

Drawing the Line

What Are the Essentials of the Faith?

Introduction

What is essential? This question is answered in different ways by nearly every believer. Somehow we want to think that our spin on biblical doctrine and theology is right and everyone else is wrong. However, I think it is an act of ultimate arrogance to think that everything I believe about the Bible is right and anyone who does not believe exactly like I do is wrong. There are areas of theology where we do not have the inside track on the mind of God, and in those areas there are valid reasons for disagreement. Where the rub comes is determining those areas.

My Approach to This Question

I have chosen a four-layer model of theology in my approach to this issue. I employ this approach to analyze my own theology and determine at which point I withdraw fellowship from others who disagree.

At the top is the “E” layer, for ESSENTIAL. I define an ESSENTIAL as any doctrine or truth, which if denied or misunderstood, keeps one out of heaven, seriously distorts the revelation of God to man, or leads to gross sin or error. Below ESSENTIAL is the “C” layer, or CONVICTION. These are truths that will not keep one out of heaven or lead to gross sin, but will have a serious impact on the direction of one’s spiritual growth and development. Under “C” I have placed a third layer, “I”, or IMPORTANT. These are doctrines and truths I consider to be important, but they are not as important as CONVICTIONS. CONVICTIONS determine where I will worship, and will limit with whom I will fellowship. IMPORTANT issues determine comfort levels there. Below “I” is “P”, or PREFERENCES. These are issues on which I have a preference, but no real strong feelings either way. In no way do my preferences inhibit my fellowship with others.

Using the above model, I have constructed the chart found at the end of this document which I use to determine those hills on which to die. I will die over any ESSENTIAL, I will debate CONVICTIONS, I will discuss IMPORTANT issues, and I will be gracious with those who disagree about my PREFERENCES.

Supporting Postulates

I have outlined below some of the postulates I have used in formulating my thinking on this issue. These are listed in no particular order.

Postulate 1 - Every doctrinal issue involving specific truth has only one right answer.

This, of course, goes without saying. There cannot be two right answers to any specific question of truth. That is the error of relativism, which states that what may be right for me may be wrong for you and vice-versa. It is also the error of situation ethics in which moral absolutes become relative depending on the situation.

One of the fundamental principles of Biblical Hermeneutics is that each passage has only one proper interpretation but many applications. A specific portion of Scripture means only one thing. Removing objective truth from the Bible leads to all kinds of error and allows one to

make the Bible say anything desired. Whenever there is a difference of opinion on some doctrine between two parties, one, or both, are wrong.

Postulate 2 - Not every doctrine is of identical importance.

Although there is a single right answer to every doctrinal question, not every doctrinal question is of equal importance. We may have a difference of opinion as to whether Nebuchadnezzar will be in heaven or not (I think he will), but our view of Nebuchadnezzar's salvation is not eternally determinative. On the other hand, if we have a disagreement about *sola fide*, then one or both of us will not be in heaven.

The problem is that many make every doctrinal truth of equal importance. The problem with this is that the only ones, then, who are right are the ones who have spent their entire lives studying the Bible to get all the right answers. Anyone who disagrees with them, over any issue, is wrong, and in some cases viewed as a non-believer.

How much truth does a person need to know in order to become a believer? Do they have to have a correct eschatology? Do they need to have a full comprehension of supra-, infra-, and sub-lapsarianism? Do they need to be able to define the deity of Christ in all its fullness? Do they need to understand all of the attributes of God? Do they need to have a correct ecclesiology? Of course not! That is not to say these doctrinal issues are not important and should never be debated, it just means that God did not design a plan of salvation in which one must become a theologian before becoming a believer.

Postulate 3 - Some doctrines are nearly impossible to fully comprehend in our fallen state.

Whether we like to admit it or not, there are some doctrinal issues that we just cannot fully comprehend in our fallen state. For example, who wrote the Bible? We are told in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that it is the Holy Spirit, but if that is the case why do we see stylistic differences between the writings of Paul, Luke, and John? Who lives your Christian life? The Bible says in Galatians 2:20 that it is you, and not you! Who is sovereign in salvation? The Bible clearly teaches that I was chosen by God before the foundation of the world, yet in time I chose God!

All of these doctrinal issues, and more, are paradoxes this side of eternity. Do I choose God or does He choose me? Both! Who wrote the book of 2 Timothy, Paul or the Holy Spirit? Both! Who lives your Christian life, you or God? Both! Is Christ fully God and fully man? Yes! Explain these! You cannot.

Postulate 4 - Not every doctrinal issue has an identical weight of evidence as all other doctrines. Some doctrines are more easily proved than others.

As one studies doctrine, some doctrines are fairly easy to prove. For example, it is not that difficult to prove the Trinity, virgin birth, Deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and eternity of heaven or hell (in spite of Clark Pinnock). On the other hand, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to fully prove the pretribulational rapture of the Church or the need to be baptized by immersion. One may be able to make a strong case due to patterns found in the New Testament, but ultimate proof is missing.

In order to explore this further, we need to realize that there are different levels of proof for doctrinal issues. In some cases we have POSITIVE proof. In this case the doctrine is explicitly taught or stated in no uncertain terms. Our only choice is to believe it. A little less strong is DERIVED proof. Derived proof can be given to support the doctrine of the Trinity and the pretribulational rapture of the church. Although these doctrines are not explicitly stated, a near 100% case can be made for their accuracy (I believe 100% in the case of the Trinity).

A final type of proof is PATTERNED proof. This supports doctrines that are not explicitly stated or derived from Scripture, but are seen only in the patterns of the early church. A prime example of this is baptism by immersion. There is no clear statement regarding the fact that one must be immersed as the only valid mode of baptism, and one cannot make a good derived proof of this doctrine either. However, one can show that the apparent pattern of the early church was that of immersion, and as a result there is evidence we should follow that pattern. The point to be made about patterned proof, however, is that it cannot be made to be binding. In other words, just because we find a pattern for a particular doctrine does not mean that there are no other valid patterns allowed.

Postulate 5 - Essentials do not change over time.

This is an extremely important postulate. If a doctrine was essential in the early Church, then it is essential today. Conversely, if something is essential today, then it must also have been essential for the early church.

For example, if we believe that the substitutionary atonement is an essential for salvation, then it has always been, and always will be, essential. God does not change essentials on us. This was brought home to me in a negative sort of way when I was in high school. A pastor of a GARBC church was going before an examination board for ordination. Because he was a good friend of mine, I went along to observe the process. Everything was going along smoothly until he got to his position on the rapture, which was posttribulation. The reaction of the ordination council was interesting—it was like throwing a steak to a pack of hungry dogs. As it turned out, he was not ordained. In thinking about that event my question was, “What if he had gone before that same group 200 years ago?” The doctrine of a pretribulation rapture would not have even been brought up, much less debated. How did something unknown 200 years ago all of a sudden become an essential? It did not! I happen to believe in a pretribulation rapture, but in no way is that doctrine essential.

Postulate 6 - If it is Essential - God has made it clear.

God is not in the business of hiding essential truth from us. If something is required for us to get to heaven, God has made it very clear in the Scripture. What I fail to understand is how doctrines that are unclear and have tenuous proof become essentials. We may believe and argue these doctrines, but they are not essential. One does not have to become a Bible scholar to become a Christian. The essentials are clear, few, and easily found in the pages of the New Testament.

Some Practical Considerations

Having listed those postulates I use in determining what is essential truth, I would now like to discuss some practical considerations about the other three levels. Please note that all of the illustrations used are viewed from my perspective. There would be many who would disagree as to where I place these issues,

Consideration 1 - Some doctrinal issues may fall into one or more of the above categories depending on to what degree it is taken, and even within the four levels not every doctrinal issue is of equal weight or importance.

Many doctrinal issues span one or more levels depending on the degree to which it is taken or understood. A good example of this is the role of women. There is significant disagreement, sometimes between godly men, on the exact role of a woman in a church. Some would argue that

there should be no difference between men and women. Others want to keep women “barefoot and pregnant.” I personally believe the New Testament is clear on the role of women, but what about those who disagree? How do I relate to them, and how do I function in a church that may not believe as I do?

My answer to this question depends on the degree to which one takes the egalitarian viewpoint (men and women are equal). If a church would ordain women, and have women elders and pastors, I would find it extremely difficult to minister in such a church. Is this an essential? No! I can still be a true believer and have a woman pastor, or even be a woman pastor. However, in my understanding of this issue, I would place the notion of women elders high in the CONVICTION level. I would find it extremely uncomfortable to minister in and attend a church with ordained women elders.

What about women teaching men? Again, I would place this at the CONVICTION level but somewhat lower. I believe 2 Timothy 2 is very clear that women are not to teach men within the corporate assembly of believers.¹ However, I would find it much less uncomfortable to attend and minister in a church that occasionally allowed women to teach men than I would in one that ordained women. I don't agree with women teaching men, but I certainly would not split a church over it.

Finally, what about women praying publicly in a church? I think a case can be made to allow women to pray in the local assembly of believers from the evidence contained in 2 Corinthians 11-14. As a result, I would place this in the IMPORTANT category. It is not a conviction of mine to forbid women praying, and I would probably not have it practiced myself if I had the say in the matter, but I do not think in nearly as serious as women teaching men or women elders.

As another example, what about baptism? I grew up in an environment where water baptism by immersion was one of the fundamental truths of the church. Is it that important? Well, the first question to ask is “will the lack of baptism keep one out of heaven?” The answer is an obvious no! One can go to heaven without being baptized, or even without being immersed. Therefore, baptism by immersion is not an ESSENTIAL.

Is it a CONVICTION? I would personally place the act of baptism as a CONVICTION since we are commanded to make disciples, baptize them, and then teach them in our Lord's Great Commission. However, I would place the mode of baptism as an IMPORTANT issue. Why? I think that the importance of baptism has nothing to do with the water and everything to do with identification. I see baptism as an external act whereby a person is making a public confession of Christ as their Lord and Saviour and then publicly identifying with a local assembly of believers². As such, the act of identification and not the mode of baptism is the crucial element.

¹ Review my position paper on the *Role of Women in the Church* for a further discussion of this issue.

² My thinking along this line has been influenced by looking at baptism in the New Testament. Some would make immersion an essential by going to Romans 6:1-3. However, a careful analysis of that text shows that Paul is not talking at all about water baptism but is talking about Spirit baptism in which the believer is identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Water baptism may be a good picture of this, but that is all. When we look at baptism in the New Testament, we start with John the Baptist. His baptism had NOTHING to do with identifying the person as dying with Christ, being buried, and then rising again. The symbology of baptism was not as much in the mode as in the act itself. Those who were baptized by John were identifying with his message of repentance and publicly proclaiming their belief of his Kingdom message. The fact that there were immersed was only incidental, and in fact, the act itself was borrowed from other religious communities at that time who used baptism as a public declaration of a person joining their group or believing their message.

Consideration 2 - Some clearly defined doctrines in the Bible do not fall into the ESSENTIAL category although they are clearly true.

This is a corollary of the point made above that not every doctrinal issue is of equal importance. Two doctrines may be equally true, but not equally important.

For example, the concept of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, is an ESSENTIAL. If the New Testament teaches anything, it teaches that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone. On the other hand, the New Testament also teaches that unbelievers will be tormented in the lake of fire forever. Is this an ESSENTIAL? Can someone be a true believer and not believe the lost will be tormented forever? The answer is yes. They are wrong, but they can still be a believer. Both doctrines are equally true, but not equally important.

Consideration 3 - Some place a doctrine in a different category depending on their traditions.

This is where the major area of disagreement occurs between churches and believers. The argument is not as much the truth of a doctrine, but how important that doctrine is.

For example, Landmarkian Baptists believe that baptism by immersion is extremely important, and not just immersion, but baptism by someone who themselves were validly baptized. They would not allow anyone to become a member of their church that had not been baptized "correctly." Other churches, however, would allow someone to become a member that had been baptized elsewhere. Still others do not consider baptism an issue at all. The point is, the issue of the mode and method of baptism will be placed at a different level by various believers depending on their traditions.

The same holds true with tongues. Some would place the gift of tongues in the ESSENTIAL category by stating that anyone who does not speak in tongues is not truly born again. Others would place it at the CONVICTION level, either for or against. Still others would place it at the IMPORTANT level. In my case, I do not believe the gifts of tongues is valid today, and therefore I place it at a low CONVICTION level.

Consideration 4 - Fellowship MUST be broken at the ESSENTIAL level.

If a doctrine is ESSENTIAL, then fellowship must be broken with those who do not believe it. Why? Because those issues that are ESSENTIAL are eternally determinative. I cannot worship in a church that denies the blood atonement, substitutionary death, resurrection of Christ, or any other ESSENTIAL.

Consideration 5 - Fellowship may be limited at the CONVICTION level.

Although I believe we should not necessarily leave a church over a CONVICTION, I do believe that we have the freedom to do so. If an ESSENTIAL is violated, I MUST leave, if a CONVICTION is violated, I MAY leave.

For example, I have already mentioned that the practice of tongues itself is a CONVICTION. Therefore, I do not have to leave a church that allows the practice of speaking in tongues.

As a result, I see believer's baptism as an act whereby a person publicly declares their faith in Christ and then identifies themselves with a local congregation of believers. If one wants to immerse, sprinkle, or whatever, I do not think that is the most important issue. If I had my choice, I would immerse, but I certainly would not treat as a heretic someone who sprinkled.

However, since I have a strong conviction against tongues, I would find it very difficult to worship and serve in a church that allowed the practice of tongues. Therefore, I would most likely leave such a church and find one that would believe the same way I do.

The same thing goes in my personal relationships. I may still count as friends those who disagree with my convictions. I can still fellowship with them and worship together with them, but in the long run the depth of our relationship will be limited by our difference on the CONVICTION level. I would never treat someone who believed in the sign gifts necessarily as a heretic, but I would find it tough to develop a deep relationship with such a person.

Consideration 6 - Most church splits and arguments occur at the PREFERENCE level.

What are preferences? Any issue in which two equally godly believers can disagree and where there is more than one valid viewpoint. Most issues of preference are gray areas, areas in which the Bible has no specific prohibition against.

Some examples of preferences are playing cards, mixed swimming, Bible versions, dancing, alcohol, use of tobacco³, and going to movie theaters⁴. None of the issues in and of themselves are specifically prohibited in the Bible. However, each of these issues is intensely debated by believers, and in many cases churches split over them. It is my personal opinion that since God was not clear on these issues neither should we. That does not mean that we can have our own personal convictions about these things, but why split a church or call down the wrath of God on those who disagree?

Consideration 7 - Doctrinal issues may change levels over time but ESSENTIALS do not.

This is a corollary to postulates 5 and 6 above. ESSENTIALS, by their very definition, do not change over time. Other issues, however, may move from IMPORTANT to CONVICTION or PREFERENCE over time. An example of this is the use of tobacco. In the late nineteenth century no one thought badly of anyone who smoked a cigar, today, however, those who do so find themselves subject to excommunication in many circles.

I believe we need to be careful about making too much of doctrinal issues that have changed over time. Who is to say that we have taken something that is important and relegated it to the "who cares" category while at the same time taking something of less importance and making it a fundamental of the faith.

Consideration 8 - One's position on doctrinal issues may change as one matures spiritually over time, but ESSENTIALS remain the same.

The primary example I can give of this is the mode of baptism. There was a day in which I believed baptism by immersion was an essential of the faith. However, as I studied baptism I came to believe that although the act is extremely important, the mode is much less so.

The reason for this is simple. As we grow in our knowledge of the Word of God, the Spirit brings up issues in our lives that at one time were relatively unimportant, but now, due to our increased understanding of spiritual things, become more important. I believe this is the theme that undergirds the issue of doubtful things in the New Testament. As New Testament believers

³ For example, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great baptist preacher of the last century, smoked cigars on a regular basis.

⁴ In my mind the issue is not where you watch a show, but what you watch. Why is it that those who prohibit us going to movie theaters to watch a particular film allow us to watch the same film on our television at home?

learned of their freedom in Christ, things that used to be extremely important (like the Jewish dietary laws), became optional. The same holds true with us.

None of us starts out with a full and complete understanding of every theological issue. As we grow in our spiritual walk and understanding, however, many of these doctrinal issues begin to sort themselves out, and we place them into the various levels in our model. As we continue to grow, sometimes our view of issues become more refined, in which case we move them to a different level. This is all part of spiritual growth.

The great danger here, however, is that many want everyone to share their own same convictions regardless of where that person is along the path to spiritual maturity. Those of us who have been Christians for thirty years cannot expect someone who has been a Christian for thirty days to think the same way we do about every doctrinal issue. We need to exhibit grace and patience as others make their way to spiritual maturity.

Personal Doctrinal Chart

	Question(s) to Ask	Representative Doctrines
E S S E N T I A L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does denying this truth keep one out of heaven? • Does denying this truth seriously distort the revelation of God to man? • Does denying this truth lead to gross sin or error? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virgin Birth • Substitutionary Atonement • Justification by faith ALONE - <i>sola fidei</i> • Bodily resurrection and 2nd Coming of Christ • Verbal, plenary inspiration of 66 books of the Bible • Exclusion of extra-biblical revelation - <i>sola scriptura</i> • Pelagianism
C O N V I C T I O N	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does denying this truth seriously distort the spiritual growth and direction of one who disagrees? • Does denying this truth lead one into serious theological error and compromise? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believer's Baptism (any method) • Role of Women in the Church - extremes • Sign Gifts • Use of "Christian" psychology • Market-driven evangelization and worship • Political Christianity • Calvinism (Augustinianism) vs. Semi-Pelagianism • Lordship Salvation
I M P O R T A N T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this truth something I am comfortable with because of my upbringing or tradition? • Are there other believers who love the Lord that disagree with truth in this area? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Baptism by Immersion • Infant Baptism as a sign of the Covenant • Music used in Church • Styles of worship not specifically prohibited by the Bible • Governmental structure of a church
P R E F E R E N C E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this truth not essential to spiritual growth or development, and in which multiple, good sides can be chosen? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible Versions with the exception of obviously bad ones (I am NOT a KJV-onlyer!!) • Dress Codes within taste • Gray Areas - dancing, cards, smoking, drinking unless taken to extremes