

Essentials and Non-essentials

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1. Pertaining to Truth

It is a very common thing for people to regard truth as of two kinds: essential and non-essential, important and unimportant. This is a great mistake. All truth is one, and cannot be divided into classes. Every point of truth is of equal importance with every other point. Truth is of God, for Jesus Christ whom He has sent is the truth.

But the riches of Christ are unsearchable. He is infinite, therefore the truth is infinite. But there can be no comparison of infinities. To the human mind, at least, all infinities are equal. So the only thing necessary to be determined is whether or not a thing *is true*. If *it is*, then no matter how unimportant it may *seem* to human understanding, we may be sure that it cannot be ignored without sin.

In a perfect machine the smallest bolt is as important and necessary as the largest shaft, for the reason that without the bolt the shaft would be useless. So in God's perfect word the smallest matter is as important as what are called the great things. God has not wasted His time on non-essentials. He does not speak that which is of no importance.

Proverbs 30

⁶ Every word of God is pure; He is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him.

⁷ Add not unto His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar.

2. Pertaining to the Christian Religion

What are the “essentials” and “non-essentials” of the Christian religion? From the ideas expressed by people on the subject it would seem that the “non-essentials” of Christian faith and practice were very numerous. No one, perhaps, would be able to define just what they are, still the belief in their existence is both wide-spread and firm.

Of course, if the “non-essentials” cannot be defined, it is equally impossible to say what constitutes the “essentials.” In practice, each individual adjusts the matter to suit himself. The “essentials” he endeavors to put in practice, and the “non-essentials” are practiced so long as their observance is not a matter of too great inconvenience.

There has been an effort made for many years to bring about a union of the various bodies of Christendom upon the basis of these “essentials” of the Christian faith, but the movement has made little progress. The united wisdom of these various bodies has not been able to produce a satisfactory statement of what these essentials are.

The prospect, to many minds, is an alluring one; but the more the ground is explored from which the proposed union must come, the more does the subject become involved in obscurity. There is a vengeance about it which prevents the promoters of the enterprise from getting hold of anything tangible. The basis upon which it must rest is altogether unstable.

Turning to the Bible, from whence all truth upon questions of Christian faith and practice must be drawn, we find it altogether silent regarding the “non-essentials” of which we are speaking. The only information it gives on the subject is of a negative kind. And this fact is sufficient to account for the confusion that exists with regard to it in the minds of men; the question is one which exists only in the human imagination, and concerning which each man is his own source of authority.

The only authority on the subject—other than the negative information of the Scriptures—is human reasoning, dictated by self-interests. When God wrote the Bible to tell man what things he must do to be saved, He left the non-essentials out. Whatever the Bible has set forth as man’s duty in this relation to God, is essential; and whatever the Bible has left unmentioned, is not essential.

All the practices and forms and observances pertaining to religious worship, that are not specified and enjoined in the Bible, are non-essentials. And they are so entirely non-essential that they have no rightful place in Christian faith or practice whatever.

3. Bible Warnings

This belief in non-essentials pertaining to the service of God is not peculiar to our own day. It has been manifested in all ages. The Bible tells us of the experience of some who held this belief in ancient times:

1. Cain did not think it essential that his sacrifice should consist of a lamb, as Abel’s did, and he brought the fruits of the ground, but his offering was not accepted.
2. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, on one occasion did not think it essential to offer one particular kind of incense before the Lord in the tabernacle; “and there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.” *Leviticus* 10:1-2.
3. King Saul did not think it essential that a sacrifice to God should be offered by one particular man when it necessitated a long delay, so he offered the sacrifice himself. The sacrifice was the essential thing; the particular person offering it was a non-essential. But when Samuel who was to have offered the sacrifice, appeared, he told Saul that obedience was an essential thing, and that the kingdom should be taken from him for his transgression.

4. The ancestors of the idolatrous heathen did not think it essential to worship God in the particular way that was practiced by those who feared God, and decided it would make no difference if they worshiped Him through something that their eyes could behold, just as Roman Catholics today think it makes no difference if they worship God through an image, since it is God, and not the image that they worship. But the result was that “they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.” *Romans* 1:22-23. And their descendants speedily sunk into the lowest depths of ignorance and degradation.

It is not necessary to refer to all the examples given us on this point. It is evident enough that man, in venturing upon this ground, does so at a terrible risk. It is evident that the wise and only safe course to be pursued, is to regard nothing as non-essential which is enjoined upon us in God's word.

It is at the peril of our souls that people undertake to decide that there are essentials and non-essentials in that which concerns their duty to God, and to determine what these are. When God speaks, it is man's place to hear and obey, without reference to his own views of what the situation requires; and when God has not spoken, it is man's place to know nothing on that point, and to be silent both in word and deed.