

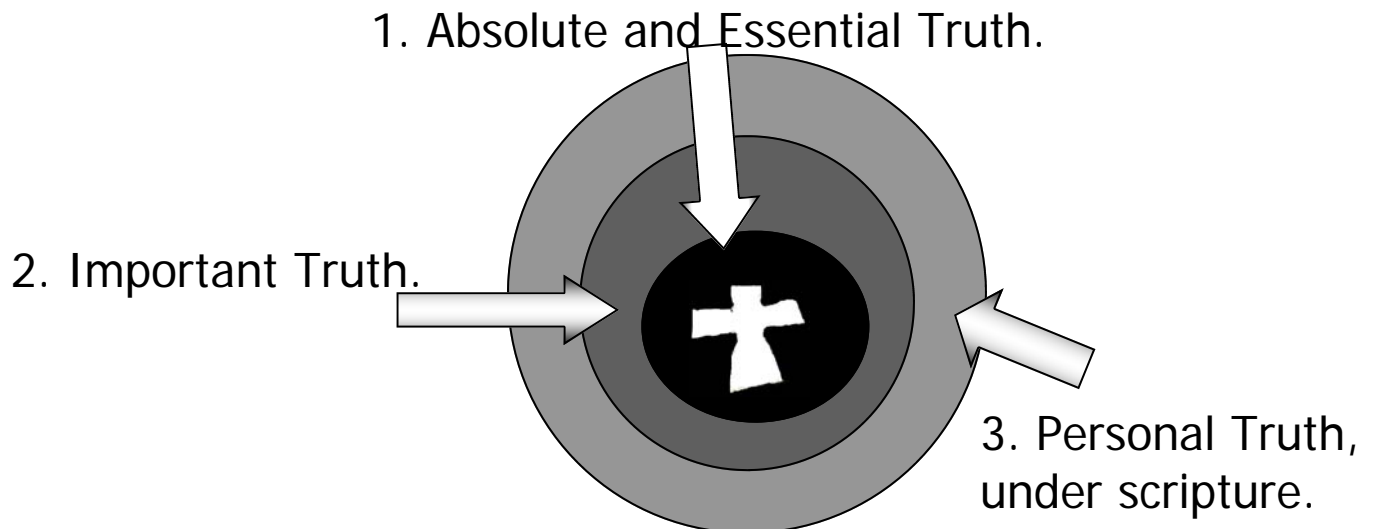
Unity and Diversity
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Harpeth Community Church is a part of a Movement of Protestants who have sought to be a people committed to God's truths found in scripture. The greatest truth in the Bible is that God sent Jesus Christ into the world to save us from our sin and take us to heaven so that we could enjoy an eternal relationship with him. We can be saved if we will place our faith in Jesus Christ. This truth is called "the gospel." Those who truly accept and commit themselves to the gospel, become disciples of Jesus - people who trust and follow Jesus Christ daily. This truth is essential.

Beyond the core truth of the gospel there are other levels of truth. Second level truths are the other important truths of scripture, which show us how to trust and follow Jesus. But secondary truths, in themselves, do not save us. Only Jesus Christ and active faith in his gospel saves us. At the same time, secondary truths are important truths because all of God's truth is important: they guide us in the way of Jesus, they protect us, they strengthen us and they enable us to be faithful to God in all things.

Then there are third level truths. Third level truths are important, but they are personal. What we mean by "personal" is that some truths depend on the person and his or her situation. Some Christians are surprised to learn that there are relative or personal truths. But, at this 3rd level, there is a consensus that explicit or clear biblical teachings are hard to find or may not even exist. Stated differently, there is no clear teaching on what is right or wrong – or the issue does not involve something that is always right or wrong. These are matters that God leaves for us to determine for ourselves.

The purpose of this paper is to give a brief explanation of these three levels of truth in the light of the gospel and the path of discipleship. It is hoped that this position paper will help us to see how to uphold biblical truth and how to relate to various other Christians and fellowships in light of these truths. Please review the following diagram of the three levels of truth in anticipation of what follows.



1. Absolute and Essential Truth: Faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.

The word “gospel” is not a common word today. It simply means the “good news.” We believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is “good news”— the best and most important news that any human being ever hears.

- This gospel is the central message of the Holy Scriptures, and is the key to understanding them.¹
- This gospel declares the only way to know God in peace, love, and joy is through the reconciling death of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord.
- This gospel sets forth Jesus Christ as the living Savior, Master, Life, and Hope of all who put their trust in him. It tells us that the eternal destiny of all people depends on whether they are savingly related to Jesus Christ or not.

The gospel is so simple that small children can understand it, and it is so profound that studies by the wisest theologians will never exhaust its riches.

The Bible summarizes the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8:

Now, brothers, 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. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles . . . (NIV).

The Bible tells us that we are “saved” by this gospel. We are saved from the justly deserved punishment for our sins when we die. We are saved from the bondage of Satan.

The gospel is “Christ died for our sins,” “according to scripture,” “that he was buried, raised on the third day,” and that “he appeared” afterward to witnesses. This is of essential importance in scripture and in our lives.

This summary of the gospel in the Bible is that upon which the earliest statements of faith (the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds) were made, going back almost nineteen hundred years. We believe that these statements of faith and the gospel message itself rightly point us to the basis of a unity with many people, from many church backgrounds. We embrace the joy of celebrating and proclaiming this unity wherever possible. It is a unity that transcends all denominational, institutional, and cultural backgrounds.

In this way the Bible teaches: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Christ himself taught: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The gospel tells us that, as all have sinned, so all who do not receive Christ will be judged according to their sins as measured by God's holy law, and face eternal punishment in hell. And one day Jesus will reward his faithful servants and punish those who have not followed him. The gospel is our only hope, it is the sole ground of our justification (being made right with God).

Faith in the Gospel

The gospel tells of our great gift. Salvation is by "grace," which means that it is "the free gift" of God (Romans 3:23-26). All that human beings have to do in response to what God has provided is to place our "faith" in Jesus Christ. To have faith is to "believe," "trust," and "adhere to" Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). Faith is a "submissive trust" in Jesus Christ and the gospel. Yet, even "our faith" is the result of God working in our hearts, initiating our response (John 16:7-11; 1 John 2:20, 27). We respond to God's invitation by turning from our sins (repentance) and committing (in total dependency) to Jesus Christ, for we have no merit of our own. We pledge to die to ourselves and live for Christ (Romans 6:1-6). In this way, faith is the central, underlying, and sustaining response to what God has done for us in Christ.

The Bible teaches that our faith in the gospel must be a deeper faith than a simple mental assent, where we say, "yes, Jesus died for me." Many people call Jesus their "leader" or their "Lord," but they do not truly trust him. In reality, he is not their real "Lord" because they have not really been changed and transformed by the gospel — they have not seen their lives come to be characterized by obedience to God and love (Matthew 7:21-23). To have faith in Jesus, then, means that he must truly become the Lord and Master of one's life. True faith is God working in our hearts in such a way that eventually our lives become filled with obedience to God's teaching and love for others (Romans 1:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3). Genuine faith is manifest by its actions and obedience. When a pattern of obedience does not accompany faith, then faith is dead (James 2:14-26).

Commitment to Discipleship

The Bible tells us that if we really have faith in Jesus Christ, we will become his followers. The word for this commitment is "discipleship." A "disciple" is "a follower," "a student" or better yet, "an apprentice" of Jesus.ⁱⁱ In the purest sense, a Christian is "an apprentice" of Jesus Christ who is *learning from him* how to develop a deep and meaningful relationship with God. This was the original mandate that Jesus gave to his apostles (Matthew 28: 19-20).

The importance of being a disciple is highlighted by the fact that the word for disciple (or disciples) is used over two hundred and eighty times in the Bible, but the word for Christian (or Christians) is used only three times. A person simply cannot be a true Christian without being a disciple. Someone who claims to be Christian is spiritually

dead if he or she is not primarily focused upon following Jesus. This truth is described in various ways in the Bible although not always by using the term “disciple”. In fact, this truth is the major, fundamental, and underlying theme of the entire New Testament.ⁱⁱⁱ We must get to know Christ personally and intimately. Jesus himself summed up how important it is that we get to know him with these words: Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

It must be emphasized that Christianity is about a relationship with God through Jesus based upon faith, it is not about rules. More than providing you with a list of do’s and don’t, God provided you with a model after which you are to build your life. The more that we learn about Jesus Christ and the more that we let his ways enter into our hearts, the more confidence we will have in following him (1 John 3:16-17; Mark 10:43)

When we truly decide to follow him, we will notice one thing that is at the center of who Christ is and what we must become: the willingness to pick up the cross and die. The cross – first in Jesus’ life and secondly in your life – is the center of salvation and the Christian life. The famous Protestant Reformer Martin Luther used to say “the cross puts everything to the test.” Through the cross, we see the depth and degradation of human sin. Through the cross, we see God’s heart for us, bursting with love. And through the cross, we see the mold of our new life, forming us into Christ-like people.

When we become Christians we must learn to die to ourselves, by dying to our selfish and sinful ways. We must die so that Christ can live within us. At the very heart of being a Christian is Christ’s cross and our willingness to embrace our cross for him. In a stunning summary of this principle, the apostle Paul sums up the entire Christian life with these words:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

The Ultimate Sign

God has placed a special mark within those who are his children — God’s Spirit lives in them (Ephesians 1:13-14). Those who truly accept the gospel will have the Spirit of God leading them to focus more and more upon what God has done through his Son — *making them more and more Christ-centered* (Ephesians 3:14-18). And the Spirit will also lead them to become more and more like his Son — *making them more and more Christ-like* (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). By genuine faith in Christ, the presence of the indwelling Spirit, and the fruit of Christ-centered lives, we can know those who are truly “born again” (John 3:5; Titus 3:5-6; Romans 8:5-17; Galatians 5:16-26). God only comes to dwell within those who are his children, leading them to become Christ-centered and Christ-like (1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 8:9).

All who place their faith in the gospel, receive the Holy Spirit, and commit themselves to the path of discipleship become united in the most important thing in life, regardless of the fellowship or denomination in which they may be found. This is a unity given by God, for God's glory. This is the unity which we strive to recognize, hold to, and celebrate in the Restoration Movement.

The Bible sums up the evidence of a Christ-centered and Christ-like life as a "life of love." Love for God, love for one another, and love for our neighbors should be clearly demonstrated in our lives. (Matthew 22:37-39; Romans 12:9-21; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13). And, by our love for one another as Christians, all men will know that we are Christ's disciples (John 13:34-35).

Corrupting The Gospel and Path of Discipleship

The gospel is so important to God that both humans and angels are warned against changing or corrupting it (Galatians 1:6-9). The gospel is changed or corrupted when teachers and groups add other things to it. Or it can be corrupted when teachers or groups change the content and nature of the gospel (Galatians 2:14-16; 5:1-4).

We have been and remain united in speaking out against those who will promote another gospel, especially when innocent people are being deceived. Our unity in the gospel binds us to each other, yet it also strengthens us against deception and the opponents of the Biblical gospel and classic (orthodox) Christianity. Our unity is grounded in the truth of the gospel, not political correctness, sentimental ideas of tolerance, or human philosophy.

We also uphold the path of discipleship, for it reflects the heart of the gospel. We must not only trust Jesus and his cross, we must also follow Jesus and his cross. Unless we pick up our cross and follow him, we cannot be his disciples (Mark 8:34-36). Only those who truly walk in the ways of Jesus and live the kind of life to which he called us are those who are saved (1 John 2:3-5).

2. Important Truth – and Diversity

When we are focused on the Gospel and the path of Discipleship, we have a center point for our faith and our fellowship with others. If we agree on these two components of the core teaching of the Bible, we can tolerate diversity because every thing else is truly secondary.

Our unity in the gospel and in the path of discipleship is a wonderful bond. It makes us brothers and sisters in Christ with people from all kinds of backgrounds, fellowships, and denominations. It gives us the most powerful partnership possible. And it is to be demonstrated to the world through our love for one another. But it does not eliminate all of our differences.

Biblical truth is supremely important to us at HCC. The gospel and the personal path of discipleship are not the only important teachings in the Bible. On many other Biblical teachings the pursuit of truth has caused us to “agree to disagree” with those who otherwise believe in the gospel and in the path of discipleship. Our different understandings mean that we have different beliefs about second level matters. This acknowledgement usually means that we can adhere to the Gospel and the path of discipleship in the same local church. In fact, it is healthy to acknowledge that we can be united and still have disagreements with each other on these secondary matters. We also acknowledge that sometimes it may mean that we will have to attend different congregations, where we can uphold those second level practices that would be compromised if we attended the same church. The key factor, if we are to be a part of the same church, is respect for different second level beliefs and practices. Consider some of the following examples.

There are two major views about the security of a believer among Bible believing people. There are believers who identify with John Calvin (Calvinists) and hold that once a person is truly saved, God makes him eternally secure and God makes that person’s security evident by giving him or her a transformed life by the power of the Holy Spirit (an obedient life). The other major view comes from those believers who identify with Jacob Arminius (Arminians) and hold that once a person is truly saved, God empowers him to live a transformed life, but it is still possible to resist the Holy Spirit and turn away from God and become lost. Arminians do not believe that we are saved one day and lost the next, but they do believe that a genuine Christian can reach the point (over time) where he has turned away from Christ and forfeited salvation. They believe that we must strive to “keep the faith” lest we become weakened to the point where we turn away from Jesus Christ.

In most cases however, both Calvinists and Arminians can serve Christ together in the same church because both views agree that those who are *truly saved will give evidence of their salvation by a transformed, obedient life*. Those without a transformed life (allowing for the growth of immature faith and struggles with sin) either were never truly saved in the first place or were once genuine believers, but have abandoned the faith. Regardless of the theological understanding, people from both camps can agree that those who claim to be Christians but participate in lifestyles of disobedience are in eternal peril. These people are either in danger of falling away or they were never truly saved in the first place. We have eternal concern for them because we believe that only the faithful are truly saved.

Both uphold the view that we are saved “by grace, through faith” (Eph. 2:8-9). In fact, this scripture is vitally important to us because it has two parts: God’s grace and the human response of faith. We contend that a healthy understanding of this formula is necessary to understand what the Bible actually teaches. Both Arminians and Calvinists can agree that both aspects are important and by doing so, most will find that they can happily follow Christ together in the same church.

Most churches, who have this foundation, witness great diversity of opinion within themselves on a host of secondary issues: the timing of the second coming, the nature of scripture as the infallible word of God, whether or not a sole “pastor” can serve as an elder, whether or not there are special gifts of the Holy Spirit for personal prayer language today, whether or not God predetermines which individuals will be saved, etc. And on and on we can go. These are important differences that we take seriously - but they are secondary truths – and if we are in error, they do not stop God from saving and making us his children. Nor do they cause us to view each other as opponents or enemies. There are differences, but we have much more in common than in opposition. Our differences are between brothers and sisters who are bound by the Holy Spirit and God’s Grace.

Sometimes it means that we must follow Christ in different local churches. This is almost always because of differences in how we practice second level truths, not because of belief differences about second level truths. It is easier to hold different beliefs and work together, than it is to hold different practices and work together. We usually do things in the local church a certain way, not in multiple ways (that would be chaotic and confusing). Those who differ with our practice usually cannot hold to a good conscience and actively participate in that with which they disagree.

For example, at HCC we take a strong stand on the practice of water baptism. We believe that water baptism by immersion, as an expression of faith and commitment to Jesus, should be a part of each person’s conversion experience. When done as an expression of faith, it is for “the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). We believe that this practice is the normative one in the Bible (Ephesians 4:4-6; Hebrews 6:1-3; Acts 2:36-40) and in early church history (the Nicene Creed of 381 A.D.).^{iv} By conviction we hold to this teaching today, but we recognize that many people who otherwise believe in the gospel and the path of discipleship do not agree with us. So we uphold our conviction on baptism and insist that those who want to join us follow this biblical teaching, but we can still affirm other Christ-followers, who do not view or practice baptism as we do. If a person has not experienced a biblical baptism (by immersion as an expression of personal faith and commitment to Jesus) and does not agree to submit to this practice, then he or she will eventually want to find another local church where this particular understanding of the Bible is not upheld. We cannot uphold a united front on this point and embrace different practices. Baptism is a doctrine that is too important in scripture and in our testimony to those who are spiritually lost, so we acknowledge that some will feel a need to leave us for different churches.

As another example, we believe in male leadership for those who are the primary teachers and the elders of a church (1 Timothy 2:12: 3:7). Some people look at this matter differently, believing that such teachings are cultural and not the true intent of God. Convictions on this matter are deeply held. So, when our belief is upheld, there are Christians who may find it necessary to follow Christ in different churches, rather than to make a compromise with what they believe God wants the church to practice.

The vast majority of these issues are secondary issues which do not destroy our salvation or make us “lost.” Yes, all of these doctrines are important and we need to strive to be faithful in our understanding and practice in each area. Yes, we need to listen to one another and exhort one another to make sure that we are being faithful to God’s truth in all things. And “yes,” there may have to be genuine differences of practice in our local churches. But “no,” we don’t have to get everything just right. The gospel also teaches us that we are all imperfect and struggling children who will never get it all right and who can only be saved by “grace through faith.”

3. Personal Truth

There is even a third level of diversity among Christian people that we acknowledge at HCC. At this third level we can function together because we agree on the gospel and the important but secondary matters of the faith. We agree to disagree because these third level matters are individual matters. These areas do not require the whole church to take a single, unified stand and they are not matters of clear “right” or “wrong”, according to the Bible (Romans 14:1-15:8).

For example, we think that it is best to take communion on a weekly basis. We do not say that this is the only right way to take communion, but we have elected to follow this practice because we personally believe that it is a good position. It is based on the practice of the Christians in the Bible and the early church. And it helps draw us back to the central teaching of the Bible that we are saved “by Grace through Faith” on a weekly basis.

There are many other relative truths like the frequency of communion: some Christians eat meat, some do not; some Christians drink wine, some do not; some Christians go to “R” rated movies, some do not. Some Christians believe that the days in Genesis 1 are twenty four hours and some do not. Some Christians believe that the Anti-Christ will be a real person and some do not. In each of these areas we can witness a unity-in-diversity. Again, each of these matters is very important to us as individuals. We will have to give an accounting of ourselves to God (Romans 14:10-12). But none of these matters determines our status as children of God and we have great freedom of conscience to believe and practice what we think is best.

If we accept these three levels of truth, our Christian life and cooperation with others will be more God honoring. And it will be easier to serve Christ together. There is an old expression that, when applied to the three levels, sums up our approach: “In essentials, unity; in non essentials, diversity; in all things, love.”

Implications

- When God has made us brother and sisters in Christ, it surely grieves him for us not to actively recognize it — at HCC we seek to actively recognize Christians beyond the borders of our fellowship. We have always sought to be “Christians only, but not the only Christians.”

- The most crucial aspect of truly embracing the gospel is not just to trust Christ, but the commitment to follow him. The central task of those who are being saved is to become true followers (disciples) of Jesus who live out his lifestyle. Theological issues, as important as they are, must be secondary and in service of the life of discipleship.
- We can accomplish a great many things more effectively in the cause of the gospel if we are united and working together with Christians in other churches – even those with whom we differ on secondary matters.
- If we emphasize and show the world our unity in the gospel and our love for our brothers and sisters in other Christian fellowships - scripture teaches us that God will use it to help unbelievers see the truth of Christianity and come to believe (John 13:34-35; John 17:20-21).

ⁱ Parts of this statement are drawn from and adapted from "THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST: AN EVANGELICAL CELEBRATION," COPYRIGHT 1999 BY THE COMMITTEE ON EVANGELICAL UNITY IN THE GOSPEL, P.O. BOX 5551, GLENDALE HEIGHTS, IL 60139-5551, which was first published in *Christianity Today* (August, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Dallas Willard, "How To Be A Disciple," *Christian Century* (April 22-29, 1998): 430-431. See also, Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Richard Longenecker (editor), *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996).

^{iv} See my position paper, "Biblical Baptism and the Restoration Movement" for more information.