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Essentials and Non-Essentials: How to Choose Your Battles Carefully

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68 Comments



Christian Life, Denominations, Epistemology, Evangelicalism, Orthodoxy, Prolegomena, Roman Catholicism

We talk a lot about this: essentials and non-essentials. In fact, at the [Credo House of Theology](#) (our headquarters), right when you walk in the front door you will see written on the wall in Latin the 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 (statement of faith). It expresses the idea of orthodoxy and grace. It reminds us that there are essential Christian beliefs *and* there are non-essentials.

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).

As well, 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).

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, the essentials, while we (should) give liberty in the non-essentials. I often tell people that there are some things that I believe that I would die for; there are some things that I believe that I would lose an arm for; there are some things that I believe that I would lose a finger for; and then there are some things that I believe that I would not even get a manicure for.

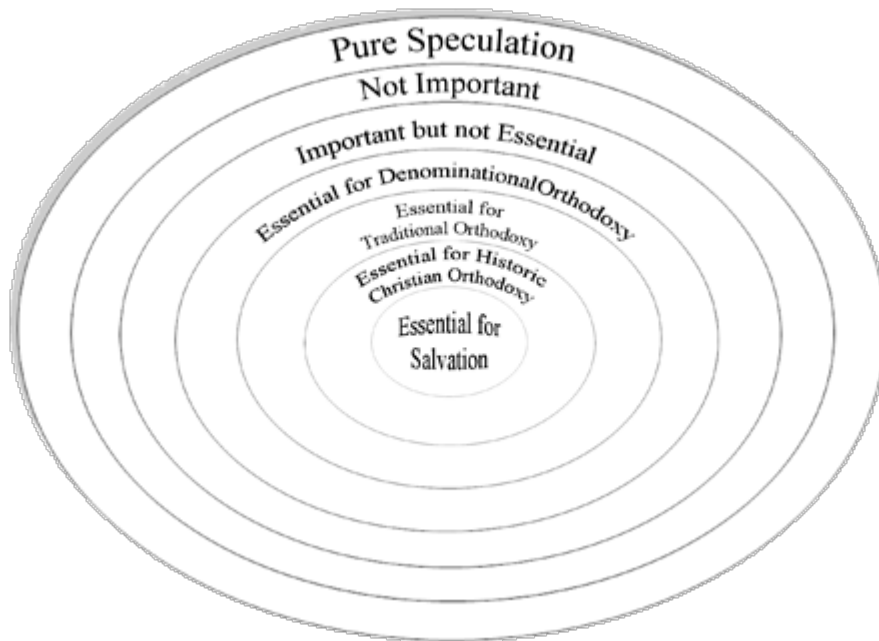
Like in all areas of life, we need to learn to choose our battles carefully. But in order to do this, we must first come to know the difference between essentials and non-essentials.

But (as the criticism goes) it is not that easy to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. [I have written on this before](#). 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.

What I include:

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

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 what tradition. This is expressed by the Vincentian Canon, “that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.” (The exception of fringe movements does not count). Not only must the church have belief in it, but it must also explicitly have confessed its centrality (e.g., belief that Matthew wrote the book of Matthew does not, I believe, qualify here).

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 eternal punishment for the wicked
- A belief in God's timeless existence
- Christ is the only way to salvation

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 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 that 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 that 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)

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)

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 inerrancy of Scripture
- 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
- Belief in the eternal destiny of pets (except I *know* my dog Rocky is going to heaven)
- What was God doing “before” creation
- Will there be meat to eat in heaven (we can all hope)
- Will there be sex in heaven (we can all hope *more*)

In conclusion to this rather long post, my purpose has been to stimulate a deeper level of thought about the difference between essentials and non-essentials. I know that there are a lot of unanswered questions that might have been stimulated, such as, *“Can someone be saved without believing in the exclusivity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, as expressed at Nicea?”* Or, *“What about homosexuality and the ordaining of women?”* I will leave some of these for the discussion to follow. I hope that, *at the very least*, some of my Calvinist and Baptist friends will see that some of the things that are held most dear in their traditions, *while important*, are not really defining factors in historic Christianity.

I am not an ecumenicist, but I don't think that we should have ill-will or break fellowship with people unnecessarily. I hope that thinking through these things will make both our unity and diversity more meaningful and less reactionary.