

Essential Doctrines

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Part II

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In this two part teaching we are examining what we call the essential doctrines of our Christian faith. Why is it so important that we Christians are able to distinguish between essential doctrines of our faith and those that are less essential? It is because all Christians must believe and understand the basic doctrines of Christianity in order to grow to full maturity.

But there are many less essential doctrines of our faith about which reasonable minds can differ. We are called to be in fellowship with all Christians who believe the truths of our essential doctrines. The fact that we may differ with fellow believers on lesser important doctrines should not break our unity as the body of Christ.

In Part I we explored the doctrines concerning Jesus including the virgin birth, the blood of Christ, Jesus as fully man though He led a sinless life, His death, burial and resurrection, and His return to this earth. In this Part II, we will examine the three remaining essential doctrines of the Trinity, Salvation, and the Inerrancy of Scripture.

THE TRINITY

God the Father, Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Holy Spirit

It is absolutely essential that every Christian believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. Interestingly, we do not find the word "trinity" in Scripture. However, it comes closest to describing what the Bible tells us about the Triune God.

The late theologian Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield states, "There is only one and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. . . . The doctrine of the Trinity is purely a revealed doctrine. That is to say, it embodies a truth which has never been discovered, and is undiscoverable, by natural reason. With all his searching, man has not been able to find out for himself the deepest things of God. . . the human heart cries out for the living God in whose Being there is that fullness of life for which the conception of the Trinity alone provides."¹

Many people believe that the clearest reference in Scripture to the Trinity is found in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit** . . ." (Mat 28:19 NIV) The Apostle Paul speaks of the Trinity in his benediction to the Corinthian Church, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor 13:14 NIV) Peter also references the Trinity. He wrote, "Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood." (1 Pet 1:2 NIV) Thus, we see clear references to the Trinity in the Apostles' writings.

The early church fathers preserved the doctrine of the Trinity. From the second century on, various church creeds and the edicts of numerous church councils bore witness to

the belief in the Trinity. The leaders of the Reformation continued to affirm the Trinity. Finally, Bible believing theologians today accept the Trinity as the only truly valid descriptive concept of the Triune God whom we serve.

God the Father

All Christians need to know and have an understanding of the attributes and nature of God, our Father, as revealed by Scripture. As we take this brief look at God, we must keep in mind that it is impossible for man to fully understand Him. As Paul said, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror." (1 Cor 13:12 NIV)

Scripture tells us that God is the Eternal God and the Lord of heaven and earth (Rom 16:26 and Mat 11:25). Our God is the One true God who said, "I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. . ." (Is 45:5 NIV) He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. (Deut 10:17) He is a consuming fire. (Deut 4:24) He is a God who knows no limitations; with Him all things are possible. (Mk 10:27; 14:36) He is the Eternal King. (Mat 25:34) He is a God who knows the hearts of men. (Lk 16:15) He is a God who knows our needs. (Mat 6:8,32) He is the God of all comfort. (2 Cor 1:3) He is near us whenever we pray to Him. (Deut 4:7) He fights against our enemies to give us victory. (Deut 20:4) He is a jealous God. (Deut 4:24) And He is love. (1 Jn 4:8) He is life. (1 Jn 5:20) He is light. (1 Jn 1:5) This is the God we serve!

God the Father is the preeminent member of the Godhead of the Old Testament. The only references to the person of Jesus in the Old Testament are the veiled references made by prophecy.² I find only 79 references to the "Spirit" of God in the Old Testament.

As we examine the Old Testament, we see that God began a progressive revelation of Himself to the Israelites as the one true God. We find numerous examples of God speaking directly to various Old Testament leaders revealing Himself to them.

Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron about the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he commanded them to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. (Exo 6:13 NIV)

Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. (Isa 7:3 NIV)

Without question God the Father was the dominant member of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

God the Son

God is the Father of His son, and our Lord, Jesus Christ. (Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3) We know from Scripture that Jesus existed with the Father before the world began.

Here is how the Apostle John reported Jesus' preexistence as well as His role in the creation of the world:

In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that is made. (Jn 1:1-3 NIV)

Paul wrote:

"He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col 1:14-17 NIV)

Simply stated Jesus was and is God incarnate, or God in human flesh. As such, He is the second person of the Trinity.

Near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry His teaching about His relationship to the Father intensified. At one point Philip asked Jesus, "*Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.*" Jesus answered: "*Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?*" (Jn 14:8-10 NIV)

On another occasion Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one.*" (Jn 10:30 NIV) Jesus' priestly prayer in the gospel of John is very revealing. He prayed,

". . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (Jn 17:21-23 NIV)

Thus Scripture clearly states that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity. He was not, as some claim, merely "a good man." In fact if He is not God, He was not a good man but rather the opposite! Because if He is not God, as Scripture asserts, then He was the world's greatest deceiver! There is no middle ground. He is either one or the other.

It is Jesus' Deity which qualified Him to be the only acceptable sacrifice for sin. Our very salvation hinges on the fact that Jesus is God. (See Part I of this teaching for a more extensive analysis of the doctrines concerning Jesus.)

God the Holy Spirit

The Spirit of God was present in Genesis during the creation. God identified this Spirit as "My Spirit." (See as an example Gen 6:3.) The reality of God's Spirit extends throughout the Old Testament although His visible work among the Israelites appears somewhat limited as compared to the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit "came upon" judges and warriors to enable them to perform extraordinary tasks

all of which furthered the will of God on earth. (See Jdg 11:29.) The Spirit bestowed skill and wisdom upon man. (See Exo 31:2-4.) He also spoke through God's servants, the prophets, throughout the Old Testament proclaiming the word and will of God to man.

In the New Testament we see the Holy Spirit as coming upon the Virgin Mary at the conception of Jesus. We also see Him descending on Jesus at His water baptism. In Luke Jesus announces the Spirit has come upon Him to preach, to release prisoners, to recover sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (See Lk 4:18,19.) And, of course, we have the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts, Two.

Today the Holy Spirit continues to be the agent by which we as believers are baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). The indwelling Holy Spirit becomes the cleansing agent for each believer, convicting us of our sin. He is also the agent by which believers are able to enter into greater power and truth. (See as examples Lk 24:49; Joh 16:13; Act 1:8; Eph 3:16.)

SALVATION

The doctrine of Salvation is another essential doctrine for every Christian. We know from Scripture that Jesus came to save man from his sin. He said, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*" (Lk 19:10 NIV) Jesus came as Savior for all mankind. But not all of mankind will be ultimately saved. John put it this way, "*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*" (Jn 1:12 NIV)

The Universal Sinfulness of Man

To understand salvation it is important to understand and accept the universal sinfulness of man. Why? Because as a prerequisite to receiving salvation each of us must first admit that he or she is a sinner. The Bible says, ". . . *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" (Rom 3:23 NIV) In fact, all who are sons of Adam are sinners, and that includes the entire human race.

There are those who will either deny that sin exists, or who admit that sin may exist, but deny that they themselves ever sin. Both these beliefs are wrong, contrary to the Bible, and will ultimately defeat salvation if not corrected. These people fit into the same category as those who see themselves as "good" and take the position that God will surely not turn away from heaven someone if that person has been "good" during his or her lifetime. Again, this is wrong thinking and will ultimately defeat the call of salvation if not corrected.

Salvation Is Only Through Christ

It is very common today to hear, "It doesn't really matter what your religion is, all religions lead to heaven. We all

serve the same 'god.'" These words sound good. They sound so agreeable, so unifying and comforting, don't they? But they are lies! Tragically, if one believes them, they become fatal lies. Here is another horrible lie, "If I fail in this life, I will reincarnate into a new life and try again." This lie is from the pit of hell! The Bible says, ". . . *it is appointed unto men **once** to die . . .*" (Heb 9:27 KJV, emphasis added.)

When we examined the essential doctrines concerning Jesus, we saw that before Jesus came and offered Himself as an acceptable sacrifice to God for sin, there was no salvation for man. Scripture also makes it quite clear that Jesus is the only way to personal salvation for each individual human being. Peter, while preaching of the healing power of Jesus to the Jews after the healing of the lame man in the book of Acts said, "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*" (Act 4:12 NIV) In John, Ten, Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the gate of entrance. Therefore Jesus said again,

"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. . . " (Jn 10:7,9 NIV)

Personal Salvation

Now let's ask the question, "**How** does one become a Christian? Is it simply that he or she agrees with the general teachings of Christianity? Is it through church membership? Is it by being a member of a family that is Christian?" The answer to these questions is a resounding, "NO!"

The Bible gives us the absolute and only answer. It is found in Romans:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. (Rom 10:8-10 NIV)

Thus to become saved, first, a person must believe he or she needs salvation. That in itself is an admission of the guilt of sin. Second, he must believe in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and that He is indeed the risen Savior. Third, she must confess Christ as her Savior. . . "Jesus is Lord." Simply stated, it is a heart-mouth action. The heart believes, the mouth confesses. And it is a universal call to every human being on earth.

Let us briefly address the issue of the various procedures different churches require of their people when it comes to salvation. For example, one church may hold a confirmation ceremony, another may require a formal confession of Christ before the congregation, while another church may require the sinner's prayer be spoken in front

of a witness as proof of salvation. These procedures are not in and of themselves wrong as long as they encompass what the Bible requires, that is, the personal acknowledgment of sin, the fact that Jesus is the risen Savior, and then asking Jesus to be your personal Lord. In other words, Jesus as the only way to salvation is the essential doctrine here, the various procedures different churches may require are the non-essential doctrines which flow from it. The key issue is the heart's decision to accept Christ. However that is manifested to others is not as important.

Let me close this section with one final thought. I am not so sure God is quite as formal as we tend to be when it comes to an individual and his or her salvation. Paul stated, "**Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**" (Rom 10:13 NIV) We must be very slow to judge someone else's personal process of salvation. Only God knows the heart!

Saved Only By Grace Through Faith

Now let's explore the question, "Exactly how do we receive Jesus and thereby enter into salvation?" The Word says,

"For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through **faith**-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph 2:8 NIV, emphasis added.)

Grace has its origin in God and is extended to man. Although grace is very hard to define, it has been described as God's unmerited favor toward man. Harper's Bible Dictionary³ makes the word "grace" synonymous with God's favor or His mercy toward mankind, and especially toward the church. It is this grace that is God's part. It is God's grace that makes salvation available to us.

But faith is our part. In its simplest form, faith is the ability to believe what God has revealed to us in His word. For purposes of salvation, faith is the belief that Jesus died for our sins and that because of that death, He is capable of saving us from hell **if** we call on His name. Here is how Paul put it, "*For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*" (Rom 10:10 NIV)

This great salvation Jesus purchased for us comes to us by God's grace based on our faith. Thus we are given the incredible privilege of experiencing the reality of salvation by God's grace through faith.

THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

The final essential doctrine we will examine is the inerrancy of Scripture. It is vital for every Christian to believe that the Bible in its original form is the very word of God. There are those who claim that the Bible is not infallible, that it contains errors. Then there are others who say it is just a good book from which we may learn moral lessons. These people are in error.

A more subtle assertion is the claim that the Bible

"contains the word of God." But even if someone believes that the Bible "contains the word of God," then that means that only certain parts of the Bible are the word of God. The question then becomes, "What part of it is God's word?" Even asking that question means that anyone who reads the Bible may pick and choose what he subjectively believes is God's word and is equally free to reject other parts.

The Bible itself makes the most definitive statement as to its Divine inspiration:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16,17 NIV)

The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, infallible in their original texts, and are the authoritative rule of faith and conduct. (2 Ti 3:15-17; 1 Thes 2:13; 2 Pet 1:21)

Conclusion

Today's church isn't the only one wrestling with the problem of essential doctrines. As the church began to grow in the second century, false doctrines (such as Gnosticism) began to find their way into church teaching. To counter this error, early church leaders taught the people a "creed," or a standard confession to solidify the basic truths of Christianity. This creed was and continues to be called the *Apostles' Creed*. Here is a commonly accepted version of the Creed to which Christians adhere. It is known as the Received Form and dates from about 460 A.D.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ His only (begotten) Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead [sic], and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick [living] and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic [universal]

Church; the communion of the saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen."⁴

God calls His followers to be in fellowship with any other believer who holds Christianity's basic foundational doctrines as truths. In order to maintain proper fellowship in the body of Christ, it is vital for us to recognize and understand those essential doctrines which are required for true unity as Christians. But mature believers may genuinely differ on other non-essential doctrines and still maintain a bond of Christian love, fellowship and mutual respect. The non-essential doctrines upon which reasonable, Bible-believing men and women may disagree should never cause a breach in our unity.

Let us close with Jesus' prayer for all of us,

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. **I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:** I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:20-23 NIV)

1. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Page 3012.

2. **The Angel of the Theophany.** In the early part of the Old Testament there is an angel known as "the angel of the Lord." This angel is theologically known as *The Angel of the Theophany*. He made many appearances to various people such as Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Joshua, and Gideon to name a few. This angel usually spoke in the first person as God Himself. Some theologians believe, though we may not say with certainty, that Jesus was the angel of the theophany. Scripture simply calls him, "the angel of the Lord."

3. Harper's Bible Dictionary, Harper & Row, Publishers, San Francisco, page 357.

4. The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, Volume I, Page 204.

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