

Boundaries: Maintaining Clear Doctrinal and Moral Boundaries to Protect Christian Organisations

New members are continually joining Christian organisations, bringing with them new ideas. Do we need to establish some doctrinal and moral boundaries to keep our organisations from going astray? When should we add new boundaries? What boundaries should be drawn? This workshop will propose some general principles to consider along with some specific recent examples.

Wayne Grudem is Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona. He is a graduate of Harvard (BA), Westminster Seminary-Philadelphia (M.Div., DD), and the University of Cambridge (PhD). He has served as the president of the Evangelical Theological Society (1999), as a member of the Translation Oversight Committee for the English Standard Version of the Bible, and was the General Editor for the *ESV Study Bible* (2008). He has written more than 25 books, including *Systematic Theology* (2nd edition, 2020), *Christian Ethics* (2018), *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, *Business for the Glory of God*, and (with Barry Asmus) *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*. He also co-edited (with John Piper) *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Over 300 of his articles and lectures are available at www.WayneGrudem.com.

A. Why should Christian organizations draw boundaries at all?

Definitions:

- What kinds of organizations? All kinds

- Boundaries = doctrinal statements that are enforced by an organization

1. False teaching harms the church

Acts 20:29: I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Also 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim 2:16; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 Tim 4:1)

2. If false teaching is not stopped, it spreads and does more damage (1 Cor 5:6; 2 Tim 2:17; Acts 20:29)

→ if one false teacher is allowed in an organization, others cannot be stopped

→ Acts 20:29-30: the longer the wolves stay, the more damage they will do

→ many leaders of false teaching have been genuine believers who were deceived by some wrong idea

3. If false teaching is not stopped, we will waste time and energy in endless controversies rather than doing valuable kingdom work (2 Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9)

4. Jesus and the NT authors hold church leaders responsible for silencing false teaching

Revelation 2:20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. (Also Titus 1:10; Rev 2:14)

5. Objection: doctrinal boundaries don't do any good because they are never enforced

Answer: they don't solve every problem, but they do:

- a. Prevent some from joining
- b. Give some people opportunity to admit honest differences
- c. Give leaders a standard for choosing new leaders or disciplining those who do not agree

B. Why should evangelical organizations draw new boundaries?

“New” =/=> make an organization fundamentally different from what it was at the beginning

“New” => stating publicly for the first time what the vast majority of members have assumed to be true from the beginning

not to make an organization different from what it was at beginning

but to keep an organization from becoming different from what it was at beginning

1. False teaching changes, so old boundaries do not protect against new problems

NT examples:

Nicene Creed (325/ 381 AD):

Chalcedonian Creed (451 AD):

Reformation (1517 -)

20th century:

Recent years:

2. Why does God in his sovereignty allow these various false teachings to come into the church in different ages?

a. The purification of the church (Eph 5:25-27)

→ will happen gradually over time (which is how God usually works):

“Sometimes that process of purification has been marked by specific historical events; for example, in 325 and 381, the Nicene Creed; in 451, the Chalcedonian Creed; in 1517, Martin Luther’s 95 theses; even in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.” At other times, there has been no one defining moment, but a gradual rejection of misunderstanding and a growing consensus endorsing biblical truth in some area. For example: the rejection of the militarism of the Crusades and their attempt to use the sword to advance the Church; or the realization that the Bible does not teach that the sun goes around the earth; or, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the marvelous advances in doctrinal syntheses that found expression in the great confessions of faith following the Reformation; or, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the realization that the civil government could and should allow religious freedom; or in the 19th century, the growing consensus that slavery is wrong and must be abolished; or, in the 20th century, the growing consensus that abortion is contrary to Scripture. Other examples could be given, but the pattern should be clear: Jesus Christ has not given up his task of purifying his Church. The long term pattern has not been 19 centuries of decline in the purity and doctrinal and ethical understanding of the Church, but rather a pattern of gradual and sometimes explosive increase in understanding and purity.” (Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act as If We Really Believe That ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43/1 (March 2000), p. 13)

b. Testing the faithfulness of God’s people (Deut. 13:1)

c. Testing our attitude toward false teachers (2 Tim 2:24-26)

Francis Schaeffer: At the same time, however, we must show forth the love of God to those with whom we differ. Thirty-five years ago, in the Presbyterian crisis in the United States, we forgot that. We did not speak with love about those with whom we differed, and we have been paying a high price for it ever since we did not talk of the need to show love as we stood against liberalism, and, as the Presbyterian Church was lost, that lack has cost us dearly. (*Church Before Watching World*, 1971, 69-70)

C. When should evangelical organizations draw new boundaries?

1. After a false teaching has become a significant problem

2. Before the teaching does great harm, and before it has a large following entrenched in the congregation

3. But who has the authority to make these changes?

a. Protestants do not have a Pope!

b. No church councils today

c. Hundreds of thousands of churches & organizations gradually coming to a consensus over an issue.

D. For what doctrinal and ethical matters should evangelical organizations draw new boundaries? Some questions to ask: (Weigh these, don't just count them)

1. CERTAINTY: How sure are we that the teaching is wrong?

2. EFFECT ON OTHER DOCTRINES: Will this teaching likely lead to significant erosion in other doctrines?

3. EFFECT ON PERSONAL AND CHURCH LIFE: Will this teaching bring significant harm to people's Christian lives, or to the work of the church?

4. HISTORICAL PRECEDENT: Is this teaching contrary to what the vast majority of the Bible-believing church has held throughout history?

5. PERCEPTION OF IMPORTANCE AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE: Is there increasing consensus among the leaders and the members that this matter is important enough that the teaching should be explicitly denied in the doctrinal statement?

6. PURPOSES OF THE ORGANIZATION: Is the teaching a significant threat to the nature and purposes of the organization?

7. MOTIVATIONS OF ADVOCATES: Does it seem that the advocates of this teaching hold it because of a fundamental refusal to be subject to the authority of God's Word, rather than because of sincerely held differences of interpretation based on accepted hermeneutical standards? Gal 2:4; 6:12; Phil 3:19; 2 Cor 11:13; 2 Pet. 2:1-3

8. METHODS OF ADVOCATES: Do the advocates of this teaching frequently manifest

arrogance, deception, unrighteous anger, slander, and falsehood rather than humility, openness to correction and reason, kindness, and absolute truthfulness? (Jas. 3:17-18)

9. **WRONG QUESTIONS:** Are the advocates my friends, are they nice people, will we lose money or members if we exclude them, will the academic community criticize us as being too narrow-minded, will someone take us to court? (All grounded in fear of man, not fear of God and trust in God.)

E. Conclusion

Isaiah 56:10 His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber.

Jude 1:3 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.