



BIBLICAL TRAINING CENTER

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Essentials vs. Non-Essentials – The Need for Charity and Love

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1. Overview

This class will identify doctrines that are **absolutely essential** to Christianity and the ones Christian denominations have **exercised freedom** to disagree about. Special emphasis will be given to having **charity, grace and love** towards others who disagree.

a. Here are the **essential** doctrines:

1. The **Bible** as revelation.¹
2. **One** God who is Triune (Trinity).
3. Mankind's **Fall** and people's sinfulness.
4. **Salvation** by faith through grace.
5. Christ's **virgin birth**.
6. Christ's **full deity** and **full humanity**.
7. Christ's **sinlessness**.
8. Christ's atoning **death**.
9. Christ's bodily **resurrection**.
10. Bodily **ascension** of Christ into **heaven**.
11. Christ's current **priestly intercession**.
12. Christ's bodily future **second coming**.

These are the **core beliefs** that virtually all Christian groups would agree on.

¹ There is a debate today about to what extent the Bible is revelation. All Christians believe the Bible contains special revelation. But some like myself are **full-inerrantists** who believe the Bible is reliable on every area it touches (including science and history). Others are **partial-inerrantists** who believe the Bible is accurate concerning salvation but not necessarily these other areas.

b. Some **non-essentials** where there's freedom to disagree:

- Forms of **church** government (e.g., elder-rule, congregational, Episcopalian, "Moses-model")
- Our role/God's role in salvation (e.g., monergism vs. synergism).
- Proper candidate and mode of **baptism** (e.g., infant baptism, sprinkling or full immersion).
- The nature and function of communion (e.g., real presence, spiritual presence or memorial only).
- The use of musical instruments in worship.
- The nature of charismatic spiritual **gifts** (i.e., are all, some or none of them valid for today?).
- The day of worship (e.g., Sunday, Saturday or every day).
- End-times viewpoints (eschatology).
- The role of **women** in the church (e.g., can women lead/teach men).
- Procession of the Holy Spirit (this split the church in 1054!).

c. An important famous saying:

"In **essentials** unity; in **nonessentials**, liberty; and **in all things**, charity." (Rupertus Meldenius, 17th c. AD)²

Can we back up the idea that there are **essentials** and **non-essentials** with Scripture?

Biblical Support

2. Biblical Argument that Some Doctrines are Essential

We can look at major people of the New Testament to see if there was anything they considered to be non-negotiable essentials. Here's a sample from **Jesus, Peter, John, Paul** and **others**.

[Jesus taught or implied some doctrines were non-negotiable.](#)

a. Jesus said there was only **one** God by quoting the Old Testament (*shema*):

² Many wrongly attribute this quote to Augustine. See Mark Ross, "In Essentials Unity, in Non-Essentials Liberty, in All Things Charity," Ligonier Ministries, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/essentials-unity-non-essentials-liberty-all-things/>.

Mark 12:29 - Jesus answered, "The most important [command] is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, **the Lord is one.**

- b. Jesus told people they were **wrong** for not believing in a future physical resurrection.

Matthew 22:29–32

"29 **You are wrong**, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 And **as for the resurrection** of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 32 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

- c. There was **no other way for people to be saved** apart from his death and resurrection.

John 3:14–15 ...the **Son of Man be lifted up** [on the cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 14:6 – Jesus said to him [Thomas], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me.**

- d. He said people must believe he's the **Messiah** (the promised, anointed one).³ There is no room for a different opinion.

John 8:24 – I [Jesus] told you that you would die in your sins, for **unless you believe that I am he** you will die in your sins."

- e. Jesus had a very high opinion of **the Bible** of his day (the Old Testament).

- **Inspiration.** Jesus said the Old Testament is from God. Its words are from the "mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4).
- **Infallibility.** He said it cannot fail or be broken. "...not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18)
- **Inerrancy.** God's Word is truth (without error). "Your word is truth." (John 17:17) He demonstrated firm belief in the many Old Testament **people, places** and **events**.

³ Many Christians think Jesus is also referring to his claim to be the second person of the Godhead as well.

Paul taught or implied some doctrines were non-negotiable.

- f. Some doctrine is **sound**, other doctrine is not.

2 Timothy 4:3 – For the time will come when they will not endure **sound doctrine**, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers...

- g. There's a **right** way to interpret the Bible. (Implies there's a wrong way too; not all peoples' conclusions are true!)

2 Timothy 2:15 – Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, **rightly dividing** the word of truth.

- h. We should know the **essentials** so well that nobody can lead us astray.

Ephesians 4:14 “...that we should no longer be children, **tossed to and fro** and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the **trickery of men**, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...”

- i. Paul had to withstand **Peter** to his face (over essential).⁴

Galatians 2:11 – Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed...

Peter taught or implied some doctrines were non-negotiable.

- j. All of 2 Peter is about **false** teachers. This tells us we need to be able to identify truth from falsehood. Look at the language/wording:

2 Peter 2:1 – But there were also **false prophets** among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in **destructive heresies**, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift **destruction**.

... they will **exploit** you with **deceptive words**... (2 Pe 2:3)

...their **judgment** ... their **destruction**... (v. 3)

... [they] walk according to **the flesh** in the lust of **uncleanness** ... (v. 10)

⁴ This essential was regarding the composition of God's church. Paul argued that non-Jewish Christians (gentiles) had equal status with Jewish believers. Peter was treating them with lesser status.

...They are **presumptuous, self-willed**. (v. 10)
...like natural **brute beasts** made to be caught and destroyed... (v. 12)
...will receive the **wages of unrighteousness**... (v. 13).
...They are spots and blemishes... (v. 13)
...**eyes full of adultery** and that cannot cease from sin... (v. 14)
...are **accursed** children... (v. 14)
...they speak **great swelling words of emptiness**... (v. 18)

Such a strong warning about false teachers! (those who teach against the **essentials**).

John taught or implied some doctrines were non-negotiable.

- k. John said it was essential to believe Jesus was fully **human** because some in the church were denying this.

1 John 4:3 every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ **has come in the flesh** is not of God. And this is the spirit of the **Antichrist**, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

- l. Do not **welcome** them into their house!

2 John 7, 10 – 7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist...
10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, **do not receive him into your house** nor greet him...

Jude taught or implied some doctrines were non-negotiable.

- m. Jude said we must earnestly contend for “the faith” which was once for all delivered to us in the New Testament.

Jude 3, 4 – Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to **contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints**. For certain men have crept in unnoticed...

- n. “**The faith**” refers to a collection of teachings that are essential.

3. Biblical Argument that there are Non-Essentials

Romans 14 (whole chapter).

- a. Paul talks about “**doubtful** things” which are areas that are not crystal clear.

Some think it’s ok to **eat meat**, others do not:

Romans 14:1, 2 – [We are] not to disputes over doubtful things. 2 For one believes he may eat **all things**, but he who is weak eats only **vegetables**.

Some think there’s a **special day of the week to worship** God, others do not.

Romans 14:5 – One person esteems **one day [of worship] above another**; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

Some think it’s ok to drink **wine**, others do not.

Romans 14:21 – It is good neither to eat **meat** nor drink **wine** nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.

- b. What does Paul say? We shouldn’t judge or stumble those who have different opinions in these areas. Most important thing is to **love** despite different opinion.

Peter mentions growing in grace.

- c. Importance of growing not just in **knowledge/understanding** but also **grace**. There’s a tendency for knowledge to puff people up (1 Cor. 8:1). We must also grow in grace too.

2 Peter 3:18 – Grow in the **grace and knowledge**⁵ of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

- d. Jesus, our chief Theologian/Apologist.

Our master, our chief Theologian and Apologist, was so **shrewd** that “they did not dare to question him any further.” (Luke 20:40) Yet, this same

⁵ *Gnosis* here can be translated: “what is known,” “knowledge,” “understanding” or “insight.” See Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 100.

Theologian/Apologist also said, “learn from me, for I am gentle (meek) and **humble** in heart.” (Matt. 11:29)

3. Rational Argument why Grace and Charity are Needed

We can see **grace and charity** are needed by looking at the challenges of **hermeneutics**⁶ and **logic**.

- a. The goal in Bible study should always be: “What did the **author** intend to say?” The problem is that we don’t have **direct access** to the mind of the author. Instead, they **encoded their meaning** into words using **the rules of language** (grammar). This grammar is tied to a culture in ancient history. It can be a bit of a puzzle to unpack all of the rules to figure out what they meant.
- b. There are **literary features** to consider (such as **metaphors, hyperbole** and **idioms**).
- c. There is the problem of **ambiguity** in all communication.⁷ Sometimes it’s not clear which **pronoun** is referring to which noun. Sometimes there is confusion over which **rule of grammar** to use. Sometimes it’s not clear what is logically being said.
- d. What this means is that **judgment calls** need to be made.

Examples of small judgment calls that impact theology.

- e. **Romans 5:5 – “Love of God” vs. “Love for God?”**

Romans 5:5 – Now hope does not disappoint, because **the love of God** [ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ] **has been poured out in our hearts** by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

⁶ Hermeneutics is the methodology for how to interpret ancient texts.


⁷ For a great overview of the challenges of ambiguity of any literary text see “Ambiguity,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, last modified February 8, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ambiguity/>.

Translators must decide if Paul meant “of God” to be an **objective** or **subjective** genitive.

Subjective Genitive	Objective Genitive
“the love of God (God’s love) has been poured out in our hearts” (i.e., God fills us with His very own love/charity for others).	“the love for God has been poured out in our hearts” (i.e., God has put attraction for Himself into our sinful hearts).
Allows for synergism (i.e., no issue with idea that we cooperate with God for salvation).	Would support monergism (i.e., we cannot even come to God unless God gives us love for himself).

f. **Ephesians 2:8 – What exactly is “not of yourselves?”**

Ephesians 2:8–9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith, and **that** not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.



τοῦτο (that) Refers to “you have been saved”	τοῦτο (that) Refers to “Faith”
“...you have been saved through faith, and (God’s salvation) is not of yourselves...”	“...you have been saved through faith, and faith is not of yourselves...”
Allows for synergism.	Would also support monergism.

g. **What does the word “Israel” refer to in Romans 11:26?**

Romans 11:26 – And so **all Israel** will be saved...

All Israel = National/Ethnic Israel	All Israel = Spiritual Israel
Paul is saying there’s coming a day in future when “national/ethnic Israel” will recognize Jesus as Savior.	Paul is saying all true, spiritual Israelites will be saved.
Supports the end-times view called Dispensationalism .	Allows for Replacement Theology .

Doesn’t this call into question all doctrines?

h. No. There's good news! The essentials of scripture are **covered repeatedly** throughout Scripture so we can be **certain** what they are. As a rule of thumb, the essentials are the **main thing** of Scripture. And the main thing is the **plain thing**. We should not make an essential out of an unclear passage (like we see in the cults).

4. Lesson from History

We have many examples of what not to do! There is a dark history of protestants killing other protestants over secondary theological disagreements!

Anabaptists (1527-)

- Third wave of reformers. Called "Radical" because they wanted to **take reformation even further**.
- Anabaptist = "baptized again" (adults should get **baptized again** even if done as infant).
- **Were persecuted** by German Reformers (followers of Luther), Swiss Reformers (followers of Calvin and Zwingli) and Catholics.
- Estimated **5,000 men and women** were tortured and executed.

5. Healthy Disagreement

Disagreement is not always a bad word! It means, "to have or express a different **opinion**." There are **healthy ways** and **un-healthy** ways to disagree:

Healthy	Un-Healthy
Grace (recognizing different opinions)	Belittling
Charity (showing agape love)	Name-calling
Humility (I might be wrong)	Clashing
Respect (they're smart too)	Quarreling
Meekness (holding back)	Bickering
Love (genuine concern for person)	

Chuck Smith (1927- 2013) said in his book *Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Word of God*: "It is not easy to maintain the unity of the Spirit among us on these matters. It seems that the sovereignty of God and human responsibility are like two parallel lines that do not seem to intersect within our finite minds... In difficult doctrinal matters, may we have gracious attitudes and humble hearts, desiring most of all to please Him who has called us to serve Him in the body of Christ. **Discussion - YES! Disagreements - YES! Division - NO!**"

Deeper Q & A

Does someone have to believe all the core essentials to be saved?

We've been looking at the **core essential beliefs** that virtually all Christians would agree with. But what are the minimum set of beliefs a person must believe in order to be saved?

A person must believe **they are a sinner** and that **Jesus died, was buried and rose again** to pay for their sin (cf., Acts 16:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:1-8). Many times, these basic elements of the Gospel are the **only things** most new converts to Christianity understand.⁸ The other details are then learned over time.

Are all the other essentials then really essentials? Yes! It's appropriate to say that **all the essentials** listed in this class are essential because together they make salvation possible.⁹ While a person might not need to believe all, **it would be strange for them to reject any**, considering they make their salvation possible.

Is there a more exhaustive list of secondary issues?

I put together a list of secondary issues for a recent paper on the different views of creation and the Bible.¹⁰ This should emphasize that if we cannot learn to get along with other Christians in the church who have different views than us on these secondary issues, we are going to run into **some serious challenges** within the church. It is mind-boggling how many ways there are to disagree with other Christians. See chart on the next page.

⁸ Many of the other essentials are inferred in a basic Gospel presentation. Some may understand more than others. For example, it is implied that the Bible is revelation from God (#1) since that is how the Gospel is being presented.

⁹ For more info, see chapter 17 in Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three: Sin, Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2004).

¹⁰ See Shawn Nelson, "Important Safety Rails in the Creation Debate," Nelson.ink, December 1, 2018, <https://nelson.ink/important-safety-rails-in-the-creation-debate/>.

Commonly Debated Topics Among Conservative Christians.¹¹

Theological Debate	Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4	Options
God's Sovereignty/Man's Responsibility	Calvinism	Arminianism	Some Mix		3
Church Government Type	Elder-rule	Congregational	Episcopalian	"Moses Model"	4
Women in Church Leadership	Yes	No			2
Baptism (Qualified Recipient)	Infant baptism	Believer baptism			2
Baptism (Proper Mode)	Immersion	Sprinkling	Pouring		3
View of Communion	Real Presence	Spiritual Presence	Memorial Only		3
Day of Worship	Sunday	Saturday	Every Day		3
View of Millenium / Eschatology	Historic Pre-	Dispensational Pre-	Post-	A-millennial	4
Charismatic Gifts for Today	Operational	Ceased			2
Tongues for Personal Edification	Yes	No			2
View of Hell	Eternal	Annihilation			2
Second Blessing after Salvation	Yes	No			2
View of Creation	Young Earth	Old Earth	Theistic Evolution		3
# ways to hold <i>theological items</i> debated among conservative Christians					248,832
Ethical Debate	Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4	Options
View of Ethics	Non-conflicting Absolutism	Conflicting Absolutism	Graded Absolutism		3
Abortion	Never	Sometimes	Anytime		3
Infanticide	Never	Passive	Active		3
Euthanasia	Never	Active	Unnatural Passive	Natural Passive	4
Genetic Surgery	Yes	No			2
Sex detection / Selection	Yes	No			2
Artificial Insemination	Yes	No			2
Surrogate Motherhood	Yes	No			2
In Vitro Fertilization	Yes	No			2
Organ Tissue Harvesting	Yes	No			2
Stem Cell Cures	Yes	No			2
Cryonics	Yes	No			2
Cloning	Yes	No			2
Gene-Splicing	Yes	No			2
Capital Punishment	Never	Rehabilitationism	Reconstructionism	Retributionism	4
Participation in War	Never (Pacifism)	Always (Activism)	Selectivism		3
Civil Disobedience	Never	When Promoting Anti-biblical Laws	When Breaking Biblical Laws	Always	4
Divorce	Never Allowed	Sometimes			2
Remarriage	Yes	No			2
Can a Pastor be Remarried?	Yes	No			2
Can a Fallen Pastor be Restored?	Any Time	After Healing	Never		3
Ecology	Are Responsible	Not Responsible			2
Animals Rights	Never for research	Humane Research	Any Research		3
Drinking Wine	Recreational Ok	Never			2
Cigarettes	Ok	Never			2
Marijuana	Recreational Ok	Never			2
Gambling	Recreational Ok	Never			2
Birth Control	Yes	No			2
Long Hair for Men	Yes	No			2
Wearing Makeup for Women	Yes	No			2
Dancing	Yes	No			2
Tattoos or Nose-rings	Yes	No			2
# ways to hold <i>ethical items</i> debated among conservative Christians					391,378,894,848
Total ways to hold all debated items					97,387,593,162,817,536

¹¹ Ethical portion adapted from Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).

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