



Step One: Theological Triage Tool

Biblical unity in ministry must be grounded upon theological discussion, reflection, and agreement. But not every Christian organization needs the same level of unity because not every Christian organization is bound to the same mission and goals. Elders of a local church, for example, need unity on the issues of baptism and church polity. Meanwhile, the board for a pro-life non-profit may only require unity on “first-order issues” (i.e., beliefs which separate Christianity from other religions).

Clear factors for alignment are essential to partnerships with gospel integrity.¹ Yet sadly, points of lesser distinction often become grounds for exclusion where an organization’s gospel witness is weakened.²

In *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Gavin Ortlund plots a course away from unnecessarily over-defining the issues we hold sacred. He reminds us, “It might initially sound good to say that ‘all doctrines are equally important,’ but it is a difficult statement to justify biblically. Paul, for instance, speaks of the gospel as a matter of ‘first importance’ (1 Cor. 15:3). On other topics, he often gives Christians greater latitude to disagree.”³ Ortlund isn’t advocating for a malleable unity with indiscernible borders, nor does he think mere agreement on the gospel is sufficient as a basis for organizational unity. Ortlund warns, “If we stop at this basic distinction, we risk obscuring the significance of secondary doctrines. . . Doctrines can be ‘secondary’ or ‘nonessential’ to the gospel and yet still make a difference in *how we uphold* the gospel.”⁴

Broadly speaking, Christian leadership should measure and rank doctrines by the degree to which they are:

- rooted in biblical clarity

¹ “For Christians to be linked in association with ministers who do not preach the gospel of Christ is to incur moral guilt. A union which can continue irrespective of whether its members’ churches belong to a common faith is not fulfilling any scriptural function. The preservation of a denominational association when it is powerless to discipline heretics cannot be justified on the ground of the preservation of ‘Christian unity.’ It is error which breaks the unity of churches, and to remain in a denominational alignment which condones error is to support schism” (Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 158).

² Note Jesus’s prayer in John 17:21, that those who believe in his word “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

³ Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 29.

⁴ Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills*, 47.

- connected to the importance of the gospel
- anchored in church history
- fruitful in the church today
- holding the greatest bearing as it relates to our shared work and mission.⁵

To apply these categories, Ortlund proposes we rank beliefs according to a four-tier scale: *essential, urgent, important, or indifferent*.⁶ We will adapt Ortlund's tiers by adding four "hand gestures" to represent how tightly or loosely we hold to certain beliefs and expressions.

1. **Essential: Two fists closed** (*No Association*). We hold this tightly, and we could not partner or associate with those who disagree.
2. **Urgent: Left hand open, right hand closed** (*Association, Not Partnership*). We would associate relationally and may even affirm aspects of the leader and/or church, but differences on such issues would not allow us to enjoy formal partnership.
3. **Important: Right hand open, left hand closed** (*Partnership with Acceptable Differences*). Even though there are differences, we would open "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9) to partner together formally.
4. **Indifferent: Two hands open** (*Partnership, No Issues*). We recognize the legitimacy of other views,. As a result, disagreement over such issues would not impede a glad partnership.

The tool below exists to help teams explore their theological alignment. Each group should adapt the tool by identifying the most delicate or controversial issues within your group. These will emerge from considering your statement of faith, your values, your recent history, and, probably, your most common criticisms.

Below you will find a blank template of the tool followed by one already customized (for the board of Great Commission Collective) so you can observe how the tool is applied.

When customizing your own tool, take the following steps:

1. Create the broad categories for discussion (Baptism, Creation, Millennial position, etc).
2. Import your own definition under the "Common Position" and then follow it up with an example that strays from the ideal (see below).
3. Send out a blank-but-customized copy of the tool to each team member and invite them to complete it.
4. Block out several meetings to discuss the responses under each category. The goal is not complete agreement on all areas. The goal is first to understand where each team member stands and why each leader ranks an area in the way they do.

⁵ In identifying these guidelines, I was helped by the four questions presented in Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills*, 79.

⁶Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills*, 47.

GCC STATEMENT OF FAITH (ISSUE)	Essential (2 fists)	Urgent (L-open R-closed)	Important (R-open L-closed)	Indifferent (both open)
<p><i>Baptism</i></p> <p>Common Position: Immersion, upon profession of faith, performed before the church, as an outward expression of the inner reality of salvation and association with Christ. It does not complete the believer’s salvation, nor result in a sign gift.</p> <p>Example: A church is charging its members to go out and baptize (by immersion) anyone who professes faith in response to the gospel – wherever and with whoever, in whatever body of water you can find!</p>				
<p><i>Creation</i></p> <p>Common Position: A literal, 6-day creation where God brought everything that exists into being out of nothing as described in Genesis 1-2.</p> <p>Example: A pastor holds that God brought everything into being out of nothing, and that he intentionally ordered it, but that ultimately this played out over much longer periods of time and was arranged in Genesis as one ‘week’ for literary and structural purposes rather than for literal interpretation.</p>				
<p><i>Elder-rule</i></p> <p>Common Position: Authority and accountability for governing and leading the local church rests upon a plurality of gifted, biblically qualified men.</p> <p>Example: A church is functionally elder-rule, but those elders derive some authorization from the congregation, who</p>				

<p>exercises affirmation through voting on elder appointments and budgets.</p>				
<p><i>Millennial Position</i></p> <p>Our Historical Position: Christ will return in bodily form, at which point he will begin his present, visible 1000 year reign on the earth, culminating in the final judgment (premillennial).</p> <p>Example: A pastor believes that the millennial reign referred to in Revelation is playing out now under Christ's authority, rather than at a future point where it will take place literally on the earth. At the conclusion of this period, he believes Christ will return in bodily form and bring about final victory and the judgment, establishing the new heaven and new earth.</p>				
<p><i>Women Deacons</i></p> <p>Popular Position: The office of deacon in churches where there are elders, examined in Scripture passages that reference deacons and observed in the practices of the early church, is open to both men and women.</p> <p>Example:</p>				
<p><i>Continuationism</i></p> <p>Common Position: The Spirit's power and the spiritual gifts, described in the New Testament, "continue" after the canon of Scripture has closed.</p> <p>Example: A church with decidedly passionate worship periodically has members share prophetic words in a Sunday meeting. They also openly ask the Spirit to come upon them in power.</p>				
<p><i>Reformed Soteriology</i></p>				

<p>Common Position: Man, in his fallen depravity, is not capable of seeking God, rendering salvation in Christ through faith a gift given entirely out of the sovereign will and grace of God.</p> <p>Example: A church has varying views among its elders related to the level of man's will interacting with God's sovereignty in salvation. As a result, they avoid wading into these issues directly from the pulpit, so as to engage as many people as possible with Jesus without alienating any.</p>				
<p>GCC CHURCH ATTRIBUTES (Not all attributes are present)</p>				
<p><i>Bold Preaching</i></p> <p>Position: Unapologetic exposition and application of the word of God.</p> <p>Example: Though he regularly refers to and explains the Bible as he preaches, a pastor believes that topical series aimed at relevant issues for the congregation is the best way to preach.</p>				
<p><i>Purposeful Discipleship</i></p> <p>Position: Maturing believers making disciples.</p> <p>Example: A church's primary discipleship expressions revolve around Sunday school-type classes and periodic Bible studies. The question pushed forward is, "Must a church observe or avoid a certain discipleship methodology to partner with GCC?"</p>				
<p><i>Passionate Worship</i></p> <p>Position: Worship that engages our deepest affections for God and expresses</p>				

<p>the truth of his faithfulness, glory, and the redemptive work of Christ.</p> <p>Examples: The musical worship is expressly vertical and focuses on the truth of the gospel, but the style is more liturgically reflective, oriented around hymns, responsive readings, and pastoral prayers.</p>				
<p><i>Strategic Church Planting</i></p> <p>Position: Partnerships that multiply churches around the world.</p> <p>Example: A church is committed to church planting through a home-based model where elders lead groups, teaching happens, and sacraments are administered, but a Sunday gathering happens only one or two times a month.</p>				
<p>GCC CULTURAL VALUES (Not all values are present)</p>				
<p><i>Gospel Integrity</i></p> <p>We ensure the gospel is the theological center for our leadership, preaching, and churches.</p>				
<p><i>Intentional Care</i></p> <p>We provide supplemental care through biblical counseling, and crisis intervention for pastors and church leaders.</p>				
<p><i>Deliberate Collaboration</i></p> <p>We engage church leaders in the development of the network with church planting, leadership training, and pastoral care.</p>				
<p><i>Contextual Application</i></p>				

<p>We create models and methods for church planting and training that scale and adjust to context and culture.</p>				
<p><i>Healthy Plurality</i></p> <p>We promote team leadership in elder-ruled churches as a matter of conviction, and we provide tools that equip pluralities to evaluate themselves and grow in health.</p>				
<p><i>Kingdom Focus</i></p> <p>We actively serve, learn from, and partner with ministries outside ourselves because our heart is for gospel expansion.</p>				
<p><i>Social Justice⁷</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Contrite ● Compassionate ● Careful ● Courageous 				

⁷ For these four words – contrite, compassionate, careful, and courageous – we’re borrowing from the four categories described in this Kevin DeYoung [article](#). In summary:

1. **Contrite:** “Look at the church’s complicity in past and present evils. We have been blind to injustice, prejudice, racism, sexism, and abuse. What the world needs is to see a church owning its sins and working, in brokenness, to make up for them and overcome them.”(We need to be woke!)
2. **Compassionate:** “Look at the many people hurting and grieving in our midst and in the world. Now is the time to listen and learn. Now is the time to weep with those who weep. What the world needs is a church that demonstrates the love of Christ.”
3. **Careful:** “Look at the moral confusion and intellectual carelessness that marks our time. Let’s pay attention to our language and our definitions. What the world needs is a church that will draw upon the best of its theological tradition and lead the way in understanding the challenges of our day.”
4. **Courageous:** “Look at the church’s compromise with (if not outright capitulation to) the spirit of the age. Now is the time for a trumpet blast, not for backing down. What the world needs is a church that will admonish the wayward, warn against danger (oppose the woke culture), and stand as a bulwark for truth no matter how unpopular.”

STATEMENT OF FAITH (ISSUE)	Essential (2 fists)	Urgent (L-open R-closed)	Important (R-open L-closed)	Indifferent (both open)
<i>Doctrine?</i> Example:				
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<i>Doctrine?</i> Example:				
<i>Doctrine?</i> Example:				
<i>Doctrine?</i> Example:				
VALUES				
<i>Value?</i> Example:				
<i>Value?</i> Example:				

Step Two: Identifying Our Theological Vision

Every church or network has both doctrine (what they believe) and a practical methodology (how they do ministry). In an ideal world, the latter is based upon the former.

But the truth is, there's often an undiscovered bridge between our theology and our practice. The term *theological vision* was conceived by theologian Richard Lints and then popularized by Tim Keller to describe that middle space between doctrine and practice. A ministry or local church is using its theological vision as they figure out how to apply their doctrine in a particular time and place.⁸ Our theological vision crystalizes when we prayerfully reflect on both *the gospel* and *our context* — the people, place, and time of our ministry.

The true baseline for unity within a partnership — defined loosely as *churches working together for multiplication through their unified message and mission* — is rooted in a shared theological vision. This is a delicate matter because a theological vision is often assumed rather than stated. Networks often ask planters, churches, and partners to affirm a statement of faith and a set of cultural values. Others raise the bar by evaluating a potential partner's relational and methodological fit. Yet if the theological vision remains undiscussed and unaffirmed, then unity hasn't really been achieved.⁹

In their book *Together for the City*, Neil Powell and John James write:

The driving force behind establishing a cause around which to partner is the theological vision. That vision establishes the nature of a church's ministry expressions, and among them a common cause emerges, around which a number of churches with the same vision can begin to coalesce. So theological vision is the glue that holds a movement of diverse churches together. It allows churches to serve a movement rather than simply seek to multiply churches in their own image. The sum is far greater than the parts, and the results are diverse.¹⁰

In order to arrive at a theological vision, Keller invites us to consider eight questions:

1. What is the gospel, and how do we bring it to bear on the hearts of people today?
2. What is this culture like, and how can we both connect to it and challenge it in our communication?

⁸ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 18; Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), chap. 9.

⁹ "Two churches can have different doctrinal frameworks and ministry expressions but the same theological vision — and they will feel like sister ministries. On the other hand, two churches can have similar doctrinal framework and ministry expressions, but different theological vision — and they will feel distinct" (Keller, *Center Church*, 18).

¹⁰ Neil Powell and John James, *Together for the City: How Collaborative Church Planting Leads to Citywide Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 116–17.

3. Where are we located — city, suburb, town, rural area — and how does this affect our ministry?
4. To what degree and how should Christians be involved in civic life and cultural production?
5. How do the various ministries in a church — word and deed, community and instruction — relate to one another?
6. How innovative will our church be? How traditional?
7. How will our church relate to other churches in our city and region?
8. How will we make our case to the culture about the truth of Christianity?¹¹

To Keller's questions, you might consider adding:

1. Are we agreed on what constitutes a church? How about a network?
2. How would we determine the difference between wise contextualization and over-contextualization?

Certainly, you may want to add more questions. These are just to get you started.

A team exercise to unearth a theological vision could include:

- Send out the Tim Keller article titled, "[Ministry in the Middle Space](#)" to the group, along with Keller's eight questions. Ask them to read the article and then reflect upon each question. Encourage them to write down responses.
- Send out the Al Mohler article titled, "[A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity](#)". Ask your group to print and then fill out the form to identify the kind of unity needed for your group to flourish.
- Block out time for a retreat (overnight or day-long).
- Go through your responses to Keller's questions. Allow for unhurried time of discussion. Take time to pray.
- Task the planter or lead pastor to take the feedback and consolidate it into a few words that capture the responses with bullets beneath each word.
- Allow this document to be presented and discussed at the next meeting.
- Identify a lockdown date for agreeing on the theological vision. Then dedicate the interim time to pray, ponder, and revise.

When the leadership of Great Commission Collective considered our own approach to theology and practice, we settled on a theological vision with four fixed categories: Gospel + Collective + Multiplication + Longevity. Redeemer's City-to-City Network uses the categories of Gospel + City + Movement.

¹¹ Keller, *Center Church*, 18.

