

Essentials. . . of the Christian Faith

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2006 Preface

It is often stated that the Moravian “motto” is “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things love.” Though sometimes this motto is misused as an excuse for ignoring better judgment and doing anything one wants, it is a wise caution to heed in dealing with our fellow human beings.

*The motto is not exclusively Moravian, though we use it perhaps more frequently than any other church. John Amos Comenius, a bishop of the Moravian Church who is also known today as the father of modern education, penned the motto in his last literary work, *The One Thing Needful (Unum necessarium)*, as advice for Christ’s Church. The motto can be traced even earlier to Rupert Meldenus, a pseudonym for Peter Meiderlin (1582-1651), an irenic Lutheran theologian who taught and died in Augsburg. Some say St. Augustine of Hippo first wrote the motto.*

But exactly what are the “essentials” over which we should be in “unity”? Our Bishop Luke of Prague (d. 1528) gave a succinct answer by characterizing the essentials on the part of God as the good will of God the Father for our salvation, the saving work of God the Son, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The essentials on the part of humanity, said Luke, are faith, love, and hope. Note that these are all more actions and relationships than they are a lengthy list of beliefs.

*The “modern” age of the 18th to 20th centuries posed questions about the essentials in different ways, and one noted Moravian theologian, Augustus Schultze, gave his answer in a brief address delivered in 1902. For more than 40 years, Augustus Schultze taught at Moravian Theological Seminary, and he was president of the seminary in 1914 when he published *Christian Doctrine*, only the second work by a Moravian, following August Gottlieb Spangenberg’s *Idea Fidei Fratrum*, on systematic Christian doctrine. We certainly would not presume to make an “essential” of Schultze’s statements on the*

essentials (nor would he want us to). They may, however, be of help to us as we seek answers to similar questions and attitudes posed in our own day. Here then is Augustus Schultze's 1902 answer to the question, "What are the essentials?"

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August 2006*

Essentials of the Christian Faith

Doubtless, this is a timely and an important subject to think and to speak about for all who profess the Christian faith, nay for all who are called by the name of Christians. As in every department of knowledge, sentiment and activity, so above all in matters of the Christian religion it is necessary, at times, to go back to fundamentals and to ask ourselves: What does it mean that we are Christians? Such inquiry is helpful for clarifying our Christian principles and rightly directing our Christian endeavors.

Objections

But some will say: This subject is of no special interest or concern to me. In fact, there are some objections that may be raised against its consideration. The first is, that the question, What are the Essentials of the Christian Faith? need not be answered; the second, that it has been answered long ago; and the third, that it cannot be answered with satisfaction to every one.

1. Need Not Be Answered

There are many so-called Christians in our day who hold that the discussion of "theological questions" should be left to ministers and theological seminaries, as it is of no practical value to the Christianity of the twentieth century, which does not care what a man believes provided he lives rightly, which wants practice and not preaching, and which will not be bound by narrow-minded and antiquated articles of doctrine. The reply to these persons is that, if their Christianity is absolutely indifferent to the essentials of the Christian faith, it certainly is no Christianity at all; if it is simply averse to formulated systems and traditional forms of religion, it needs to inquire all the more eagerly, what true religion and true Christianity implies.

2. Has Been Answered

There are others who take the opposite ground by saying that this question has been answered long ago. After the fundamentals of the Christian faith have been laid by the Church Fathers and Synods, and the Churches have all taken their stand upon them for so many centuries, should we not, "leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, go on to perfection"? (Heb. 6:1.) Can we not go on building without again

examining the foundation walls? Must facts and doctrines be again called into question, that have been accepted by the fathers after the most careful search into the truth, because they do not suit the spirit of the age or because some scholars perhaps less interested in truth than in making a reputation by “new discoveries” endeavor to shake and to unsettle the Church and her faith? Certainly all discussion of details and theories can be dismissed from the forum of the practical needs of our Christian people, but not the question about the fundamentals as such. A great change in religious thought and feeling has of late years come into the Christian world and has become apparent in ever widening circles, loudly calling for recognition. Matters of vital importance to the faith and practice of the Church are frequently called into question both in the secular and the religious press; a *critical* attitude toward all traditionally accepted Christianity has been adopted by many of the younger ministers in the Protestant churches of Europe and America. Even the Sunday School must take notice of modern ideas in matters of Bible study. Not only professors of theology who must constantly meet the perplexing difficulties and doubts presented by critical research, but every earnest and faithful Christian student at times feels the ground giving way beneath him and looks for support. There is too much involved in this matter to simply rest our faith upon traditional teaching and upon the authority of other men, without wishing to see for ourselves where we stand, whether on a rock or on quicksand.

3. Cannot Be Answered

But, who is to give an authoritative answer as to what constitutes the Essentials of the Christian faith? When some Christians and some Churches lay the greatest stress upon doctrines, rites, and principles, which to others appear not only quite unimportant but even positively false, can any statement in this respect be made that will meet with general acceptance? Probably not, when the attempt is made to draw up a well defined confession of faith. But the question is not, What is indispensable to a complete system of Christian truth? It is rather, What is of practical value and universal application? What in the Christian religion is essential to know and to do, to get and to give? We Moravians, at least, have always proclaimed it as our motto in matters of religion: “In *essentials* unity, in *non-essentials* liberty, in *all things* charity.” We therefore take it for granted that there are many things generally conceded to be non-essential, while there are certain facts and truths so essential as to command a general acceptance. There always will be a difference of opinion as to the quantity, a more or less, that should be called essential or non-essential, but it will not be found difficult to agree upon the quality of the things necessary to a true Christianity. The universal need of the human heart and the corresponding divine gift, the experience of the individual Christian and the testimony of nineteen centuries of Christian history, when applied to present day requirements, will combine in giving a clear answer as to the vitals of the Christian faith.

A. Non-Essentials

In considering first what is non-essential, we may distinguish between *principles* to be followed and *facts* to be accepted or rejected, or between the method to be applied to

matters of religious faith and those matters themselves. The basis of acceptance in religious truths, the authority upon which we rest our conviction, the method of testing what is to be believed or not to be believed may change. It has changed, and it is not essential that it should continue the same in the future.

1. Creed and Church Forms

It is generally conceded that there is a considerable amount of superstition and self-delusion connected with the Christian faith of some people. We evangelical Christians, certainly, do not regard the acceptance of many teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and their belief in certain miracles, relics and signs, as necessary or even commendable. We want the truth of those doctrines and of those stories tested by criticism and an honest investigation. Why then should we be afraid or object to let in the light of investigation and criticism into our own beliefs. Can it be essential to insist upon conformity in every article of an elaborate Church Creed and to make its acceptance the test of true Christianity? Creeds certainly are of human origin and therefore subject to change. They differ or even oppose each other with regard to many points which are represented as of the greatest importance, such as the question of predestination, of the meaning of the sacraments, the definition of the Trinity, yet which are matters of theological speculation rather than of any practical value. And how about Church ritual, forms of Church government, and the like? Is it not foolish and narrow to make conformity to traditional ceremonies, modes of administering the rite of baptism and the holy communion, church-canons for ordination to the ministry, or anything that is enjoined merely by ecclesiastical law or custom, indispensable Essentials of the Christian faith?

2. The Bible

Again: all Protestant churches have accepted the Bible as the standard of religious faith and practice. But does this fact imply an unchangeable method of understanding and interpreting that standard? The modern way of studying the books of the Bible is largely historical and critical. It pays little regard to traditional authority and carries its investigation with regard to the origin and the value of Bible history and Bible teaching fearlessly forward. It is pursued by some of its prominent advocates in a presumptuous spirit and with destructive results. But as long as it represents an honest search after truth, we need not denounce it as unchristian and dangerous. Has not this new method inspired the writing of more books about the Bible in one decade than were formerly written in half a century and is not the newly awakened interest sincere, deep, and spiritual? True, it does not ascribe the same value to every part of the Bible and is not favorable to the taking out of single passages as proof texts of absolute authority for the support of this or that favorite doctrine of churches or individuals, and particularly as a basis for the vagaries of mystical fancy and eschatological dreams. It points out that the Holy Scriptures record not only the words and deeds of God and of holy men, but also the sins and the fallacies of evil men, quoting even the devil with the maxim: "All that a man hath will he give for his life" (Job 2:4.). If a careful study of the authorship and composition of the books of the Old Testament somewhat reverses the order of their

origin as we were accustomed to accept it, must we cling to the traditional belief at all hazards? Does it matter so much who wrote the Psalms, or the historical and the prophetic books, provided their contents are truthful, instructive, and inspiring. If the records of geology and the glacial age seem to be at variance with our understanding of some chronological references in the book of Genesis, should we stake our faith in the trustworthiness of the Bible upon its supposed chronology? It is one thing to hold fast these time-honored and cherished convictions, as long as they are not proved to be impossible, and another thing to make them Essentials of the Christian faith. We Protestant Christians are sometimes slow to acknowledge that, while the Bible is an inspired record of divine revelation, it is not that revelation itself, nor the only revelation of God which has been given. There was a revelation of divine acts and teachings long before there was a Bible and this revelation continues to the present day, both in ordinary and extraordinary manifestations of God through nature, history, and the inner voice of the Spirit, as well as through the Holy Scriptures. It is not an essential of the Christian faith to hold that the Bible is the only source of divine revelation to us.

3. Christian Sentiment and Work

The same principles concerning things that should not be regarded as essential to the Christian faith, will apply also to matters of Christian sentiment and work as well as to matters of intellect and belief. There are many things connected with Christianity and the exercise of our holy religion which we highly cherish and perhaps regard as indispensable for us, but which are not Essentials. There is a marked difference in nationalities and individuals; in custom and training; in social conditions and natural environments; in the estimate placed by Christians on the means of grace, the holy sacraments, regular church attendance and the like. There are people who are naturally religious, emotional or orthodox, and people who are naturally the opposite, and certain things may be essentials to the Christian faith of some people that are non-essentials to others.

B. Essentials

But what then is essential for all? There is, no doubt, some danger in being too broad and liberal, as well as in being too narrow and sectarian. King Solomon was led to regard the different religions of his day as equally good and thus became an idolater, and so in our days with many educated men and women a false charity has taken the place of the bigotry of the past. The Christian faith is regarded as but a part of a great historic evolution toward a final ideal of religion, as for instance Gibbon expressed it: "All religions are to the pious equally true, to the statesman equally useful, and to the philosopher equally false." Under the cover of an outward acquiescence in the teachings of the different churches, there is not only a great amount of practical unbelief and agnosticism with regard to all positive Christian truth abroad in the land, but even a complete ignorance and indifference as to what is really genuine Christian doctrine. Unfortunately the term "liberal" in matters of religion is sometimes a misnomer for a spirit of direct hostility to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even some of the leading authorities in theology, like Prof. A. Harnack of Germany, in his "Essence of

Christianity,” proclaim but a shallow God-father-religion which is certainly not what the apostle Paul declares the Christian’s “godliness” to be, viz., “profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life which now is and of the life which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8). Over against such conception, Christianity must in every age, even in our own day, prove its essence again as in the days of the Apostles, of the Reformation and of the founding of Herrnhut, by the personal experience of believers and by the spiritual results which it produces. That is the practical demonstration of the Essentials of the Christian faith.

For a theological definition of such Essentials the two guiding stars will naturally be the two words “*faith*” and “*Christian.*” We must begin at the center, if we want agreement.

1. Personal Faith in God

The first essential then of the Christian faith is faith, in the best sense of the word. All true religion is a personal matter, a matter of personal interest, of personal sentiment, of personal conviction, trust, and obedience. Where this personal element is wanting, the greatest Essential of Christianity is wanting; without it our religion is lifeless and fruitless. The preaching of salvation in Christ has no effect upon people who do not feel the need of Christ as a Saviour, whose sins do not trouble them and who are not spiritually awakened from the sleep of the natural indifference of man toward the divine revelation, Better one item of a positive firm conviction than a hundred articles of a lifeless belief. Better first to doubt and then make an experience of religion, than not to doubt and never to “hunger and thirst after righteousness.” It does not matter so much, how far a man can proceed in confessing the so-called Apostles’ Creed or any creed, provided he is sure that he can at least begin with: “I believe,” begin with: “I believe in God the father.” Such faith in God rests upon a sense of the unseen presence of a living, personal God, our heavenly father, the personal conviction or dependency upon His divine love, power, and wisdom, and the willingness to trust Him for needed strength, guidance, and grace. “Whom have I in heaven but thee and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee” (Psalm 73:25). Whatever, then, the detailed and varied object of our faith may be, personal experience and not traditional or authoritative belief is a fundamental of true Christianity. God is *my* God; he knows and loves *me*; he can and does reveal himself to my heart; he hears my prayer and directs my way — that is the first Essential of our religion.

2. Jesus Christ, The Saviour

However, such belief in God alone as the creator and ruler of the world and in his gracious providence is not yet a *Christian* faith, unless it accepts also the objective revelation of divine love in the great facts of our redemption. It is the great Essential of the Christian faith that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15). The early Christian Church has formulated the important historical facts of redemptive revelation in the second and third articles of the Apostles’ Creed and our Moravian Church in the eight points enumerated in the Results of the General Synod. But some minds cannot be satisfied with dogmatical statements. There

will always be the cry either of too much or too little. One hundred and fifty years ago Richard Baxter, when appointed by the British Parliament to draw up a confession of faith, wrote: "How ticklish a business the enumeration of fundamentals"; but when it was objected afterward that what he had proposed as fundamental might be subscribed by Papists and Socinians, he replied: "So much the better and so much the fitter it is to be the matter of concord." The acceptance of certain facts and truths may be logically necessary, without being practically essential. As, when we are in the undisturbed possession of our household articles or of any other possessions, we are not willing to give up any of them as useless, yet when there is danger of destruction of our property by fire or water, we may quickly decide which articles are dearest to us and most indispensable: so in looking over the principal parts of the story of our redemption, it will not be difficult to answer the question: How much must I be sure of to build my faith upon and to have as a foundation for "the life which now is and for the life which is to come"? Men may doubt the supernatural character of much that has been handed down as miraculous in the history of Israel or even in the history of the earthly life of our Saviour. But we cannot give up the miracle of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, because upon that depends our salvation. For, as the apostle Paul writes: "He died for our sins and was raised again for our justification," and "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain and your faith is also vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). This, therefore, is another essential of the Christian faith, the unconditional acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord, our once crucified, but now exalted and ever living Saviour, the anchor of our hope in life and death. On this point every Christian wants to become sure with the apostle Peter, that "we have not followed cunningly devised fables" (2 Pet. 1:16) It is also the substance of the second article of faith.

3. Continued Working of the Spirit of God

But it is not enough to have redemptive revelation given to us in the life and work of Jesus Christ. There must be forces and agencies of redemption now in operation, which apply to the present generation the salvation provided in the past. Accordingly a third Essential of our faith is the continued working of the glorified Christ through the Spirit, in the Church and in the hearts and lives of believers, as it is confessed in the third article of the Apostles' Creed. This includes the firm conviction of the necessity and the efficiency of *prayer*, not as a religious exercise or spiritual gymnastics for self improvement, but as the medium of personal communication with God and our Saviour. They are practically unbelievers who do not pray at all or only in church, or who expect no tangible results of prayer.

Such faith in the continued working of divine grace includes the belief in the regenerating and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, as manifested in the life of the believer, in the work of the Christian ministry, and in the missionary activity at home and abroad, that strongest evidence of the spiritual power of Christianity which even an unbelieving world will recognize. Witness the recent experiences in connection with the mission work in China and Japan. David Hume, the English deist, frequently went to hear the Scottish minister Brown. When told that this was inconsistent, he replied: "I do not believe all that the preacher says, but *he* believes it; and to hear a man who really believes what he says gives me pleasure and is helpful to me." "With the heart

man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Rom. 10:10). Genuine Christianity must find expression in acts of worship, in speech and song, as well as in works of love for Christ and the Brethren. But its sweetest gain is the assurance of our adoption as children of God, the daily enjoyment of the love of the Father, the grace of our Saviour, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, and the experience of “the peace of God which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). It is recorded of the great philosopher Kant of Koenigsberg, the author of “Criticism of Pure Reason,” that, when one of his hearers said: “Your philosophy is admirable and your reasoning convincing, but I cannot find the peace of heart in it for which I am seeking,” he at once replied: “Peace of heart you will never find in my lecture room; if you desire peace of heart, go to the little Moravian chapel over yonder. There is where I find peace.”

4. Inspiration of the Bible

A fourth essential of the Christian faith, as a matter of principle and of experience, is the acceptance of the Bible as being in a unique sense the “Word of God,” the rule of faith and the standard of Christian living. However opinions may differ as to the infallibility or inerrancy of Bible history, prophecy, and doctrine, as to the possibility or desirability of harmonizing certain biblical narratives with the declarations of science and of reason, as to the mode and degree of inspiration that is conceded to one or the other part of these sacred scriptures, the Christianity of today must continue to recognize the character of the Bible as different from all other literature. As Peter writes (1 Peter 1:21): “Men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost,” and Paul (2 Tim. 3:15, 16): “The sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness.” In spite of all higher criticism, nay largely by it, the Bible is constantly proving the justice of the claim made for it that it contains the word of God addressed to everyone who will search the Scriptures to find eternal life.

Thus the Essentials of the Christian faith may be summed up under a few heads so as to meet the wants of Christians of very different type, training, and tendency, and yet be central enough to contain all that is required for faith and practice. He who accepts these *four* simple articles of faith may find that they are but brief summaries of what the Christian church has always confessed and taught; only the form of expression and the method followed in fixing upon these points differs somewhat, having in view, mainly, present day needs and claims.

Methods

And here a word should be added as to what is essential in the method to be employed in the search after truth and in the endeavor to have each successive generation establish its own belief more or less independently of its predecessors.

1. Reverent and Humble

Much unnecessary provocation and self-delusion would be avoided if all who from choice or necessity subject the foundations of the Christian faith to a critical examination would go to work always in a reverent and humble spirit. We do not want to see our holy "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) and for which many of the fathers have given their lives, our most sacred possession and the source of our greatest joy for the present time as well as the anchor of all our hope for the future, rudely and wantonly attacked by men who have neither reverence nor humility, who think that what is new to them must be a newly discovered mine of great importance to all mankind and who accordingly assert their views with much self-confidence.

2. Careful and Prayerful

In the second place it appears essential that in teaching or preaching theories or newly established facts which are at variance with what has hitherto been generally held as the Christian faith, we proceed carefully and prayerfully. It is quite possible to assimilate modern progress without unnecessarily undermining the inexperienced faith, especially of the young in private or public teaching, in school or college; and we dare not sacrifice the precious heritage of Christian experience to a superficial enlightenment.

3. Seeking the Truth

In the third place all acceptance and presentation of newly acquired knowledge touching religious subjects and the Christian faith should be strictly in the interest of truth, so that we do not exchange an old established belief for a new superstition based upon the supposed authority of some prominent writer who poses as a champion of truthful investigation. In cutting loose from all traditional authority, modern thought is inclined to put subjective opinion in place of objective facts and there is a danger of the old teaching being thrown aside as "unscientific, unhistorical, and obsolete," simply on the basis of some professed better knowledge and of an authoritative declaration. We should not rashly admit as fact what may be only an assertion, but neither should we shut our eyes to any newly revealed truth, whether it be in the natural or the spiritual realm, as our Lord has said: "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

With these guiding principles we will be benefited both by the old and the new faith, prepared to meet the results of critical study and scientific research, and yet able to hold fast and to preach the wonderful Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord.