

Essentials and Non-Essentials in a Nutshell

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We Evangelicals talk a lot about essentials and non-essentials. Rightly so. We talk about distinguishing between those areas in our faith - those doctrines - which are central or "cardinal" doctrines, and those which are not so important. However, we often have trouble when someone asks us to define, distinguish, and defend this whole "essentials/non-essentials" distinction.

I have written on this *many* times, but I am going to attempt to be *somewhat* comprehensive here. That translates to "long article forthcoming." But I think that this exercise is representative of a pressing issue in Christian discipleship. So put on your seat belt. It is going to get bumpy.

At the [Credo House of Theology](#) (our headquarters in Edmond, Oklahoma), right when you walk in the front door, you see written on the wall the Latin words *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas*. Translated into English, this means, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." This phrase (often wrongly attributed to Augustine) comes from an otherwise obscure German Lutheran theologian of the early seventeenth century named Rupertus Meldenius. It has served as a place holder for a sort of Evangelical credo or statement of faith (hence, it is the first thing you see at the "Credo" house). It expresses the idea of orthodoxy and grace existing together. It reminds us that there are essential Christian beliefs *and* there are those matters of lesser importance.

I remember hearing a pastor once say concerning doctrine, "You are either one-hundred percent right or one-hundred percent wrong. There is no in-between and there are no gray areas. God is not confused or unsure. Why should we be?" While this might be true concerning God, for us, things are different. For now, we see in a mirror dimly (1 Cor. 13:12). While we have our share of those with more of a fundamentalist mindset, who have a thousand lines drawn in the sand in the name of truth, we also have our share of liberals, whose mindset compels them to erase as many lines as possible in the name of grace or love. We must be careful, balancing grace and truth.

Defining Essentials and Non-Essentials

Paul spoke about those things that are "of *first* importance [*protois*]" (emphasis mine). Christ spoke about straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel (Matt. 23:24) and the "weightier things of the law" (Matt. 23:23). The very existence of creeds and pithy statements of faith in the Bible evince the truth that there are many issues that are of "first importance." Here are a few examples of biblical creeds and succinct statements of faith:

Deut. 6:4:

Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

1 Cor. 12:3:

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor. 15:3-7:

For I delivered to you as *of first importance* what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (emphasis mine)

Phil. 2:6-11:

[W]ho, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

1 Tim. 3:16:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

Heb. 6:1-2:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

1John 4:2:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.

Each one of these represents an early summary of Jewish/Christian belief, focusing in on the most important issues.

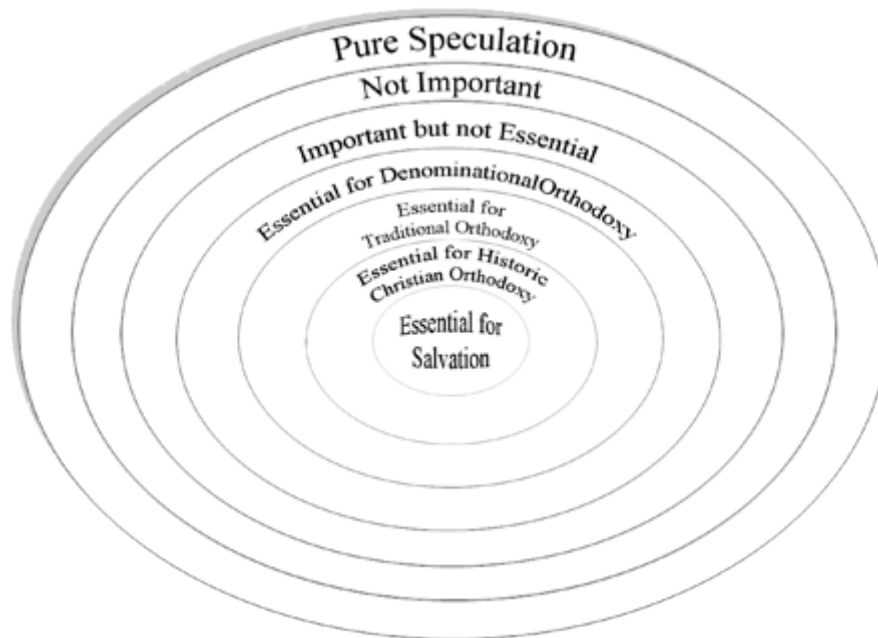
As I said, this is one of the things that (should) distinguish us as Evangelicals. We are those who unite around those things that we believe are the weightiest, the things that are the *most* important, while we (should) give (some degree of) liberty in the non-essentials. I often tell people that there are some things which I believe that I would die for; there are some things which I believe that I would lose an arm for; there are some things which I believe that I would lose a finger for; and then there are some things which I believe that I would not even get a manicure for.

Like in all areas of life, we need to learn to choose our battles carefully. But in order to do this, we must first come to know the difference between essentials and non-essentials.

But (as the criticism goes) it is not that easy to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. More importantly for now, many Evangelicals have simply never been exposed to this and therefore practice their theology in a much more legalistic way, believing *every* conviction that they have to be representative of a hill upon which they should die.

Here I want to elaborate upon and expand the discussion a little bit. While we need to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials, we also need to recognize that there are different *types* of essentials. Along with this goes my belief that there are different ways to "break fellowship" based on our beliefs. In other words, not all essentials are equal. Some are essential to the very foundation of Christianity, but some are only essential to a particular denomination or expression. This will require different *types* of breaks in fellowship.

Let me start with a chart, then I will briefly break it down:



[click on chart to enlarge](#)

Essential for salvation: These are the most essential doctrines of all essentials. This includes what *every* Christian should always be willing to die for. In essence, if someone does not believe the doctrines that are "essential for salvation," they are not saved. Hence, it is at the center of the circle.

What I include:

- Belief in God (there is no such thing as an atheistic Christian)

Issues pertaining to the person and work of Christ:

- Belief in Christ's deity and humanity (1 John 4:2-3; Rom. 10:9)
- Belief that you are a sinner in need of God's mercy (1 John 1:10)
- Belief that Christ died on the cross and rose bodily from the grave for our sins (1 Cor 15:3-4)
- Belief that faith in Christ is necessary (John 3:16)

As with all of them, I am sure that there are some ancillary matters that could be included, but this gives you the key doctrines. Without these, you simply don't have any sense present of what it means to be a Christian.

Essential for historic Christian orthodoxy: These include beliefs "essential for salvation" *but* are broader in that they express what has been believed by the *historic* Christian church for the last two thousand years, no matter which tradition. This is expressed by the [Vincentian Canon](#) (434 A.D.): "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all." The exception of fringe movements has never been valid for this canon. It is simply asking, "What have all Christians everywhere always believed?"

Some of what I include:

- The doctrine of the Trinity as expressed at Nicea
- The doctrine of the Hypostatic Union (Christ is fully man and fully God) as expressed at Chalcedon
- The belief in the *future* second coming of Christ
- A belief in the inspiration and authority of Scripture
- A belief in God's transcendence (his metaphysical distinction from the universe)
- A belief in God's immanence (his present activity in the world and our lives)
- A belief in God's sovereignty (while there are different ways to define sovereignty, this basically purports that God is in control)
- Belief that Christ is the only way to a right relationship with God
- Belief in eternal punishment of the unredeemed

To be sure, some of these doctrines "develop," or mature, but their maturation is only in relation to their seed form which preexisted their more mature expression. (For more on this, see [here](#).)

Please notice that these are essential, even if they are not *as essential* as those expressed in the previous category. In other words, these do not represent negotiables. These are still cardinal doctrines.

But we could also include in this section a grouping entitled "Essential for Historic Orthopraxy." This would include all of those practices and sins about which the church has been united in its belief. This would include humility, helping the poor, belief that homosexuality is a sin, issues of stewardship, respect for the *imago dei* (which would deem abortion wrong), and the need to evangelize the lost.

Essential for traditional orthodoxy: Again, these will necessarily include all of those from the two previous categories, but add some distinctives of their own. Essentials here will include all of those that are foundational to one of the three main Christian traditions: Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism. These are beliefs that distinguish one tradition from the next, but are not absolutely essential from the broader Christian worldview expressed above.

Some Protestant distinctives would include:

- General belief in the *major* pronouncements of the first seven ecumenical councils (325-787 AD)
- Belief in the necessity for a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ
- Belief that justification is through faith *alone* on the basis of Christ *alone*
- Belief that Scripture alone has *ultimate and final* authority on all matters of faith and practice
- The canon of Scripture made up of 66 books (excluding the Deuterocanonical books)

Some Roman Catholic distinctives would include:

- Belief in transubstantiation (the bread and wine turn into the actual body and blood of Christ)
- Belief that justification is through faith *and* works

- Belief that both Scripture and unwritten tradition have ultimate authority as they are interpreted by the Magisterium
- Belief in the authority of twenty-one ecumenical councils
- Belief that the Pope is the infallible vicar of Christ
- Belief in the Marian dogmas
- Belief that the canon includes the Deuterocanonical books

Some Eastern Orthodox distinctives would include:

- Belief in the infallibility of the first seven ecumenical councils (325-787 AD)
- Belief that the liturgy of the Church is part of the Gospel
- Rejection of substitutionary atonement and the imputation of Adam's sin
- Salvation by grace through faith as God works these out through our unification with Him (*theosis*)
- Traditional inclusion of the Deuterocanonical book (although there is some debate about this)

Again, for each one of these tradition, these represent essential distinctions which, while not as cardinal as those in the previous two categories, are important nonetheless.

Essential for denominational orthodoxy: This will be similar to the above, but one step down in importance, dealing as it does with the particular and peculiar denominational expressions by the various Protestant traditions.

Some examples:

- Credo-baptism, i.e., Baptism is only for believers (Baptists)
- Infant baptism (Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans)
- Unconditional election (Reformed and Presbyterians)
- Arminian theology (Methodists, Nazarenes)
- Belief in the continuation of the Charismatic gifts (Pentecostals, Church of God)

While these *might* be considered worthy of breaking local fellowship in practice, they are not important enough to break ultimate fellowship. In other words, these represent legitimate debates that should not affect our unity.

Important but not essential: These are those beliefs that do not describe any particular tradition necessarily. They are important, but not *that* important.

Some examples:

- Beliefs about particulars in the creation debate
- Belief whether the books of Jonah and Job are historical accounts
- Beliefs about the authorship of 2 Peter
- Belief about particular end-time schemes (i.e. premillennial, amillennial, post-millennial)
- The order of books in the canon
- Which translation of the Bible to use from the pulpit
- Which Gospel was written first
- *How* often one should celebrate the Lord's supper
- Whether or not Christ taught in Greek or Aramaic

Not Important: These are beliefs that people have concerning Christian doctrine that are not important for any expression and do not affect Christian devotion or spirituality.

Some examples

- The date of Christ's birth (Christmas)
- What kind of music to play at church
- Whether to use real wine or grape juice at communion
- Whether to hold Saturday night services

- Whether or not John the Baptist was an Essene

Pure speculation: That is just what these are - speculation. We just don't know one way or another, nor does it matter.

Some examples

- Did Adam have a belly-button? (yes, he did...it would just look funny otherwise)
- Belief in the eternal destiny of pets? (except I *know* my dog Rocky is going to heaven)
- What was God doing "before" creation? (creating hell for those who speculate such things)
- Will there be meat to eat in heaven? (we can all hope)
- Will there be sex in heaven? (we can all hope *more*)
- How long was it before Adam and Eve fell? (two hours after Eve was created . . . ask me why some other time)

So far, my purpose has been to stimulate a deeper level of thought about the difference between essentials and non-essentials. Really, I just want to convince you that there are different levels of essentials and non-essentials.

Now (take a deep breath), let's move on and talk about the criteria which makes a doctrine essential.

Defending Essentials and Non-Essentials

So far so good? I can hear the objections: "This all *sounds* really nice. But who decides what are essential doctrines and non-essential doctrines? The Pope? Your local church pastor? The SBC? Al Mohler? Or is it my private interpretation of the Scripture? Alas, with such a question, the divisions start all over. "In essentials, unity. Sounds nice, but impractical."

I don't think we have to be so pessimistic about this. I actually think that there are certain criteria that most thoughtful people can agree constitute the foundation of our faith - the essentials. I have them narrowed to four in no certain order. It is important to note that I am persuaded that all four must be present for a doctrine to be considered essential for salvation or essential. These criteria would pertain *only to the first two circles*: 1) Essential for salvation and 2) Essential for historic Christian orthodoxy.

1. Historicity: Does the doctrine have universal historical representation?

This first criterion is one of historical agreement. This is a form of "consensual faith" (*consensus fidelium*). This criterion of universal consensus follows the canon of Saint Vincent of Lérins mentioned above: *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*, "that which was believed everywhere, always, by everyone." In other words, an essential cannot be something new like the doctrine of the Rapture. Neither can it be something that has lacked historic unity by Christians across time like the perpetual virginity of Mary. As well, it cannot have limited geographic representation, like certain Eastern liturgy. The question here is, Have all Christians of all time everywhere believed it?

2. Explicitly Historical: Does the history of the church confess their centrality?

This is like the first but differs in an important way. Here we are saying that if the history of the church has not explicitly confessed this as a *central* issue, then it is not. For example, the history of the church may confess that the Christian worldview includes a firm confession of a belief in the historicity of the Flood narrative, but it has never been a part of the *central* teachings to the degree that a denial of such is a damnable offense. When combined with the first criteria, the exception cannot define the rule. The point here is that we take seriously God's work in the history of the Church through the Holy Spirit. If the church has universally believed that a certain doctrine is both true and central to the Christian faith, that doctrine deserves serious consideration as being among the essentials.

3. Biblical Clarity (Perspicuity): Is the doctrine represented *clearly* in Scripture?

One of the principles that the Reformers sought to communicate is that of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. The Reformers did not believe that all of the Scripture was clear (a misunderstanding of the doctrine of perspicuity), but that *all that is essential for salvation* is clear. In short, if something in Scripture is obscure, then it is not essential. Augustine even held to such a principle stating that one must not build doctrines on obscure passages (*On Christian Doctrine*). For example, one should not build essential doctrine on what the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" ([Matt 16:19](#)) are, or what it means to be "baptized for the dead" ([1 Cor. 15:29](#)). Unfortunately, both Catholics and Mormons have done just that. If a passage is obscure, no essential doctrine can be derived from it.

4. Explicitly Biblical: Does any passage of Scripture explicitly teach that a certain doctrine is essential?

The Scriptures speak about a great many things, but it is explicit regarding that which is of essential importance. For example, as I noted before, Paul says to the Corinthians, "For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" ([1 Cor. 15:3-4](#); emphasis mine). The "of first importance" tells us that Christ's death and resurrection "for our sins," from Paul's perspective, are essential components of Christianity. Without such, according to Paul, there is no Christianity ([1 Cor. 15:12ff](#)). As well, the Gospel of John speaks about the importance of faith. "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" ([John 3:18](#)). This passage explicitly makes faith central.

Again, these four criteria, I propose, must *all* be present. I *think* I am committed to this. If one or more is lacking concerning a particular doctrine, I believe that it is not possible for one to legitimately argue for its *core* necessity. (But again, *this does not mean that the issue is not important.*) As well, all four feed off each other and are somewhat self-regulating. In other words, if someone doubts whether something is clear in Scripture, all he or she has to do is look to history. If something is not clear in the Scripture, we will not find that it passes the test of historicity. This is why it is of vital importance that Christians not only be good exegetes, but also good historians.

Conclusion

For some of you, this is the first time you have been exposed to this way of thinking. I pray that you consider the major points of what I am saying even if you do not agree with the details. I am not an ecumenicist, but I don't think that we should have ill-will or break fellowship with people *unnecessarily*. I do believe that we have the right and *obligation* to define what it means to be "Christian." While I don't think we should over-define it to the point where our circle of fellowship is so small that it only includes "you and those two," we need to be careful, as under-defining our faith is just as dangerous as over-defining it. It is very easy to slip into theological maximalism (fundamentalism) or theological minimalism (liberalism). But we are Evangelicals. This means that we are "centrists," uniting around the most important issues and giving varying degrees of liberty in less important issues. While it is true that because something is non-essential this does not make it negotiable, it is also true that because something is believed strongly does not make it central.