

Essential Doctrines

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Part I

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During one of our leadership seminars in East Africa last year a minor doctrinal question arose among the delegates. I allowed time for a discussion to take place. After a few minutes, several of the pastors began showing unkind attitudes. The doctrinal issue was indeed minor, but some of those present were showing emotions and attitudes nearing the divisive point. I injected myself into the discussion and put the issue in its proper perspective. However, what I saw disturbed me. It was brothers and sisters in Christ behaving very negatively towards each other over what is a non-essential doctrine of the Christian faith.

Let me make clear it that I think doctrinal discussions are generally very beneficial and necessary. We often receive mail from pastors from all over the world which contains questions about various doctrinal issues. But few of the questions that are asked are important enough to divide the body of Christ. Why? Because they do not involve what I call *essential doctrines*. I define essential doctrines as those which are absolutely foundational to Christianity. By foundational, I mean that without them the very foundations of Christianity would be distorted.

For example, the deity of Christ (the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God) is a foundational doctrine. All of Christianity accepts this doctrine. If someone says he or she is a Christian and does not believe Jesus is the Son of God then that person is not really a Christian.

There are many doctrines that are less essential to the existence of Christianity. One example of a less essential or non-foundational doctrine is church government. Some Christian churches are ruled democratically with every member of the church voting on all issues. Other churches are governed by elders while still others are ruled by a regional bishop. All these forms of government are biblically permissible.

Communion is another doctrine in which there are legitimate differences. Some churches use wine for communion while others use only grape juice. Sanctification is still another such doctrine. Is it instantaneous or is it progressive?

There are legitimate differences of opinion regarding these non-essential doctrines. But there are those foundational doctrines about which we cannot, indeed must not, tolerate differences. It is those other non-essential doctrines about which we should not be so dogmatic and unyielding in our beliefs. When we take a dogmatic position on non-foundational doctrine we run the risk of improperly dividing the church.

In this two part teaching we will identify and

briefly describe what we believe are the essential doctrines or truths of Christianity. In this Part I, we will examine the essential doctrines concerning Jesus Christ. In Part II, I will examine the doctrines of the Trinity, Salvation, and the inerrancy of Scripture. All of us who are leaders in the Christian Church need to know and understand these doctrines and their importance.

DOCTRINES CONCERNING JESUS

Jesus As the Son of God

The belief that Jesus is the Son of God is universally held among all Bible believing Christians. The Apostles John and Mark testify to Jesus' Sonship. (Jn 1:34, Mk 1:1). The Apostle Paul concurs (Acts 9:20). The writer of Hebrews goes on record with his affirming testimony (Heb 4:14, 7:3). We also have the confession of Martha and the testimony of the Roman Centurion at the crucifixion (Jn 11:27, Mk 15:39). Even demons gave witness to His Sonship! (See Mat 8:29, Mk 3:11 and Lk 4:41.) Most significant of all, we have the testimony of Jesus, Himself.

They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You are right in saying I am." (Lk 22:70 NIV) (See also Rev 2:18.)

The Apostle John even tells us why Jesus came: *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."* (1 Jo 3:8 NIV) The principal work of the devil was, and continues to be, the separation of man from the Creator God through sin. John goes on to tell us just how important Jesus is to us, *"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."* (1 Jo 5:12 NIV)

The Virgin Birth

Another essential doctrine that all Christians must believe is that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, was born of a virgin. We believe the accounts in Scripture that clearly state that the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary and that, as a result of that occurrence, she conceived a son.

Isaiah foretold this event some seven hundred years earlier: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* (Is 7:14 NIV) The birth of Jesus fulfilled this prophecy.

Both Matthew and Luke record the event based on their individual investigations. Luke wrote,

"... since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Lk 1:3,4 NIV)

Here is a portion of what Luke wrote about the virgin birth:

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Lk 1:30-35,38 NIV) (See also Matthew 1:18-25.)

Many times I have heard people discuss the issue of Jesus' virgin birth. Invariably someone asks, "Why is it so important to insist that Jesus was born of a virgin? Even if He wasn't, that doesn't take away from His teachings and the life He lived." Humanly speaking that's very reasonable, but theologically speaking, it's false. It is extremely important that Jesus was virgin born. Why? Because it was necessary that Jesus' blood be pure.

The Blood of Christ

Let us examine the importance of the blood of Jesus. Our covenant with God, that is, the New Covenant, rests upon the shed blood of Jesus. At the Last Supper Jesus told His disciples, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*" (Lk 22:20 NIV)

The writer of Hebrews described Jesus' offering of His own blood for the sins of all mankind to His Father in heaven:

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by **his own blood**, having obtained eternal redemption. (Heb 9:11,12 NIV, emphasis added.)

God, by the Holy Spirit, caused Mary to conceive. The blood created by that union took on the sinlessness of God rather than the sin of Adam and of

humanity. Of course we understand that, genetically speaking, Mary contributed to the formation of Jesus' blood. But for the first time since the creation of Adam a sinless seed formed the blood that flowed through the veins of a man, the God-man Jesus. It is that which caused Jesus' blood to be holy and sinless.

Technically speaking, God has only two sons, Jesus and Adam. (God *adopts* those of us who are born again as His sons and daughters.) Thus there are two groups of people in this world, those of us who are born again in Jesus and those who are not (they are the group under Adam). So we, as humans, are corporately either in Adam or in Christ. (Paul persuasively makes this argument in Romans, Chapter 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.)

We know that Adam caused man to be separated from God because of his sin. When Adam sinned he entered into a sinful, corrupted state. Since all of mankind flows from Adam, all men are inescapably sinful (Rom 3:23). There is a spiritual law that says "*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness [of sin]*" (Heb 9:22). A man (Adam) had caused this separation, therefore a Man must correct it. Paul put it this way, "*The first man Adam became a living being*"; *the last Adam [Jesus], a life-giving spirit.* (1 Cor 15:45 NIV)

Our very salvation depends on the purity of the blood of Jesus because the perfect blood sacrifice offered to the Father had to be sinless. No other man's or woman's blood could suffice. Why? Because we all are sons of Adam with his sinful blood flowing through our veins. That's why it is absolutely vital that Jesus be conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by man.

If Jesus were not born of a virgin, His blood could not have provided the sinless sacrifice. With no perfect sacrifice, we human beings are still under the sin of Adam and there is no salvation!

Jesus As Fully Man

Scripture teaches that, although Jesus was fully God, and part of the Trinity as God the Son, Jesus was also fully man when He lived on earth. The title Jesus gave Himself was "Son of man." Many theologians believe Jesus based this title on one of Daniel's visions:

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Dan 7:13-14 NIV)

Jesus had every attribute of a man. He was

born, He had a childhood, He had a family, and He functioned fully as a member of that family before He began His public ministry. During His brief public ministry every account we have of Him portrays Him as fully human: eating, sleeping, walking about, socializing, and praying as did every other Jew of the first century. The miracles He performed and His oneness with the Father does not in any way negate Jesus' humanity. These aspects of Jesus were in addition to His being fully man.

Yet Jesus Led A Sinless Life

We have already seen that Jesus had to have sinless blood, not in the line of Adam, to be an acceptable sacrifice for mankind's sins. But Jesus also had to lead a sinless life while here on earth as the second requirement for that perfect sacrifice. Jesus came ultimately to free humankind from the curse put on it by the sin of Adam. *The wages of sin is death* (Rom 6:23). In order to free humans from that death, Jesus had to be pure at birth, and to maintain that purity all during His lifetime. It was only then that on the cross, He could be the perfect and complete sinless sacrifice needed to defeat death!

Scripture tells us:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. (Heb 4:15 NIV, emphasis added.)

Had Jesus ever committed a sin, He would have failed in His mission and joined Adam's fallen race. Thus, Jesus had to come as a man, but had to also live without sin in order to qualify as Savior.

The Death, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus

The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, in addition to the virgin birth and the Deity of Christ, are major foundation stones upon which Christianity stands. In fact, without His death, burial and resurrection, Christianity could not exist.

There are those today who wish to deny these facts as folklore, superstition, or the invention of early Christian leaders. Such thinking has its origin in the pit of hell.

The Death of Jesus

We have already established that Christianity and our very salvation securely rests in the New Covenant, or Testament, purchased by Jesus with His own pure blood. But Jesus had to die in order to execute His will and testament to mankind. The writer of Hebrews states it this way:

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant,

that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living . . . so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people. (Heb 9:15-17, 28 NIV)

All four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, give vivid accounts of His death as well as His burial and resurrection.

The Burial of Jesus

There are those today who admit to the crucifixion of Jesus, but claim that He didn't really die on the cross. But proof of Jesus' burial is absolute evidence of His death. The Jewish leaders who instigated the crucifixion of Jesus unwittingly became certified witnesses to His burial. They went to Pilate with this request:

"Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."
"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (Mat 27:63-66 NIV)

So we also have the Roman government as well as the Jewish Sanhedrin both attesting to the burial of Jesus.

Finally, virtually every secular history book of that period acknowledges that a man named Jesus lived in Israel and died there. So, even the world's historians know that Jesus lived and died! The only thing they do not acknowledge is His resurrection.

The Resurrection of Jesus

Most tragically, there have been those through the centuries who have denied Jesus' resurrection just as many of the Jews did in Jesus' day. But if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then there is no eternal life for us. It is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that defeated death! It is His resurrection that is the surety of our own resurrection and eternal life with Him in heaven. The Corinthian Church heard that there was no resurrection. Here is how Paul refuted that lie in his letter to Corinth:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been

raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Cor 15:12-22 NIV)

All four Gospels record the resurrection. The first chapter of Acts references Jesus' many appearances after His resurrection. Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred believers at once after His resurrection. (See 1 Cor 15:6.)

Even the very Jews who had Jesus killed became strong witnesses to the resurrection. To lose the person you were charged with guarding was an offense punishable by death for a Roman soldier. But when Jesus resurrected and the angel came to roll the stone away, the soldiers fainted from fear! Here is Matthew's account of what happened.

The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. . . . some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." (Mat 28:4, 11-14 NIV)

The Return of Jesus

The final essential doctrine concerning Jesus is that He will come again. When Jesus was taken up into

heaven, the disciples were staring up into the sky as He disappeared. Two angels suddenly appeared. *"Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."* (Acts 1:11 NIV)

The following are a few more of the Scriptures that make direct reference to His return: 1 Cor 4:5; 1 Thes 3:13; 2 Thes 1:10; 1 Jo 2:28; Rev 1:7.

No one knows, nor are we to know, when Jesus is going to return. But we do know from Scripture that when He does return, we must be ready.

"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first." (1 Thes 4:16 NIV)

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

In Part II of this teaching we will examine the essential doctrines of the Trinity, Salvation, and the inerrancy of Scripture. And let me say again, it is these essential doctrines that every Christian is required to believe as a tenet of faith. Scripture, and I believe the Lord Himself, gives His church liberty to disagree on many other, non-essential doctrines. If we, as church leaders, insist on being "right" on every single point we believe pertaining to our faith, we run the great risk of separating ourselves from the rest of God's church. I do not think this pleases God.

Let us end with that powerful call to unity that Paul gives us in Ephesians:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13 NIV, emphasis added.)

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