scripture is without error (presumably he holds this as a strong persuasion). But if he refuses to hold this as a conviction and thus denies what another evangelical holds to be an essential doctrine of the faith. Is he thereby perverting the gospel? A Christian may be bound to break fellowship or refuse cooperation with an individual who denies a central doctrine of scripture, but should still fully embrace a believer who firmly holds the doctrine in question, even if it is a persuasion.

A fourth and final question might be, 'if inerrancy should be only a persuasion, is it valid for some evangelical institutions to exclude from membership those who affirm other cardinal doctrines of Christianity but eschew inerrancy?'

After considerable study, thought, and discussion, we have concluded that the authority of the Bible is a conviction level belief (the content and clarity of the salvation message are tied up in the authority of the Bible) and that the inerrancy of the Bible is a correct doctrine concerning which we are fully persuaded. This seems to be the position of the International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy (and its Chicago Statement) and the Evangelical Affirmations Central Committee. Henry served on both of these as did one of the present authors; we agree with what we understand to be Henry's position.

Further, given that separation of fellowship is appropriate when there is disagreement concerning convictions, we do not see biblically that Henry's position is one over which we should break fellowship. Therefore, both our own study and the common sense result of the test of a conviction lead us to hold biblical authority as a conviction and inerrancy as a persuasion.

We also believe that it is valid for evangelical institutions to include inerrancy in 'boundary statements' such as doctrinal statements or statements of faith so long as this is not meant to imply that members should rebuke or divide fellowship with all who claim to be evangelical Christians but cannot affirm inerrancy. Parachurch entities such as evangelistic organizations, seminaries, and theological societies are groups of Christians called together for specific purposes more narrow in scope than the calling of the church universal. Thus it seems reasonable that membership in such organizations could be restricted on many bases (including doctrinal ones) to forward specific goals or purposes. For example we believe the inclusion of the word "inerrancy" in the Doctrinal Basis of Campus Crusade for Christ is appropriate given its purpose statement. It is likely that there are some staff members who view inerrancy as a conviction and others who hold it as a persuasion, as we do<sup>15</sup> It is also likely there are many staff (perhaps most) who have never thought about such a distinction, and simply believe that the Bible is completely true.

Our conclusion is that the Bible is inerrant but that this belief should be a persuasion not a conviction, since belief in inerrancy is not necessary for salvation. We can in good faith belong to and support institutions which include inerrancy in their boundary statements but would not denounce otherwise orthodox evangelicals who disavow inerrancy.<sup>16</sup>

2. Creationism. Specifically we wish to examine the topic of the creation days of Genesis one. Is the belief that the days of Genesis one were literal 24 hour days of creation essential to the Christian faith? Should this belief be held as a conviction, a persuasion or an opinion?

Some advocates of the literal day theory think it is a conviction. Richard Niessen concludes, "The day-age theory...is not permitted by Scripture and is therefore false. Elijah said, "How long will you waver between two opinions . . . (I Kings 18:21)".<sup>17</sup> Since Elijah was asking the people to choose between God and Baal, Niessen seems to be implying that Christians who believe the day-age theory are similar to the Israelites who followed Baal.

Not all evangelicals agree. Gleason Archer summarizes his position: "Obviously the "days" represent stages of unspecified length, not literal twenty-four-hour days."<sup>18</sup> This is given as a disagreement of content. Archer does not state whether he holds the day-stage theory as a conviction or a persuasion or an opinion. Based on his writings and our interactions with him it seems clear that it would in any case not be a conviction.

Here we have a difference not only of content but of the importance of the issue. The levels of belief paradigm might be applied to this controversy in the following fashion.

All evangelicals can agree that God is the Creator, the ultimate source of all that exists. This should probably be held at the conviction level, since if God did not create humanity then we are not accountable to God and may not need salvation. But the exact timing of the creation can be left open without effecting the doctrine of salvation. Each person may be fully persuaded as to the correctness of his or her position on the timing and may freely teach his position within his church or school. A church

or school may even wish to take a formal position on the issue. Alternatively, a church or school may wish to hold this as an opinion level belief and allow each teacher or pastor to be persuaded without imposing the belief on every faculty member, student or church member. While scholars may want to discuss or even debate the issue, they need not imply that those who disagree are somehow similar to those who have deserted the faith for other gods.

### III. Conclusion

Extensive further development of a paradigm of this sort could be a great boon to the Christian world. Increased clarity concerning what is truly central and crucial and what is not could assist in promoting cooperative efforts in evangelism, discipleship, church growth, missions, and education. Decisions concerning when to separate personal or corporate fellowship and how to treat someone who disagrees would have a sharper focus and, in some cases, a more biblical grounding.

The evangelical community needs a careful, thorough, and lucid systematic approach to beliefs in order to delineate what is central and non-negotiable in the Christian faith from what is valuable but secondary. We believe that this paradigm provides such an approach.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1943), p.8.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Clinton, "A Central Theme for A Doctrine of the Christian Life," ETS Far Western Region Address, 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Frederic Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1883; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Dregel Publications, 1977), p. 456.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921), p. 348.

<sup>5</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (NY: Scribner's, 1879), p. 391.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 382-383.

<sup>7</sup>John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 290.

<sup>8</sup>Luther, Lectures, p. 382-383.

<sup>9</sup>He was willing to develop separate styles of worship and discuss them with other protestants, which led to maintaining separate spheres of influence. This is an historical example of rigid separation over issues of conviction and separation but mutual tolerance and acceptance regarding issues of persuasion.

<sup>10</sup>John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace, 1957), pp. 87-88. See also John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1884), p. 156.

<sup>11</sup>Samuel Driver, Alfred Plummer, and Charles Briggs, eds. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921). also, Earnest Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* ( ), p. 11. also, J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 107. also, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 115.

<sup>12</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), trans. Henry Zylstra, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup>Carl Henry, "Conflict over Biblical Inerrancy," *Christianity Today*, May 7, 1976, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup>The present authors hold that inerrancy is true because it is clearly taught in Scripture itself and also because we believe inerrancy to be logically implied by the authority of scripture, which we hold at a conviction level.

<sup>16</sup>But we would support exclusion from CCC staff anyone who could not, without reservation, affirm innerrancy; this is, we believe, a matter of simple integrity. We do not, therefore, believe that 'exclusion from membership' is in any way equivalent to 'breaking fellowship.'

<sup>17</sup>Richard Niessen, "Theistic Evolution and the Day-Age Theory," *Impact*, March 1980, p. viii.

<sup>18</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, revised edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 186. cf. Mike Popovich and Stephen Clinton, "Scientific Model Building and Christian Theism," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society*, 4 (1981):68-76.