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THE ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH (PART 2): A LOGICAL APPROACH

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SYNOPSIS

Part two in this series takes a logical approach to answering the question of what makes a doctrine essential. There are two criteria: First, the doctrine must concern and be connected to our salvation; that is, it must be salvific. Second, its connection to our salvation must be crucial; that is, it must be so tied to our salvation that if it were not true, our salvation as God revealed it would not be possible. When these criteria are applied to the list discovered by the historical approach outlined in part one, the same basic doctrines emerge. The Trinity, the deity of Christ, His atoning death, and His bodily resurrection are all necessary in the first stage of salvation: *justification* (salvation from the penalty of sin in the past). Christ's ascension and present advocacy are necessary in the second stage: *sanctification* (salvation from the power of sin in the present). Christ's second coming and final judgments are necessary in the third stage: *glorification* (salvation from the presence of sin in the future). Christ's virgin birth is connected to salvation because it speaks of His sinlessness and supernatural origin, which are necessary for salvation. The infallibility of the Bible is an essential doctrine in that by it we know the salvific doctrines, because those doctrines are based on the Scriptures.

These essential doctrines must necessarily be true to make salvation possible, but a person need not believe all of them to be saved. One, however, cannot deny certain of these doctrines, such as Christ's deity, His death for our sins, and His resurrection, and be saved.

Finally, the discussion of essential doctrines raises the question of whether Roman Catholicism is orthodox. If judged by historical standards, it is orthodox, because it affirms all of the doctrines in the creeds and councils of the first five centuries of the church. If judged by logical standards, however, it is unorthodox, because it denies those doctrines that the Protestant Reformers deemed to be essential to salvation, such as justification by grace alone through faith alone.

What are the essential doctrines of the Christian faith? One way to answer this question, as noted in part one of this series, is to take a historical approach: the essential doctrines are those found in the early creeds of the church. Another way to answer this is to take a logical approach. This approach is better, since it avoids many of the pitfalls of the historical approach, especially the debate about which creeds and councils should be accepted.

The logical approach simply begins with the teachings of the New Testament on salvation and asks, What are the essential doctrines on salvation without which salvation would not be possible? This approach yields the same basic salvation doctrines of the early creeds discussed in part one, except for the anathemas (curses for believing false doctrine) and baptismal regeneration. Salvation as described in the Bible, based in the deity, death, and resurrection of Christ—which is the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1–6)—entails all these essential doctrines, including: (1) human depravity, (2) Christ's virgin birth, (3) Christ's sinlessness, (4) Christ's deity, (5) Christ's humanity, (6) God's unity, (7) God's triunity, (8) the necessity of God's grace, (9) the necessity of faith, (10) Christ's atoning death, (11) Christ's bodily resurrection, (12) Christ's bodily ascension, (13) Christ's present high priestly service, (14) Christ's second coming, final judgment, and reign.

Some may question how Christ's present service, second coming, kingdom reign, and final judgment are essential doctrines of salvation. The answer lies in understanding salvation in the broad sense of all three stages: justification, sanctification, and glorification. According to Scripture, (1) we have been saved from

the penalty of sin (by justification) the moment we believe (Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 3:24), (2) we presently are in the process of being saved from the power of sin (by sanctification) (John 17:17; Eph. 5:25–26; 1 Thess. 5:23), and (3) we will at death or at Christ’s coming be saved from the very presence of sin (by glorification; that is, by being made perfect) (Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 13:10–13; 1 John 3:2).

This being the case, we can see that doctrines 1–11 are essential for justification; that is, without them our justification would not be possible. Likewise, doctrines 12 and 13 (Christ’s ascension and present service) are necessary for our sanctification, and doctrine 14 (the second coming) is needed to complete salvation, namely, to achieve our glorification.¹ These last three doctrines (12–14) are not always given in lists of essentials of the faith because in such cases only the doctrines regarding our justification are in view.²

WHAT MAKES A DOCTRINE ESSENTIAL?

There are many important teachings of Scripture (e.g., the prohibitions against blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, and murder) that are not among the previously listed doctrines. What, then, makes a doctrine essential? Judging by the doctrines that the historic Christian church pronounced as essential, two basic characteristics emerge. First, the doctrine must be connected to our salvation. That is, it must be soteriological or salvific in nature. Second, its connection to our salvation must be crucial. In other words, salvation as God has revealed it would not be possible without the doctrine being true.

These two criteria are clearly revealed in most of the doctrines that were listed previously. The Trinity, Christ’s deity, His atoning death, and His bodily resurrection are all necessary for our salvation. Further, as was shown earlier, Christ’s ascension, present service, and second coming are necessary for salvation in the broad sense that includes not only justification but also sanctification and glorification. There are, however, other doctrines in the list that do not appear to be necessary for our salvation.

What about Christ’s virgin birth (more precisely, His supernatural conception in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit)? Was it essential for our salvation? Certainly the underlying doctrine to which the virgin birth points—the sinlessness of Christ—is essential to salvation, for a sinner cannot be the Savior of other sinners.³ He would need a Savior himself. A drowning person can’t save another drowning person. Was the virgin birth necessary, however, to Christ’s being sinless? This much seems certain: anyone born the natural way would have been—short of divine intervention—a sinner like the rest of us (Rom. 3:23; 5:12); and the virgin birth (i.e., supernatural conception) was one way to circumvent this. Whether it was the only way or whether, say, an immaculate conception, whereby Christ would have been conceived in the natural way but without the stain of original sin, would have worked is both moot and irrelevant. The virgin birth was one way to do it, and it was the way God chose to do it. In addition, it was important, if not crucial, to our salvation that God supernaturally signify which of all the persons born of women (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 4:4) was His Son, the Savior of the world.⁴ A natural but sinless conception of Christ would not have been an outward “sign” that drew attention to the Savior’s supernatural and sinless nature from the very beginning. The virgin birth, therefore, was a divinely appointed necessity for our salvation, by the underlying doctrine of Christ’s sinlessness and by the supernatural nature of it.

What is more, some have noted that the virgin birth points to and preserves the eternal Father-Son relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. While this does not explain in itself how Adam’s sinful nature is transmitted to his natural posterity, it does offer a possible explanation for why the Adamic nature was not transmitted to Christ: Christ had no earthly father, only a heavenly one, who like Himself was sinless. By Christ’s virgin birth the sinless heavenly Father-Son relationship was preserved and the earthly father-son relationship was interrupted; thus, neither Adam’s sin, nor its consequence, death (Rom. 5:12), could be transmitted to Christ. It was as impossible that the sinless Son could be born sinful as it was that the Prince of Life could be held by death (Acts 2:24; 3:15).⁵

THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF ESSENTIALS

There are other reasons why one sees different lists of essential (or fundamental) doctrines of the faith. One reason is because of the failure to distinguish between three different kinds of essential doctrines: soteriological, epistemological, and hermeneutical.

Soteriological Essentials

Soteriological essentials are those having to do with salvation (Gk. *soteria* means “salvation”). In short, if these doctrines are not true, then salvation is not possible. This is why they are essentials of the faith, as the foregoing discussion shows.

As we’ve seen, soteriological essentials may be divided into those necessary for our *justification* (e.g., Christ’s death and resurrection), those necessary for our *sanctification* (e.g., Christ’s ascension and present session as our advocate), and those necessary for our *glorification* (e.g., His second coming and final judgment).

Epistemological Essentials

Conspicuous by its absence from the previous list of essentials is the inspiration of Scripture, which was listed as one of the great fundamentals of the faith by modern conservatives such as B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, and J. Gresham Machen. The reason for this omission is that the previous list contains only soteriological essentials. One can be saved without believing in the inspiration and (consequent) inerrancy of the Bible.⁶ An inerrant Scripture is not necessary for salvation. People were saved before there was a Bible, and people are saved through reading errant copies of the Bible (as opposed to the inerrant original manuscripts). Further, *belief* in inerrancy is not necessary in order to be saved. Inspiration and inerrancy are not a test for evangelical authenticity, but for evangelical consistency. Inspiration and inerrancy are not part of the plan of salvation one must believe to be saved, but they are part of the foundation that makes that plan of salvation knowable. In order for us to have a sure foundation for what we believe, God deemed it necessary to provide an inerrant Word as the basis of our beliefs.

Inspiration, therefore, is not a soteriological essential; rather, it is an *epistemological* essential. Epistemology (Gk. *episteme* means “knowledge”) deals with how we know. We never could be sure of the doctrines that are necessary for our salvation without a completely true, divinely authoritative revelation from God, such as we have in the Scriptures. The great ecumenical creeds, nonetheless, do mention “the Scriptures” as being the basis for what we believe; therefore, they do acknowledge this epistemological essential of the faith.

Hermeneutical Essentials

A third kind of essential is presupposed in this whole discussion: a *hermeneutical* essential (Gk. *hermencia* means “interpretation”). All of the previously mentioned doctrines relating to our salvation are based on a literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture.⁷ Without this, there is no orthodoxy. Most cults specialize in denying this literal method of interpretation in part or in whole. This is how they so easily can twist Scripture to their own heretical advantage.⁸

The whole Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) is based on the precondition of a literal interpretation of the Bible.⁹ The literal hermeneutic is, therefore, the fundamental method that makes possible our knowledge of all the doctrinal essentials.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT

Not all the essential doctrines in the creeds are stated explicitly. The doctrine of Scripture is one example. It is everywhere implied as the only infallible basis for Christian belief; however, it is nowhere treated explicitly. No creed or council ever treated it, but all of them implied it and cited it.

The doctrine of human depravity, likewise, is not explicitly treated in all these early creeds. It is, however, implied in the statements about Christ dying for our “sins” and about our need for “remission” and “forgiveness” of sins.

It is this distinction between explicit and implicit doctrinal truth that has led many theologians to speak of *fidei implicitus* (“implicit faith”). For example, a person who believes in the deity of Christ and the oneness of God is implicitly a Trinitarian, even though he (or she) does not explicitly believe (because he

is yet untaught) the formal doctrine of the Trinity. It would seem that such a person who believes the gospel (that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins and was resurrected) can be saved without yet being an explicit Trinitarian.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHAT MUST BE TRUE AND WHAT MUST BE BELIEVED

Not all soteriological essentials are necessary to be believed in order to be saved. For example, the virgin birth is nowhere stated as part of what is necessary to be believed in order to be saved; nonetheless, if Jesus were not actually born of a virgin, then He would have been sinful like the rest of the natural-born sons of Adam (Rom. 5:12f); and if He were sinful, then He could not be our Savior from sin. There is, therefore, a distinct difference between what must be *true* in order for us to be saved and what must be *believed* in order to be saved.

Someone, likewise, could not believe, or even could disbelieve, in the second coming of Christ and still be saved. If there were no second coming, however, then he could not be saved in the complete sense of some day being saved from the very presence of sin (glorification).

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DENIAL AND DISBELIEF

There are certain essential doctrines that a person may not believe and still be saved. He may not believe in the virgin birth, the inspiration of Scripture, the ascension of Christ, His advocacy before the Father, or His second coming, and still be saved. He may not believe them because he does not even know about them; or, he may know them and still not believe them.

There are, however, certain things that a person cannot deny today and still be saved.¹⁰ He must believe the gospel—that Christ died for our sins and was resurrected (1 Cor. 15:1–6). He must “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31, emphasis added).¹¹ He must believe “in [his] heart that God has raised Him [Jesus] from the dead” (Rom. 10:9). When “Lord” (Gk. *kurios*) is used of Christ in the New Testament it means, or refers to, His deity.¹² It follows, therefore, that one cannot deny the deity of Christ and be saved.

It is conceivable, however, that one who is uninformed of the deity of Christ could not believe it and still be saved. Certainly not all of the Old Testament saints who were saved understood and believed in the deity of the Messiah. It is not so, however, that one who is informed of the deity of Christ could not believe it and still be saved. There is no New Testament ground for affirming that those today who understand about Christ’s deity and yet deny it are saved. It is now a normative and necessary condition for salvation (Rom. 10:9; Acts 2:21, 36; 3:14–16; 5:30–35; 10:39; 16:31; 1 Cor. 12:3). One must “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” to be saved (Acts 16:31, emphasis added). One must believe in his heart and confess with his mouth “the Lord Jesus” to be saved (Rom. 10:9–10, emphasis added). This would mean that one who believes, as Jehovah’s Witnesses do, that Jesus is Michael, a created angel, cannot be saved. Likewise, no one who believes, as Mormons do, that Jesus is the brother of Lucifer can be saved. This would also mean that any Arian (follower of the fourth century heretic Arius), who denies the deity of Christ, cannot be saved.¹³

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HERESY AND SALVATION

One can believe heretical views on some doctrines, however, and still be saved. Being saved (justified) depends only on believing certain saving truths such as Christ’s deity, His death for our sins, and His resurrection. One may disbelieve the virgin birth, inspiration of the Bible, Christ’s ascension, and second coming, however, and still be saved. In short, one can hold heretical views on a number of doctrines and still be saved. Such a person is, of course, unbiblical and inconsistent; but better to be inconsistently saved than consistently lost. It is, of course, better yet to be consistently saved, but that is not the question at hand.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PARTIALLY HERETICAL AND COMPLETELY HERETICAL

If a person denies one essential doctrine, does that make him a heretic? It makes him heretical on that particular doctrine he denies, but not heretical on everything else. For example, if one denies the inerrancy of the Bible, he can still be saved. Inerrancy, as epistemologically important as it is, is simply not part of the plan of salvation that is necessary to believe in order to be saved. One can, likewise, deny the virgin birth and still be saved for the same reasons. Being unorthodox on one doctrine does not mean a person is unorthodox on other doctrines. One must, of course, be orthodox on certain salvific doctrines in order to be saved.

WHAT ABOUT ROMAN CATHOLICISM?

When it comes to Roman Catholicism, there are really two questions. First, does Roman Catholicism contain salvific heresies? Second, can a Roman Catholic be saved by following official Catholic doctrine?

First, judged by the standards of the creeds and councils of the first five centuries, Roman Catholicism is orthodox. It does not deny any of the doctrines contained in the first four ecumenical councils. It affirms them all. If, however, it is judged by Reformation standards of *sola fidei* ("faith alone"), *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), *sola Christa* ("Christ alone"), and *sola gratia* ("grace alone"), it is not orthodox.¹⁴ The question is whether or not these Reformation teachings are the proper test for orthodoxy. Judged by the historic creedal standards, Roman Catholicism is a true church with significant error, not a false church with significant truth. Judged by Reformation standards, it is a false church with significant truth.¹⁵

Second, is the gospel contained in official Roman Catholic doctrine? Again, as defined by the norms of the Reformation, it would appear that the answer is *no*. Many Protestant theologians, in fact, believed that the Roman Catholic church officially apostatized at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) when it proclaimed, among other unbiblical teachings, that "if anyone shall say that the good works of the man justified are in such a way the gift of God that they are not also the good merits of him who is justified, or that the one justified by good works...does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life (if he should die in grace), and also an increase in glory; let him be anathema."¹⁶

Roman Catholic theologians, however, are quick to point out several things. First, what Catholics call *initial justification* (and Protestants call *justification*) comes totally by God's grace and apart from any works, since it happens to a baby when he is baptized and thereby regenerated.¹⁷ Further, even in adults salvation is totally dependent on the work of Christ on the cross, without which no one could be saved. Finally, even the good works believers perform are possible only by the grace of God. In short, Catholic doctrine teaches the absolute necessity of the finished work of Christ on the cross and of God's grace for our salvation. The new Catholic catechism states, "Our salvation comes from the grace of God" and even "the merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness."¹⁸ Even Trent affirmed that "if anyone shall say that man can be justified before God by his own works which are done...without divine grace through Christ Jesus: let him be anathema." Further, "nothing that precedes justification, whether faith or works, merits the grace of justification. For if it is by grace, it is no more of works."¹⁹

In summary, it would appear that there is enough truth inside official Roman Catholicism for those who believe it to be saved, at least by the historic standards for orthodoxy found in the early creeds and councils. It would seem to beg the question to impose the Reformation standards on the pre-Reformation church. This is not to say the Reformation was not right. It was. Salvation comes through faith alone, based on the work of Christ alone, provided by grace alone, grounded in the Word of God alone. Roman Catholicism obscured the essential saving truth of the gospel by overlaying it with error and contradicting it in practice.

THE LIST OF ESSENTIALS

The list of essential Christian doctrines that emerge from the early creeds and councils includes (1) human depravity, (2) Christ's virgin birth, (3) Christ's sinlessness, (4) Christ's deity, (5) Christ's

humanity, (6) God's unity, (7) God's triunity, (8) the necessity of God's grace, (9) the necessity of faith, (10) Christ's atoning death, (11) Christ's bodily resurrection, (12) Christ's bodily ascension, (13) Christ's present high priestly service, and (14) Christ second coming, final judgment (heaven and hell), and reign. All of these are necessary for salvation to be possible in the broad sense, which includes justification, sanctification, and glorification.

It is not necessary, however, to *believe* all of these to be saved (justified). The minimum necessary to believe in order to be saved is: (1) human depravity, (3) Christ's sinlessness, (4) Christ's deity, (5) Christ's humanity, (6) God's unity, (7) God's triunity, (8) the necessity of God's grace, (9) the necessity of faith, (10) Christ's atoning death, and (11) Christ's bodily resurrection.

It is not necessary to believe in (2) Christ's virgin birth, (12) Christ's bodily ascension, (13) Christ's present service, or (14) Christ's second coming and final judgment as a condition for obtaining a right standing with God (justification). Even some of those beliefs that are necessary may be more implicit than explicit; for example, human depravity and God's triunity. Regarding human depravity, one must believe that he is a sinner in need of a Savior, but need not believe all that the orthodox doctrine of human depravity involves, such as the inheritance of a sin nature. The deity of Christ, likewise, is involved, which in turn involves at least two persons who are God (the Father and the Son); but there is no reason to think that to be saved one must understand and explicitly believe the orthodox doctrine of the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit who is united with those two persons in one nature (i.e., one God). Many people, in fact, do not understand this doctrine clearly, even years after they were saved.

All of the essential doctrines are necessary to make salvation possible, but not all are essential for one to believe in order for one to be saved. All are essential to believe to be a *consistent*²⁰ Christian, but not all are necessary to believe to *become* a Christian. Generally, a sign that authentic conversion has occurred is that when a professing believer is *instructed* on these doctrines, he *embraces* them.

NOTES

1. The precise order of end-time events (pre-, a-, or post-millennial views) has never been made a test of creedal orthodoxy. The doctrine that the second coming and resurrection are future events is part of orthodoxy; hence, an extreme preterist view that denies these is unorthodox.
2. For further discussion of this point see Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Sin, and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), chap. 17.
3. Precisely how the virgin birth prevented Christ from inheriting Adam's sinful nature is debated among scholars. The precise mechanism remains a mystery—at least to me. Several possibilities have been suggested, but none have gained universal acceptance. Two things seem clear as parameters of a viable explanation. It must have been something that preserved the genetic connection of Christ with Adam (which a virgin birth does through Mary, Christ's natural mother), whose race Christ was representing and saving (cf. Luke 3:38; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45; Gal. 4:4; 1 Kings 8:19), and yet it must also be something that does not involve a natural generation of male and female, which is the way we inherit Adam's fallen nature. These parameters would appear to eliminate several explanations that have been offered, namely: (1) that the sin nature is passed on only through the father's genes, although the mother has fallen genes as well, and (2) that God directly created a new sinless nature (not genetically connected to Adam) in Mary's womb as opposed to supernaturally fertilizing an ovum of Mary.
4. See J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930).
5. For this point I am indebted to my friend and editor, Elliot Miller.
6. Inerrancy follows logically from divine inspiration; for if the Bible is the Word of God and God cannot err, then it follows logically that the Bible cannot err in anything it affirms (or denies).
7. See Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, *Church, Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), chap. 13.
8. See Norman L. Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Correcting the Cults: Expert Responses to Their Scripture Twisting* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).
9. The "literal" method does not mean there can be no figures of speech. It means that the whole Bible is literally true, just as the author meant it, even though not everything in it is true literally. There are parables, metaphors, and many figures of speech in the Bible—all of which convey a literal truth.
10. We say "today" because in the progress of revelation God has ordained that more content be explicitly believed today (e.g., the "name" of Jesus—Acts 4:12; John 3:18; 3:36; 8:21) than in Old Testament times (cf. Gen. 15:5–6; Jonah 3). For more on the contents of salvation, see Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, chap. 17.
11. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
12. The word "Lord" (Gk. *kurios*) as used of Jesus in the New Testament clearly means deity because: (1) In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) it is the common translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh* ("Lord" in English translations), which only means God. (2) It is used in the New Testament (i.e., Greek) translation of Old Testament Scriptures that refer to *Yahweh*

(e.g., Matt. 3:3; 22:44). (3) It is used in the context of worshipping Christ (e.g., John 20:28; Phil. 2:10), but God alone was worshiped.

13. It is possible that some Arians are not properly informed about the deity of Christ, having only an implicit faith in it, and still are saved. In this case, however, the proof that they have this implicit faith in it would be that when properly taught from Scripture about it, they would then place their faith in Christ's deity explicitly (cf. Acts 19:1–6).
14. For further discussion on *sola gratia*, see Norman L. Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), part 2.
15. Among the significant errors of Rome are the addition of the Apocrypha to the Bible, the addition of works to faith as a condition for salvation, the addition of Mary to Christ as a Mediatrix of salvation, the addition of purgatory to the cross to pay for our complete salvation, the addition of prayers offered to dead creatures to prayers offered to the living God, and the addition of the worship of the consecrated host to the worship of the incarnate Christ.
16. Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Defarrari (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1957), no. 842, 261.
17. If the Catholic view is called heretical because of infant baptism, then the Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran views must be called heretical for the same reason. This would mean that more than two thirds of Christendom holds a heretical view of justification.
18. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), 2009.
19. *Ibid.*, 801.
20. Consistent not only in a logical, theological sense, but also in a practical and spiritual sense.