

“IN MATTERS OF FAITH, UNITY; IN MATTERS OF OPINION, LIBERTY”

by Jack Cottrell

In this essay I am analyzing the first two statements of the venerable Restoration Movement [RM] slogan, “**In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty**; in all things, love.” It is well known that this “peace saying” was coined by a German Lutheran writer named Peter Meiderlin (or Rupertus Meldenijs) in a work produced about 1627, and that it has been adopted and used throughout the history of our movement. I am not here concerned with its origin and subsequent history, but only with the way it has been used in the RM in recent times. (For thoughts on its origin and early use, see Hans Rollmann, “In Essentials, Unity: The Pre-History of a Restoration Movement Slogan,” *Restoration Quarterly* (1997, 39/3), available on several websites.)

I am not a fan of this slogan. Correctly interpreted and understood, it can be valid and useful. But its terms are so ambiguous that (in my opinion!) in recent times it has *not* been understood and used correctly. Let me summarize the problem.

First, the common understanding of “essentials” is *essential for salvation*. I.e., the only doctrines we need to agree on (seek “unity” on) are those which one must accept in order to be saved. This is usually a very short list, involving the person and work of Jesus and how to be saved.

Second, everything else – all other doctrines – are deemed to be “non-essentials,” and all non-essentials are then equated with “opinions.”

Third, since they are not essential for salvation, all opinions – all other doctrines – are regarded as *unimportant* in the sense that it does not make any practical difference what anyone believes about them. It is simply irrelevant what positions anyone takes on these issues. All interpretations and approaches must be respected.

The ultimate result of this way of using the slogan is clear: it has the devastating result of watering down and undermining the very concept of truth; in effect it destroys the Biblical concept of sound doctrine. Of course, this is already happening for many other reasons, but this slogan is being misused to justify this trend. Thanks in part to the way we are using this slogan, true Christianity – as represented by the RM – is being suffocated by doctrinal relativism.

My purpose here is to explain this in more detail, giving examples, and to suggest how we may use the slogan properly and to good advantage.

I. THE SLOGAN MISUSED

- A. The first problem, which is inherent in the slogan, is that it immediately divides all doctrines into just TWO categories: matters of faith, and matters of opinion. As we proceed, we will see why this is a problem.
- B. The second problem is the ambiguity of the terminology applied to these two categories.
 1. The form of the slogan used by our conference program is “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty.”
 2. But sometimes it is stated thus: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty.”
 3. A hybrid version is “In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty.”
 4. Is there a “correct” version? Which are the better terms? Does it matter which we use?
- C. What are the problems regarding the terms in the *unity* category?
 1. First we will consider the expression, “matters of faith.”

- a. "Faith" is generally used in two senses:
 - (1) Subjective faith (the *fides quae*, or "faith by which" one believes). This is the ACT of believing.
 - (2) Objective faith (the *fides qua*, or "the faith which" is believed). This is the CONTENT of what we believe to be true. It is the doctrine to which our minds give assent.
 - b. In the expression "matters of faith," the word "faith" is used in the latter sense. It refers to what we as Christians are called upon to believe.
 - c. To say there must be *unity* in such matters of faith indicates that these are teachings which *all* Christians *ought* to believe, in the sense of 1 Corinthians 1:10, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment." I.e., we have a *moral obligation* to have "the same mind" and "the same judgment" in matters of faith.
 - d. This exhortation to unity implies that there is only one true belief, one true interpretation, for such matters of faith.
 - e. This understanding of "matters of faith" is correct in itself, and would not be a problem if it were not uncritically equated with the concept of "essentials," as the next point shows.
2. What about the term "essentials"?
 - a. When the word "essentials" is used in the slogan, the first question we should ask is: "Essential *for what?*"
 - b. Often, however, this question is never asked, and it is just *assumed* that it means "essential *for salvation.*"
 - c. Other terms are then introduced, which reinforce this narrow understanding:
 - (1) The essentials (matters of faith) are regarded as *tests of faith*. I.e., those who do not believe them do not have true saving faith.
 - (2) They are also regarded as *tests of fellowship*, or *tests of communion*. I.e., those who do not accept these essentials are not part of the true church; they are not our brethren in Christ.
 3. This approach also has implications for the meaning of the term "unity."
 - a. We should distinguish between the *spiritual* unity of all who are saved and thus who are thereby a part of the one body of Christ, and the *doctrinal* unity to which Paul exhorts Christians in passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:2; and Ephesians 4:13-15. We may have the former without the latter, since in these texts it is Christians (who already have spiritual unity) who are being exhorted to seek the latter (more complete) kind of unity.
 - b. However, when "matters of faith" and "essentials" are equated, and when "essentials" are interpreted to mean "essential for salvation," this distinction is lost. Those who have *spiritual* unity will already have *doctrinal* unity, since the latter applies only to

things “essential for salvation” and will thus already be accepted by all the saved. Thus the imperative for Christians to seek further doctrinal unity on non-salvation issues is ignored.

- D. We will now discuss the second part of the slogan, the *liberty* category. Here we see further ambiguity and more problems.
1. Let’s remember:
 - a. The very structure of the slogan implies that there are only two categories.
 - b. The definition of the first category as “essential for salvation” implies that whatever is not necessary *for salvation* must be relegated to the second category (“non-essentials” or “opinions”).
 2. First, let’s think about the term “non-essentials.”
 - a. The meaning here, of course, depends on what meaning is assigned to “essentials” in the first part of the slogan.
 - b. Since “essentials” is usually taken to mean “essential for salvation,” then “non-essentials” will naturally mean *not essential for salvation*.
 3. What leads to confusion here is that this category is also called “matters of opinion,” or just “opinions.” What is meant by “opinion”?
 - a. In the formal sense, an opinion is an individual’s judgment as to what should be considered true or false about any given issue, even matters of fact. But connecting “opinion” with “liberty” suggests something quite different. It implies that an opinion is a matter about which there is no one correct view, and thus about which one is *free* to hold whatever view he chooses. I.e., freedom of opinion means that one is not *bound* by moral obligation, rules of evidence, or principles of hermeneutics to hold to any particular view. On the other side of the coin, it means that one should be free to hold to such an opinion without judgment or censure from anyone else.
 - b. Thus a “matter of opinion” is an issue for which there is no one true belief, and no moral obligation to hold to any specific view.
 - c. This is why “matters of opinion” can easily be equated with “non-essentials.”
 - (1) The result is that opinions are non-essential *for salvation*, since they are the opposite of essentials, which are interpreted to mean “essential for salvation.”
 - (2) A more serious result is that (in practice) a “matter of opinion” becomes non-essential, *period*. It is “just an opinion.”
 - d. The conclusion is that what one believes about a “matter of opinion,” about a non-essential, *really does not matter*. It is irrelevant. Is this not what “liberty” implies?
- E. The bottom-line question now is: what has happened to the concept of *sound doctrine*?
1. The answer is this: the assumption that there are only two categories of doctrine, plus the equation of “matters of opinion” with “non-essential for salvation,” is a literal *disaster* for sound doctrine.
 2. The approach is this: if it is not a salvation issue, then you and everyone else are free to

believe whatever you want to believe on that subject.

3. Here are some examples of this.

a. Years ago, in response to a *Christian Standard* article I wrote defending inerrancy, an M.Div. graduate from Fuller Theological Seminary (with a B.A. from a Lutheran college) strongly disagreed with me in a letter: “The strength . . . of our movement is that we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is our only creed.” Everything else is a deduction or opinion. “The *only* essential is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. *Everything* else is up for grabs,” including inerrancy. (By the way, he said he was “seeking a parish” among our churches in Ohio.)

b. In his presidential address for the 2003 NACC, Bob Russell said this: “Another common denominator of those churches that are reaching the masses is that there is a **high value placed on harmony** as opposed to dividing over secondary doctrines.

“We have this great slogan, ‘In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; and in all things, love.’ Isn’t that what they practiced in the New Testament church? They allowed for differences of opinion about the observance of the Sabbath and eating meat sacrificed to idols.

“Growing churches practice liberty in opinion because they place a high value on unity. I would challenge church leaders to list what you believe are essentials, what a person must believe to be saved. Then allow for liberty in the other areas. Don’t take an official, dogmatic stand about such items as millennial views or eternal security.

“Take another step and ask, ‘Can a person teach or serve as a leader in this church and disagree on the nonessentials?’ People have visited our church and said, ‘I sat in the class of a teacher who believes ‘Once saved always saved.’

“I respond, ‘Yes, I know that teacher and I disagree with him on that.’

“They’ll ask, ‘Are you going to do anything about it?’

“I answer, ‘I guess not, as long as he doesn’t make it a test of fellowship. I may present my view again in a sermon in several months.’ (From Bob Russell, “Imagine God’s Glory Revealed in Your Church,” *Christian Standard*, 9/21/03, p. 12.)

c. One of my better students at CBS had the desire to become a church planter. In private correspondence he related the following account:

“My wife and I recently attended a nationally-known assessment for would-be church planters. . . . During the weekend we met a couple of times with our primary evaluator. This man comes from a Christian Church background. His job was to discern our potential effectiveness as church planters. His chosen method was often to dialogue with us about areas that he perceived as potential weaknesses.

“One of these areas turned out to be my theological views about women in church leadership. Based on passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11-13 and 1 Corinthians 11:3, I understand that women are not to teach male heads of households. Our evaluator asked me to defend my view, which I did.

“After we discussed this issue at length we were both ready to move on. Still,

with a smirk on his face, he asked me this question: ‘So if a woman is teaching a man, which one is going to hell?’ I responded: ‘Neither one, it isn’t a salvation issue.’ He looked back at me with disgust and said, ‘Well, if it isn’t a salvation issue, why does it matter? I leave it up to the individual to decide, if it’s not a salvation issue.’

“Ultimately, when my wife and I were receiving our final debriefing the evaluator said, ‘With that legalistic attitude . . . you won’t be successful in church planting [in our area]. You will probably be all right where you’re going, but you can’t plant a church in several parts of the country and be that narrow in your thinking. It won’t work.’ ”

- d. In an article entitled “In Opinions, Liberty,” Dr. James North discusses a 19th century RM figure named Aylette Raines and his view of universal salvation, and also Barton W. Stone and his denial of the substitutionary atonement and the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Brother North speaks of these views as *opinions* as opposed to matters of faith.
- e. Some make a distinction between *statements* in Scripture, and *interpretations* of those statements. Some of these statements themselves may be essentials, but the interpretations of them must be regarded as opinions. I remember George Mark Elliott telling about the time he was corresponding with a Disciples of Christ leader about this subject. The Disciples leader declared that the essential truth that unites us all is that “Jesus is Lord,” and he affirmed that he personally did believe that Jesus is Lord. Professor Elliott wrote and asked the man, “Exactly what do you mean by that confession?” The Disciples leader wrote back and bluntly said, “You have no right to ask me that question.”

II. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TERMS OF THE SLOGAN

(Under this main heading I will explain how the terms in the slogan, “In matters of faith [essentials], unity; in matters of opinion [non-essentials], liberty,” *ought* to be used.)

- A. What should be meant by the term “essentials” (or “matters of faith”)? (My main point here is to challenge the common but mistaken idea that “essentials” means “essential for salvation.”)
 1. To say that *only* “salvation doctrines” are “matters of faith” or “essentials” is contrary to the very nature of the Bible.
 - a. What IS the Bible? We grant the human element in its origin, but the divine element is decisive. The traditional concepts of revelation and inspiration lead to the conclusion that the Bible is the WORD OF GOD.
 - (1) “God has spoken” (Hebrews 1:1-2).
 - (2) “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - (3) Scripture is “the very words of God” (Romans 3:2).
 - (4) God’s Word is TRUTH (John 17:17).
 - b. What is God attempting to do by giving us his very own words in the Biblical documents? He is attempting to *communicate* with us, to transfer ideas and concepts from his mind to ours.
 - (1) Here is a question we must seriously consider: In his attempt to communicate

with human beings, has God *succeeded* or *failed*?

- (2) To put it another way, when God speaks his Word to us, does he desire to communicate a specific message with a specific meaning? Does he desire that this message be understood? *Can* it be understood?
 - (3) To answer anything but *YES!* to these questions is to say that God has *failed* in his attempt to communicate with us. This, of course, is an unthinkable attack upon God himself.
- c. If we truly believe the Bible is the WORD of GOD, then we must also believe the following:
- (1) That every statement in Scripture, and every communication therein of any kind, has *one correct meaning*, that God intends it to be understood in *one specific way*—no matter what the subject is, whether related to salvation or not.
 - (2) That human beings made in God’s image are *ABLE* to discern what this one correct understanding is, by applying the normal principles of language exegesis.
 - (3) That we are morally bound and obligated to seek, believe, and teach this one true understanding of God’s Word. This includes the idea that we are morally obligated to *agree* or be of the *same mind* on God’s words to us.
 - 1 Corinthians 1:10 – “I exhort you . . . that you all agree [that you all say the same thing], that you be united in the same mind [Greek, *nous*] and the same judgment or decision [Greek, *gnômç*].” These Greek words, *nous* and *gnômç*, cannot be differentiated here (Kittel, *TDNT*, 1:717).
 - Philippians 2:2 – “Make my joy complete by being of the same mind [*phroneô*], maintaining the same love, united in spirit [*phroneô*], intent on one purpose.” Here we are exhorted to “think the same thing,” and to “think the one thing.” “The fundamental demand of [this] Pauline exhortation is a uniform direction, a common mind, and unity of thought and will” (Kittel, *TDNT*, 9:233). Philippians 4:2 has the same exhortation.
 - Ephesians 4:4 says there is just “one faith.” This should probably be taken in the sense of the *fides qua*, or the body of doctrine which is believed. In Ephesians 4:13-15 “unity of the faith” and “unity of the knowledge of the Son of God” are the measure of maturity.
 - Titus 1:9 – An elder must be one who holds “fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”
 - This does not mean that we must “fight and argue” with one another over Biblical teaching, but we must earnestly and graciously defend the faith (Jude 3). To simply “agree to disagree” is not the Biblical idea of unity of belief.
 - (4) That every teaching in the Bible is important for something, that it is *essential* for something! Isaiah 55:11 says: “So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.” What makes a teaching

essential is not whether it is necessary for salvation, but whether it is something about which GOD HAS SPOKEN.

2. To say that only salvation doctrines are essential is contrary to the nature of *necessity* or *essentiality*. Regarding spiritual issues, there are two kinds of necessity. I want to explain this by drawing a parallel between *right action* and *right belief*.
 - a. First of all we shall consider right *actions*, i.e., acts of obedience to the commands of God. It is necessary or essential to obey EVERY command of God, but some obedience has the “necessity of *means*,” while other obedience has the “necessity of *precept*.”
 - (1) Necessity of *means* applies to those acts of obedience that are necessary for salvation. This is what Acts 6:7 calls “obedience to the faith,” and what Paul calls “obedience to the gospel” (Romans 10:16 [ESV]; 2 Thessalonians 1:8). This is the obedience necessary for receiving the gift of salvation. Most would place faith and repentance under this kind of necessity; others of us would add confession and baptism. These acts of obedience are essential according to the necessity of *means*.
 - (2) But what about all the other things God’s Word commands us to do, e.g., the ten commandments, 1 Corinthians 11:24-26, and Ephesians 4:25-32? What about obedience to our everyday *law code*?
 - If obedience to everyday law-commands is not necessary as a means of receiving (or even retaining) salvation, does this mean it are not necessary in any sense? If, strictly speaking, salvation is not dependent upon keeping these commandments, can we then say that it *doesn’t matter* whether we obey them or not?
 - NO! They have another kind of necessity – the necessity of *precept*. A precept is a commandment given as a rule of conduct. What this means is that if God has commanded us to do something, no matter what it may be, then even if it is not essential for salvation we still have an absolute necessity to do it! We have an absolute moral obligation to obey every command of God, even if it is not necessary for salvation. To disobey a precept of God is still a sin, even if we do not lose our salvation thereby.
 - (3) One of the implications of salvation by grace is that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ even though our everyday obedience to our law code is not perfect. This is what Paul is teaching us in Romans 3:21 – 5:21. But we should *never* take this to imply that such everyday obedience is unimportant, irrelevant, or arbitrary! Such obedience is still *necessary*, with the necessity of precept. Paul is very clear about this in Romans 6. In other words, though we are under grace and our sins are *forgiven*, SIN IS STILL SIN, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IS STILL RIGHTEOUSNESS. Though sin does not keep us out of heaven (Romans 3:28), it is still *wrong*.
 - (4) Imagine someone coming to Bob Russell and saying, “When I came to your church, my Sunday school teacher said it is OK for Christians to get an abortion, or to gamble, or to own a bar, or to get drunk once in a while.” Do you think Bob would say, “Yes, I know that teacher and I disagree with him on these things.

But he's a good teacher, and I'm not going to do anything about it as long as he does not make these things tests of fellowship"??? I seriously doubt that he would take this approach.

- (5) I usually like to say it this way: We are saved BY grace, THROUGH faith, IN baptism, FOR good works. I.e., even though we are not saved *by* works, we are saved *for* works (Ephesians 2:8-10). We are absolutely obligated to pursue good works throughout our Christian life, even though these are not the means of our salvation.
- b. But what about right belief? My point is this: what is true of *obedience* is also true of *doctrine*.
- (1) As we have seen, some *obedience* is necessary for salvation, but this does not make other obedience *unnecessary* or non-essential. *All* obedience is necessary, *just because God has commanded it!*
 - (2) In the exact same way, believing *some* doctrines IS necessary for salvation, but this does not make other doctrines or teachings of Scripture UNnecessary or NON-essential. Just as some obedience has the necessity of precept, so some belief has the necessity of *decree*. It is *necessary* to believe even the non-salvation content of Scripture, *just because God has said it!* We are saved by grace, through faith, in baptism, FOR SOUND DOCTRINE!
 - (3) Just as there is a "law code" we are obligated to obey, so there is a "truth code" we are obligated to believe.
 - God's will for us all is not only that we be saved, but that we "come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).
 - We are obligated to KNOW the truth (John 8:32), BELIEVE the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:12), and LOVE the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10).
 - Just as in Romans 6:1 Paul says, "Are we to continue in **sin** so that grace may increase?", so we may also cry out, "Are we to continue in **falsehood** that grace may increase?"
 - (4) As in the case of works as such, the sinner certainly does not have to understand, much less believe, the entire body of truth and sound doctrine taught in Scripture in order to be saved.
 - Certain core concepts are salvation issues, of course – especially the truth about Jesus and his works, and about how to receive salvation.
 - But with most Biblical teaching, one can be lacking in understanding, or even be in error, and still be saved. Just as we are not saved by works, so also we are not **saved** by doctrine.
 - (5) BUT remember: just because certain doctrines are not essential for salvation or are not tests of fellowship, this does not mean they are arbitrary or irrelevant or unimportant or "just your opinion."
 - As we have said, we are not saved by *how well* we obey the *law code*; but we are still *obligated* to obey it. Sin is still sin, and righteousness is still

righteousness.

- LIKEWISE: we are not saved by doctrinal correctness, by how well we understand and adhere to the *truth code*, BUT WE ARE STILL OBLIGATED TO **SEEK THE TRUTH AND KNOW THE TRUTH AND BELIEVE THE TRUTH AND LOVE THE TRUTH AND TEACH THE TRUTH** – the truth about every subject taught in the Word of God. Truth is still truth, and falsehood is still falsehood.
- That we are not SAVED by doctrinal correctness does not mean there is no such thing as doctrinal correctness.

(6) How does this affect our attitude toward others?

- All who have obeyed and are obeying **the gospel** are saved, even though they may be lacking in perfect obedience and perfect belief. We accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ, as fellow-sinners saved by grace.
- But we cannot condone their false beliefs any more than we can condone their unrighteous behavior.
- Being saved FOR GOOD WORKS includes being saved FOR SOUND DOCTRINE.

3. So how does this affect this part of our slogan, “In essentials, unity”?
 - a. “Essentials” (or “matters of faith”) include all doctrines that are necessary for salvation, or that have the “necessity of *means*.”
 - b. But “essentials” *also* include every other doctrine or teaching that is affirmed in the Word of God, because these teachings have the “necessity of *decree*” (as parallel with the necessity of *precept* for non-salvation obedience). We are just as much obligated to seek unity in these doctrines as in the salvation doctrines.
 4. A question I do not have time to explore is this: how do we identify the doctrines that are essential for salvation? My brief answer is that these involve the person and work of Christ, and how to receive salvation.
 5. Another question that cannot be explored in detail is this: if all doctrines are essential, but not all are essential for salvation, what other kinds of necessity or essentiality are there? Here are some suggestions:
 - a. Some beliefs are necessary for spiritual maturity as Christians (though not for salvation itself).
 - b. Some beliefs are thus necessary for Christian joy and assurance.
 - c. Some beliefs are thus necessary for the integrity of the true visible church.
 - d. Some beliefs are thus necessary to qualify one for teaching and/or leadership roles in the church.
 6. See my book, *Faith’s Fundamentals*, pp. 20-21.
- B. Now let us turn to the term *opinions*, and ask what we *should* take this term to mean in our slogan, “In matters of opinion, liberty.”

1. First, it is important to note that the word “opinion” has two distinctive meanings. It is my opinion (!) that we have not taken adequate account of this distinction in our use of this slogan. [Note: I am not aware of anyone else who uses the terminology, *formal* opinions and *material* opinions. These terms are my suggestions.]
 - a. FORMAL opinions.
 - (1) This term refers to ANY view/position/conclusion/judgment/belief which *anyone* holds on any subject whatsoever. Whatever we believe, for whatever reason, we can say (in this formal sense), “It is my opinion that. . . .” We are simply saying, “This is my judgment, my conclusion, on the matter.”
 - (2) I call this kind of opinion a *formal* opinion because the *content* of it is beside the point, and so also is *how* we actually came to hold such an opinion.
 - Thus we may say, “In my opinion, Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” This just means, “I have come to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” “It is my judgment that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” “I accept as true the idea that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”
 - To call such a judgment a *formal* opinion is simply to acknowledge that the human mind goes through particular ways or processes of drawing conclusions or coming to its views on anything.
 - (3) In this sense the word “opinion” applies to *everything* we accept as true, whether essential for salvation or non-essential for salvation.
 - A Jehovah’s Witness says, “In my opinion, Jesus Christ is not God.” A traditional believer says, “In my opinion, Jesus Christ is God.”
 - The Free Grace advocate says, “In my opinion, repentance is not essential for salvation.” A traditional believer says, “In my opinion, repentance is essential for salvation.”
 - A feminist says, “In my opinion, a woman may be an elder or a preacher.” A traditional believer says, “In my opinion, a woman may not be an elder or a preacher.”
 - A dispensationalist says, “In my opinion, a secret rapture will precede Christ’s return.” An amillennialist says, “In my opinion, a secret rapture will not precede Christ’s return.”

This is NOT how we should understand the word “opinion” in the slogan, since in this sense it applies even to one’s views on “matters of faith.”
 - (4) Regarding opinions in this formal sense, everyone has the *physical* (or metaphysical) *freedom/liberty* to hold any such view he chooses, to draw any conclusion he desires, about any subject. This is simply what it means to have free will. But in matters where God has spoken, no one has the *moral* freedom or liberty to hold to any view he chooses. The only opinions we have the moral

liberty to choose are matters on which God has *not spoken*. In such cases our views are opinions not only in this formal sense, but also in the *material* sense, as explained in the following point.

b. MATERIAL opinions.

- (1) I call these *material* opinions because the word “opinion” here refers not to the *process* of arriving at said opinion, but to its *content*.
- (2) A material opinion is a judgment or conclusion about some material aspect of reality, but it is a judgment for which there is *no objective way* of determining whether it is true or false, right or wrong. In fact, these terms do not even apply to a material opinion. Such an opinion is a conclusion about reality based not on some factual evidence outside of us, but on some preference, some liking or disliking, *within ourselves*. Any statement for which there is adequate objective evidence as to its truth cannot properly be called an opinion in this material sense. Rather, it is simply a fact.
 - For example, someone may say, “In my opinion, Gold Star chili tastes better than Skyline chili.” This is truly an opinion in the material sense, because it is a subjective judgment about some objective reality. It simply means that this person prefers the taste of Gold Star chili over Skyline chili. Another person might say, “In my opinion, Skyline chili tastes better than Gold Star chili.” This is an equally valid opinion in this material sense.
 - But what if someone says, “In my opinion, there is no such thing as Skyline chili. The only kind of chili that exists is Gold Star chili.” Now, this is truly an opinion in the formal sense, as discussed earlier. But whether there is no such thing as Skyline chili can NEVER be an opinion in the material sense. It has to do with objective matters of fact. Quite simply, such a statement can only be either true or false.
 - The late New York senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, once said, “Every man is entitled to his own opinions, but not to his own facts.” I.e., where facts are concerned, nothing is a “matter of opinion” in this material sense.
- (3) As applied to spiritual realities, there are an untold number of beliefs that are opinions in the formal sense, but which can never be opinions in the material sense. They can only be true or false. E.g.:
 - Human beings do not have significantly free will. (False.)
 - A secret rapture will precede Christ’s second coming. (False.)
 - Women are not permitted to be elders in the church. (True.)
 - It is not possible for a true believer ever to lose his salvation. (False.)
 - The Lord’s Supper should be celebrated every Lord’s Day. (True.)
 - Human beings are the product of divine creation, not chance evolution. (True.)
- (4) At the same time, there are an untold number of beliefs that are opinions in both the formal sense AND in the material sense, on issues such as the following:
 - Should congregations have church buildings?
 - Should congregations always *vote* on elders? deacons? preachers?

- Should the Lord's Supper be before or after the sermon?
 - May we baptize in an indoor, heated baptistery?
 - Should meals ever be served inside a church building?
 - Should any products ever be sold inside a church building?
 - How many cups may be used to serve communion?
 - May musical instruments be used to accompany congregational singing?
- (5) Regarding these latter (material) issues, one may argue that a particular view is *better* or *worse* because of circumstances (i.e., a matter of expediency), but in the final analysis no one view is *the true view*. Here, opposite views may be equally valid. Here, it may be that "one opinion is as good as another." Any view on such an issue is not just "MY opinion" on the subject, but "AN opinion" regardless of who is holding it.
- (6) It should be clear by now that for our slogan to make any sense, the term "opinions" should not be used in the generic, formal sense, because in that sense *anything* a person affirms is an opinion. The only sense the term should have in our slogan is the *material* sense. Only in this sense can some things be opinions while others are not.
2. Now that we have explained the difference between the two kinds of opinion, we need to ask this question: What determines whether an issue is or is not a matter of (material) opinion? In the area of Christian faith and practice, the deciding factor is simply this: *has the Bible said anything about it—anything at all?*
- a. A material opinion is a judgment or preference about something for which there is no objective basis. In the case of spiritual matters this means that *there is no Biblical pronouncement about it*. It is a person's view of something about which the Bible is *silent*.
- b. On the other hand, anything about which the Bible has *spoken*—
 no matter how significant or insignificant,
 no matter whether related to salvation or not,
 no matter whether given through revelation or inspired prophetic utterance,
 no matter whether affirmed few or many times,
 no matter whether taught specifically or by general principle,
 no matter whether stated in simple or perplexing terms,
 no matter how many people agree on it—
 CANNOT be called "just an opinion." HOW CAN WE PRESUME TO REFER TO ANYTHING ON WHICH GOD HAS SPOKEN AS AN *OPINION*?
- c. And yet, we see this happening quite frequently in our movement!
- "Once saved, always saved"? Not a salvation issue, therefore an opinion.
 - Women teaching men? Not a salvation issue, therefore just an opinion.
 - Substitutionary atonement? Just an opinion.
 - Universal salvation? Just an opinion.
 - Hell as eternal punishment? Just an opinion.
 - The Lord's Supper on Sunday, every Sunday? Just an opinion.
 - Original sin? Just an opinion.

--Resurrection of the dead? Speaking in tongues? Unconditional predestination? Secret rapture? Church polity? Not salvation issues, therefore just matters of opinion.

- d. NO! NO! NO! God's Word has spoken about all these and other such issues. There is one true understanding of them all! Conclusions concerning such doctrines are not (material) opinions; they are either true or false! We must stop using this slogan, "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty," to justify tolerance of false doctrine and in many cases the absence of doctrine altogether—as if (for example) the difference between "once saved, always saved" and free-will salvation is no more important than the choice between a Ford and a Chevrolet.
- e. The only proper use of the word "opinion" in the slogan is about matters of *material* opinion, regarding which each person does indeed have the (moral) liberty to come to his own conclusions.

CONCLUSION

- A. The bottom line is that this slogan can be of use only under the following conditions (otherwise it is more harmful than helpful):
 1. First, it is necessary that "essentials" or "matters of faith" NOT be limited to "essential for salvation." These terms must be applied to everything taught in the Word of God.
 - a. If we still want to talk about beliefs that are essential for salvation (which is quite proper), then we must have *three* categories of beliefs, not just two. In addition to the category of (material) opinions, there are two categories of essentials:
 - (1) "Salvation essentials," or "matters of saving faith," which must be accepted for an individual's salvation and therefore are a necessary basis for the *spiritual* unity of the church.
 - (2) "Doctrinal essentials," for which we must constantly be seeking to attain *doctrinal* unity in the church, according to the mandate of passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:10. These are the Biblical teachings for which the correct view is essential for purposes other than salvation. We are under a moral obligation to seek and teach the truth about these issues whether salvation is at stake or not.
 - b. Both kinds of essentials are "matters of faith," in the sense that we are obligated to understand and believe them, but not all are "tests of faith" or "tests of fellowship."
 - c. We are morally obligated, insofar as we are able, to seek UNITY of BELIEF on every issue about which God has spoken.
 2. Also, this slogan can be of use only if we are using the word "opinions" in the sense of *material* opinions.
 - a. These are matters about which God has not spoken, and therefore about which there is no divinely mandated doctrine.
 - b. These are the only circumstances under which we have true liberty or freedom to determine our own preferred view.
 3. If you have been listening carefully to what I am saying, you will see that this slogan, rightly understood and applied, basically means the very same thing as another slogan, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent."