

*A Position Letter from the Elders at Grace Community Church
Regarding Categories of Doctrine*

Concerning General Doctrine

When we observe how many doctrines there are in the Christian faith, we understand that some doctrines affect our fellowship more than others. With the object of explaining how we work through doctrines of different importance, we may sort them in keeping with the illustration below:

Primary	Doctrine central to faith and practice, both definitional and compulsory for orthodox belief
Secondary	Doctrine significant for faith and practice, necessary for church unity and close fellowship
Tertiary	Doctrine with limited impact or those that are less clear, held with gentle charity toward those with differing convictions

Primary doctrines are doctrines that are definitional for Christian orthodoxy. These entail the foundational beliefs and convictions which are most central and indispensable to the Christian faith. Christians have virtually no room for compromise on these doctrines, since any belief that falls outside these parameters falls outside Christian orthodoxy. We may still dialogue with charity and decency with those who hold these views, but we cannot tolerate any divergence from these views within the Church. Examples of primary doctrines are things such as Christ's true deity or the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement.

Secondary doctrines are those beliefs that will determine who can have close fellowship with one another, often indicated in the beliefs of churches, denominations, and associations. These doctrines are more specific than primary doctrines and are necessary for close fellowship (but not for Christian orthodoxy). Those who disagree on secondary issues are not necessarily unorthodox, heretical, or apostate, but disagreement on these issues will divide Christians from having close fellowship. Partnering with others who hold different convictions about secondary doctrine requires stipulations and guidelines from the church elders. This is the hardest category for examples, but some common examples of secondary doctrines include the practice of the ordinances (Baptism and Lord's Supper) and the governance and structure of the local church.

Tertiary doctrines are those doctrines which are biblical, but do not separate or prevent close fellowship with others who disagree. These doctrines are not unimportant—since all Scripture is God-breathed (*theopneustos*, 2 Tim 3:16), we may recognize that everything from Scripture is from God to us and is therefore important. Yet although they are important, tertiary doctrines are either less clear or less weighty than other doctrines, and Christians should handle these with patience and charity. Christians in close fellowship may disagree on some tertiary

doctrines without breaking fellowship. An example of tertiary doctrine may be the identity of the *Nephilim* and the “sons of God” in Genesis 6.

Concerning Church Distinctives

How do these doctrines play out within the church? Consider the graph below, building on what was said above:

Primary	Doctrine central to faith and practice, both definitional and compulsory for orthodox belief	What you <i>must</i> believe
Secondary	Doctrine significant for faith and practice, necessary for church unity and close fellowship	What you <i>should</i> believe
Tertiary	Doctrine with limited impact or interpretatively difficult, thereby held with charity toward those with differing convictions	What you <i>may</i> believe

Primary doctrines are therefore those doctrines that you *must* believe as a Christian. These are the things which are definitional to the Christian faith and must be professed by every Christian. Here we may consider Paul’s admonition to the Galatians: “As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed [*anathema*]” (Gal 1:9). Those who preach a contrary gospel (a primary doctrine) are accursed by the apostle. Christians are therefore encouraged to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The clear things which most straightforwardly define the gospel are the matters of first importance that Christians must stand in and hold fast to (1 Cor 15:1–5).

Secondary doctrines are what you *should* believe. These are things which we are convinced of from Scripture that we believe other Christians *should* believe, yet things that are not definitional for Christianity. As Paul instructed Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). This means that we recognize that there are some matters which are weightier than others (Matt 23:23–25) and there are some doctrines that are of first importance when compared to others (1 Cor 15:1–5).

Tertiary doctrines are the things you *may* believe. This does not mean these things are unimportant, nor that we should be lax in our biblical interpretation. Again, it desperately matters *how* we arrive at these convictions. This simply means that tertiary doctrines are things which can be held within Christian unity and community without cause for division. As Paul observes: “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). That does not mean the conviction about days is inconsequential—those convictions lead to action (14:6), though those actions (whether participating or abstaining) are all done to the glory of the Lord (14:6–8). We may here particularly think of tertiary doctrines as matters of the *conscience* (neither clear

commands nor prohibitions of Scripture), and doctrinal beliefs that do not impact gospel clarity or our regular observance of faith and practice.

Concerning Doctrine within Church Leadership

How are these doctrines held within church leadership? Consider the graph below:

Leaders	<i>Affirmation</i>	The spiritual leaders (elders) of the church believe and affirm the distinctive doctrines of the church—teaching, upholding, and defending them.
Teachers	<i>Confirmation</i>	All teachers recognize and uphold the distinctive doctrines of the church—adhering to the stance of the church and teaching in ways supportive of those beliefs.
Members	<i>Recognition</i>	Church members understand and submit to the distinctive teachings of the church, not actively opposing any specific doctrines which they cannot themselves affirm.

Using the above as a guideline within the church, we can (and should) expect greater doctrinal commitment from a person depending on their level of service and leadership within the church. To be considered a Christian, you must confess and believe the primary doctrines of the faith. To be a part of GCC, you must agree not to stand in opposition to (nor undermine) any of the church’s teachings on secondary doctrines. The church will generally not take an official position on tertiary doctrines.

Teachers have a greater responsibility since they are expected to know and uphold the doctrinal beliefs and distinctives of their local church. Teachers are called to uphold the church’s beliefs in the teaching and training that occurs within that church. Finally, the leaders (elders) of the church both believe and affirm the church’s doctrinal distinctives. This final category is the strongest adherence, and it implies that the church’s spiritual leaders are united on the church’s doctrinal stances and practices.

Signed,

the Elders of Grace Community Church
Battle Creek, MI
Soli Deo Gloria