

Unity, Liberty, & Love



**A Study in Discerning
Essentials from Non-Essentials**

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Lesson 1

A Biblical Foundation for Unity, Liberty, & Love

Introduction

A number of years ago Reader's Digest carried an article entitled, "Keeping the Faith." A Roman Catholic priest told of his encounter with a mugger in a dark alley—in back of the church at Notre Dame. As the priest was making his way down the alley to his parked car, a man suddenly emerged from the shadows, thrusting the muzzle of a revolver into his ribs demanding, "Hand me your wallet!" Offering no word of protest, the priest immediately began to comply. As he reached into his inside pocket, his clerical collar became evident in the dim light, catching the robber off guard. "Are you a priest?" he exclaimed. "Yes, I am," the priest replied. "Oh, I don't rob priests; I'm Catholic, too," the thief responded. Greatly relieved, the priest withdrew a cigar from his inside pocket and offered it to the penitent thief. "Oh, no, I can't do that," the thief exclaimed, "I've given them up for Lent." This thief had convictions he refused to violate!

Do you ever find yourself majoring on the minors to the neglect of those things that are really essential? Each one of us has personal convictions, and rightly so. Some are convictions regarding essential dogmas of the Faith, and it is right to expect brothers and sisters in the church to hold those together in unity. But others are convictions of conscience that are personal and strongly held but shouldn't be demanded of others whose convictions may be different. A phrase that has been around for many years goes like this: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things love." But how do we sort out what is essential and what isn't? How do we know what is required of all and when freedom is to be given?

In this series we are going to take a look at these issues. As we will see in the Scripture passages that we'll consider, this is not a new challenge. The Apostle Paul addressed it in his letters to at least three different churches: Rome, Corinth, and Galatia. Since the local church is made up of people with differing personal convictions in non-essentials, living in love and unity can certainly be challenging – but such is church. Sadly, in our pluralistic, individualistic, and narcissistic society, rather than struggle to live in love and unity amid differences, many Christians will simply denominate around non-essentials, which have often been raised to the level of essential dogma.

It is interesting to note that, in researching this topic, I didn't find much really helpful information from Orthodox sources. The first thing many Orthodox will say is that, if you start asking questions about discerning essentials from non-essentials, you are wanting to be a minimalist - you just want to get by with the minimums. But if that is the only way to look at it, then the whole argument of Paul in his letters regarding this issue makes no sense. The truth is that one of the major problems in the contemporary Orthodox Church has been its inability or unwillingness to sort out essentials from non-essentials, claiming as binding on everyone things that neither Scripture nor the consensus of Christian Tradition has determined to be so. The Roman Catholic Church is probably similar in that regard. On the other hand, Evangelicals have prided themselves on getting down to those things that are essential, but often times the accusation of the Orthodox does apply: the result is minimalism or reductionism – an oversimplification of Faith.

But the Apostle Paul makes it clear that there are those things that are a matter of personal conscience in which freedom has been given by God and for which we must give freedom to each other without judgment or loss of love and acceptance.

But if in fact, at the very least, there are some things in Christianity that are less critical than others, and even some things that are non-essential while others are indispensable, how do we distinguish between the two?

In one of the articles that I read in my research, the author, in trying to make a point about learning to pick our battles said this: "There are some things for which I believe that I would die; there are some things for which I believe that I would lose an arm; there are some things for which I believe that I would lose a finger; and then there are some things for which I believe that I would not even get a manicure."

In all areas of life, we need to learn to choose our battles carefully. But in order to do this, we must first have some principles to guide us in discerning personal convictions of conscience that are not binding upon everyone from those matters that are.

Establishing a Biblical Foundation

In a sense we are going to start at the end and work backwards. We are going to look to the Scriptures that show us how we are to treat each other in matters of conscience for which liberty has been given, then in future lessons we will discuss how to discern such matters from those that are binding upon everyone.

Although 1 Corinthians 8, 9, and portions of 10, as well as Galatians 5 and the first part of 6, have very helpful information regarding this matter, the most directly applicable passage is Romans 14:1-15:7. This passage has four major sections and includes both negative and positive aspects of love, i.e. what love won't do and what it will do in reference to Christian liberties and personal convictions. The first section involves judging, the second tripping, the third bearing, and the fourth harmonizing.

We will read one section at a time then discuss some questions. The purpose of this tonight is not so much to give answers as to grapple with some of the questions.

Romans 14:1-12

1. In your own words, what problem do you understand Paul to be addressing here?
2. When it's all said and done, who really is weak and who is strong?
3. What reasons does he give for not passing judgment on others in matters where liberty has been given? (Vv 1-4, 10-12)
4. What criteria does he give for holding a personal conviction yourself? (Vv 5-9)

Romans 14:13-22

1. To stop judging is the first step, but it's not enough. What further action is being called for in this section?
2. What priority of values is presented here in reference to personal liberty?
3. What reasons does he give for determining not to put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister?
4. Why would it be damaging for someone to do something about which they don't have a clear conscience?

Romans 15:1-4

1. Instead of judging a brother or causing him to stumble, to what positive actions are we called?
2. How does the example of Christ bearing another's reproach fit the issue at hand, and how does it give us encouragement and hope?

Romans 15:5-7

1. What is the goal of all that Paul has been talking about?
2. Toward that end, what final admonition does He give?

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul makes reference to those things that are of "first importance." Jesus chided the Pharisees for neglecting the "weightier matters of the Law." As a result of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 the Apostles determined to require of the Gentiles only those "necessary things." Not all things are necessary. In those other matters we must be careful to respect liberty and show love.

Lesson 2

Biblical and Historical Criteria for Determining What is Essential

In Lesson 1 we discussed Romans 14 and 15 in which the Apostle Paul addresses how brothers and sisters in the Lord are to relate when they hold differing convictions in matters in which the Scriptures do not bind us to one particular practice. In such matters we were reminded not to judge our brother who lives and dies to the Lord as his master, but rather to welcome him. Likewise, we were admonished not to put a stumbling block in our sister's way by treating our conviction as more important than her for whom Christ died, which is not Christian love. Finally, we were called to bear our brother's and sister's weaknesses and seek to build them up, and to live in love and harmony to the glory of God. These are the attitudes and actions that must govern us in matters that are not binding upon all alike. But how do we discern essentials from these non-essentials? What do you think the criteria should be for determining what is essential?

The first thing we have to set straight as we get into this topic is that this question is only important as it relates to relationships and love. It is a question that I ask for other's sake, not for my own.

If I'm asking what the essentials are because I just want to do the minimums to be a Christian, well, that is a recipe for trouble and is not motivated by love for the Lord. But if for the sake of love for my brothers and sisters I want to recognize those matters for which liberty has been given, that is good. And that is how we are approaching this topic. In matters that are essential we must have unity and insist that members of the church all agree. It is in reference to such things that the Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers call us to "be of the same mind."

It is also in these matters that discipline is sometimes called for in the church. While differences in personal convictions over non-essentials should never cause Christians to separate from one another, there are a few biblical reasons for separation. There are times when Christians are called to withdraw fellowship from a professing Christian. We are going to take a brief look at some of those passages because in doing so we can begin to discern things that are essential. In each of these passages, what is the issue for which fellowship is broken?

- Matthew 18:1-20 (the issue in this one requires the context of earlier verses)
- 1 Corinthians 5
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15
- Titus 3:9-11
- Romans 16: 17-18
- 2 John 7-11

From these references to those things for which professing Christians were excluded from fellowship we can begin to gain a sense of some of those matters that are essential - Matters of doctrine, matters of morality, matters of unity, and matters of love and honor. While a difference in conviction may not be about something that is essential, how I deal with it might very well be.

For instance, even though Paul establishes that a certain amount of liberty is to be given in matters of food and drink as non-essentials, if I persist in continually dealing with such matters in a way that abuses my brother or sister or betrays the faith or encourages immorality or destroys unity – then I have moved into the arena of essentials.

So, then, we can see from this that there are essentials that relate to what we believe and there are essentials that relate to what we do – essentials of faith, and essentials of practice. But is it really possible to identify what is essential in every situation? Who decides? - The Pope? - Your local church pastor? - The EOC synod of bishops? - Your own private interpretation of the Scripture? With such a question, the divisions start all over. Here we must return, at least in part, to a classical hermeneutic to establish some criteria for determining what are essential beliefs and practices of Christian life.

It's important to recognize that this is not exactly a precise science, at least in the way we typically think of science. I know that will be frustrating to the legal minded who find their security in following the rules. If the church has struggled over this issue for two thousand years, we are not likely to perfectly nail it down now. We have to remember that the church is a dynamic organism, and that the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth is alive in our midst.

Ultimately, we don't look to an external source of authority but to the Holy Spirit who is among us. But there certainly are some external criteria that can help us in our process of discernment; criteria that most thoughtful people can agree constitute the foundation of a good hermeneutical process. It seems to me that all four of the following criteria must be present for a doctrine or practice to be considered essential.

1. Historical Affirmation: Does the doctrine or practice have universal historical affirmation and agreement? This criteria of universal consensus follows the canon of Saint Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445): "that which was believed everywhere, always, by everyone." In other words, an essential cannot be something novel. Neither can it be something that has lacked historic unity by Christians across time. As well, it cannot have limited geographic representation.
2. Historical Centrality: Does the doctrine or practice have universal historical centrality? This is like the first but differs in an important way. Here we are saying that if the history of the church has not consistently confessed this as a central issue, then it is not. For example, the history of the church may confess that the Christian worldview includes a firm belief in the historicity of the Flood narrative, but it has never been a part of the central teachings to the degree that a denial of such is a damnable offense. If the church has universally believed that a certain doctrine or practice is both true and central to the Christian faith, it deserves serious consideration as being among the essentials.
3. Biblical Clarity: Is the doctrine or practice represented clearly in Scripture? One of the principles that the Reformers sought to communicate is that of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. The Reformers did not believe that all of the Scripture was clear (a misunderstanding of the doctrine of perspicuity), but that all that is essential for salvation is clear. In short, if something in Scripture is obscure, then it is not likely to be essential.
4. Biblical Centrality: Does Scripture explicitly teach that the doctrine or practice is essential? The Scriptures speak about a great many things, but they are often explicit regarding that which is of essential importance.

For example, Paul says to the Corinthians, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4; emphasis mine). The "of first importance" tells us that Christ's death and resurrection "for our sins," from Paul's perspective, are essential components of Christianity. Without such, according to Paul, there is no Christianity (1 Cor. 15:12ff).

Again, these four criteria, I propose, must all be present. But this is not the end of the process. After the question is asked, "How do we determine what is essential?" a follow-up question must also be asked, "Essential for what?" - Essential for salvation? - Essential for classical orthodoxy? - essential for denominational orthodoxy? - Essential for godly living? - Essential to make Bp. Joshua happy? We'll look at that issue in the next lesson.

Lesson 3

Learning to Pick Your Battles & Live in Love

In the first lesson we looked at Romans 14 and 15 in which the Apostle Paul reminds us to honor liberty and show love in non-essential matters for which diversity of convictions has been allowed. Last week we began to establish some criteria for determining what things are essential in Christian faith and practice, suggesting that if something is, it will have been consistently believed as true and essential in all places and throughout the Church's history and by all Christians, and it will be clearly revealed in Scripture as true and essential.

This week we will answer the question, "Essential for what?" and distinguish a little more clearly between those things that are binding upon all and those things that are not. The goal of this study is that we might gain wisdom in determining how to pick our battles: how to know for what issues we should, for love's sake, take up our arms, and for what issues we should, for love's sake, lay them down.

Let me ask you a question: What is essential for a person to be saved? If someone has come to believe the good news that Jesus Christ is God's Son and that He died for our sins and rose from the dead to restore us to God, and they have repented and given their life to Him in faith, but they are ignorant of the greater body of creedal dogmas and practices, can they be saved?

Let's look at some of the foundational Scriptures that speak to the issue of salvation. Now, I realize this is a bit of a proof-texting approach - using verses to make a point without looking at their context - but for this exercise it will suffice.

Let's read each of these verses:

John 1:10-13, John 3:1-5; John 3:16-17, Acts 2:38-39; Acts 3:19; Acts 10:44-48; Acts 13:38-39; Acts 16:29-34; Romans 1:16; Romans 6:23; Romans 10:9-13; Ephesians 1:13-14; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Peter 1:8-9; 1 John 4:13-15, 1 John 5:11-13.

Now, I ask you again: What is essential for salvation? Ok, at this point many Orthodox and Roman Catholics would likely say, "You are just being Protestant reductionists." But I'll tell you what I have come to think. Many groups have come and gone in the name of Christ through the centuries, but they didn't last, especially if they were heretical. I think there is a good reason why the Reformation and the churches that are true to its spirit have been preserved for 500 years.

The Reformational churches have targeted those things that are essential for salvation, and even though they certainly are often guilty of reducing other essential issues to the level of non-essential, their insistence upon our need to focus on those things that are essential for salvation is a necessary thing in the midst of Christendom.

Everything in my body is essential for optimal health and wholeness; but not everything is essential for life. I could lose many parts of my body, inside and out, and while I'd be limited in wholeness, I'd still be alive, right?

Now, of course, we don't want to be minimalists. We want to embrace and grow in every way that allows us to experience the greatest wholeness and fullness of the life God intends for us, and for which Christ died for us. But there are some things that are absolutely essential for life, and some that are only essential for experiencing the fullness of health and wholeness that such life is meant to give us. Do you understand what I am saying?

So, in the diagram on the last page, the core circle of essentials is made up of those things that are necessary for salvation. That is first and central; if someone embraces those things, then dies the next day, I have no question about their name being in the book of Life. However, that is not all that is essential for the fullness of that life to be experienced and pressed out into our daily reality. This is where we come to the second circle in our diagram. If one comes to faith in Jesus Christ, he or she is to be baptized into Christ and His Body in the name of the Trinity and grow into the fullness of the life God intends, bearing good fruit that glorifies God.

Now, it would take more time than we have to talk about everything that would be in this category, but we can at least make some broad strokes. As we saw last week, this will include issues of theology and issues of morality. And, of course, any item that makes this list will have to

pass the four- criteria litmus test we established last week.

Let's start with matters of theology. This will include all that the Scriptures clearly indicate is essential to the Christian Faith and that is consistently affirmed as such by the whole Church (or at least the majority) in every place and throughout history. This is Scriptural dogma stated and expressed through orthodox Tradition. So, for instance, even though it may not be necessary for initiation into the Kingdom of God to understand the details of God as three Persons in one Nature or the details of the virgin birth, or to understand all the ways theology is pressed out in devotion, these are essential to the Christian Faith and cannot be rejected if one is to grow up into the fullness of practical salvation and life in God.

When we speak of theology, it must be kept in mind that this involves both what we believe and our devotional relationship with the Lord, for belief is expressed in prayer and devotion. St. Evagrius of Pontus stated, "A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian." While Martha was up scampering around the kitchen, Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to Him with devotion – which Jesus described as the "one thing needful." Matters of faith are not just given mental assent with the mind, but are pressed out in devotion to the Lord. So, matters of devotion also fit into this circle of essentials – worship, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, silence, etc. While the form these may take may not be essential, the things themselves are.

The second category would be matters of morality. In broad reference this includes everything that is laid down in Scripture and consistently expressed through Tradition regarding godly principles of conduct and ethical living, i.e. teachings like the Sermon on the Mount and the instructions of the Epistles that are developed from it. Notice that I said "principles" of conduct.

This is a very important distinction to make. The outward expression that a moral or ethical principle might take may be different from time to time and place to place. The underlying principle would be essential but the particular form the expression of that principle takes may not be. What examples can you think of that support this? (Take time to press out examples.)

Since this category includes all those things that are involved in godly character and conduct, this would also be the place to mention things like righteousness, peace, and joy, or faith, hope, and love. Such things are essential and trump all non-essentials, no matter how helpful and important such non-essentials may be. All such matters of personal conviction in non-essentials must give way to these "weightier" virtues.

The next circle may at first seem like a strange one. Is it essential or isn't it? Well, no and yes. That's why I've used the word necessary rather than essential. It involves things that are not essential for salvation or even the fullness of growth in Christ, but that are necessary for good order in a parish or a communion of churches.

For instance, there have to be policies and guidelines and practices in place that everyone in a parish or communion of churches agrees to abide by for the sake of good order and even as an aid to unity (which is essential) even though such practices may not themselves be essential. For instance, in terms of the EOC, having a common Eucharist Liturgy may be such a thing. That certainly isn't essential for salvation or even growth, since many expressions of the liturgical faith and shape have been used throughout history, but it is necessary for good order and as an aid to unity. Can you think of anything else?

From here we move into definite areas of personal convictions that are not binding upon everyone – things that are not essential for salvation or growth in the fullness of salvation. These are typically going to be forms or expressions of essential principles that, while important and maybe even extremely helpful, are not themselves essential – matters such as “food and drink,” or holy days, etc, as we heard the Apostle Paul address in our first lesson. We are all bound by the admonition to “not be drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,” but whether one chooses to refrain from alcohol all together or drink in moderation is a personal conviction. There are many other such things that fit into this circle.

When it comes to a matter in which you are passionate about something you believe to be very important for spiritual health and wholeness, but which does not pass the litmus test of something that is essential for salvation or growth in the fullness of the Christian life, you can certainly offer your conviction as something that may be helpful for others, but you must not demand that it is binding upon everyone. The other person and their freedom must be honored in love.

Now, for the sake of time I’m going to talk about the last two circles together. Things that are not important, especially as it relates to spiritual health, even though they may be good things, such as being a St. Louis Cardinal fan, are of course matters that should be easily recognized as not binding upon everyone – though even these can sometimes get blown out of proportion. Also, the Apostle Paul warns us in numerous places not to even waste our time haggling over pure speculations, such as how many angels can sit on the head of a pin, or when Christ will return, etc. As obvious as this category may be, it is surprising the number of churches that split over such things. This is a sad commentary on the witness of the Church in the world.

Well, as was stated in the beginning: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things love. They will know we are disciples of Christ by our love. If there is a matter in which you are unsure whether it is essential or not, it is usually best to err on the side of love and liberty until you are sure. Much more harm has been done by misapplied personal convictions than by love.

May the Lord give us wisdom in these matters, courage to stand in unity, mercy and grace in honoring liberty, and a fierce and uncompromising love for Him and for each other in all things. By such His name is glorified.



