

Nonessential Doctrines

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Part I

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Over the years I have had the privilege of water baptizing many people. One woman in particular stands out in my mind. As she came up out of the water she shouted, "Did you hear it? Did you hear it?" I asked, "Hear what, sister?" She shouted, "The chains! The chains fell away! I could hear the chains hitting the bottom of this tank. Hallelujah, I'm free! Jesus has set me free!" What a joy and blessing that morning was for all of us present. Yet something as wonderful as water baptism can divide the body of Christ. Jesus meant water baptism to be a profound and joyful experience. But I have been to regions in the world where the way a church baptizes, that is, by immersion or by sprinkling, can set denomination against denomination and brother against brother. How sad. And how wrong!

What is the fundamental error of those who allow themselves to be separated from other lovers of Christ over these kinds of issues? I believe the basic error is that these Christians do not understand the difference between the essential and nonessential doctrines of our Christian faith.

Several months ago we wrote a two part article entitled, "Essential Doctrines." In that teaching we outlined the doctrines of faith which I consider to be absolutely essential or foundational to Christianity. These doctrines include those concerning Jesus (Jesus as the Son of God, the Virgin Birth, the Blood of Christ, Jesus as Fully Man, Jesus as Sinless, the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus, and His Second Coming.) In Part II of that teaching article we discussed the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus, Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. We also examined salvation in some detail as well as the inerrancy of Scripture.

We made the point that every believer must embrace the above doctrines to be considered a true Christian. In this two part teaching we are now going to examine what I refer to as the nonessential doctrines of the faith. Obviously, nonessential doctrines are those doctrines which are not absolutely foundational to Christianity. That is not to say that all nonessential doctrines are unimportant. Quite the contrary, some doctrines which we will discuss below are very important.

One common characteristic of these nonessential doctrines is that reasonably minded Christians can and do differ on various aspects of these doctrines. The overriding point I want to make in this teaching is that these nonessential doctrines should not divide the church. Whenever believers are so divided that they do not fellowship with one another based on differing views of these nonessential doctrines, that is wrong! So long as we Christians are in agreement on the essential doctrines of our faith, we should be in right relationship and fellowship with one

another.

You will note that some of the sections below are extremely brief. Unfortunately, space does not permit us to do a lengthy discourse on any of these doctrines. Furthermore, we have already written entire articles on several of these topics. Our third book, which will be ready for mailing later this year, contains a more extensive discussion of many of these doctrines. With that said, let us examine the nonessential doctrines of our faith as well as some of our Christian traditions and customs.

1. Baptism in the Holy Spirit

The Pentecostal view of the baptism in the Holy Spirit stems from the basic premise that whatever occurred in the first century church is still for every believer today. Thus the Pentecostals (for want of a better term), believe that salvation and being baptized in the Holy Spirit are two different experiences, although on occasion they can happen to someone at the same time. The scriptural basis for this view is found primarily in the Book of Acts. (See for example, Acts 8:12,14-17.) The Pentecostals combine verses like these with Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-8 as the basis of this doctrine. They also see the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as another instance of salvation and being baptized in the Holy spirit as two separate occurrences.

The evangelical church world believes that a person receives the Holy Spirit, which is synonymous with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, at the moment of salvation or rebirth. Thus, because every born-again believer has the Holy Spirit, no further action need be done to the believer. They believe that the spiritual maturing of the believer, his discernment, wisdom, etc., are all manifestations of the Holy Spirit present within.

2. Tongues

Once someone accepts the Pentecostal doctrine concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the issue of speaking in a prayer language, or tongues, comes up. Because of the experience of the 120 believers at Pentecost, and the several references in the book of Acts concerning speaking in tongues (2:4, 2:11, 10:46, 19:6), and because of Paul's extensive writings on the subject, Pentecostals view speaking in tongues as an integral part of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately some Pentecostals believe that one cannot be saved unless he or she speaks in tongues. This belief is not supported by Scripture and is erroneous in my opinion.

Non-Pentecostal churches generally reject the idea that Christians may speak in tongues today. They say that the use of this gift ceased after the first century. This position is, of course, consistent with the other doctrines that

reject modern day prophecy or that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a separate occurrence which continued to happen after the end of the first century.

3. Demonism

We have generally defined demonism as anything that has to do with the satanic/demonic realm. Much of Jesus' ministry involved demons or evil spirits. Today some denominations simply ignore the entire demonic realm. Others pay lip service to it but generally avoid dealing with it.

The demonic realm should be commonly understood by all church leaders but often it is not. I believe the reason for this is that many leaders are, 1)uninformed, 2) fearful, and/or 3)intimidated by the demonic world. Others tend to downplay demonism because they believe there is a danger that some will become too focused on demons thereby losing their Christian balance. Of course, the opposite trap is to think that demons and Satan really don't exist today and thus aren't a threat at all. To me the biggest problem in today's church is not the differences in doctrines on this subject, it is that the whole realm of demonic spirits is often simply ignored.

4. Deliverance

I define deliverance as the process of freeing a person from demonic influence and/or control. Anyone who understands the Scriptures about demons knows that very often nonbelievers need deliverance. The differing views on deliverance within the church seem to come with the question of whether or not a Christian can have a demon, thus needing deliverance.

I believe it is the right and privilege of a believer to be set free from demonic power. For a fuller understanding and teaching on the subject of deliverance see our book, [*How to Defeat Demons: An International Manual*](#).

5. Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit brings gifts to us:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12:7-12 NIV)

Some in today's church hold that not all of these gifts are for today. Others again argue that everything that

took place in the first century church is also for today's church. Regardless of which of the above gifts a believer's doctrine embraces for today, the most important thing is to realize that the Holy Spirit dwells within every believer and is waiting and wanting to take us deeper into the realms of our faith and power in Christ.

6. Healing

There are many causes of sickness and disease. These include Adam's sin which was the vehicle through which sickness entered the world. We also get sick or hurt through our own sins, the sins of others, or through a demonic attack, to name some of the reasons for sickness and disease.

Since Scripture lists healing as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9) the same two arguments exist concerning healing. However, it has been my experience that most believers understand that God, in His sovereignty, is free to heal as He chooses. Scripture also tells us to gather together the elders of the church to pray for the sick. (Jas 5:14-16) Thus, whatever our individual doctrine is on healing, we should follow Scripture and diligently pray for those who are in need of a healing.

7. Ministry Calls

Scripture lists five ministries or offices in the first century church: apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, and evangelist. (Eph 4:11) Some believe that all five of these offices exist and operate in the church today. For these Christians, the apostle operates today throughout the world planting churches. For others, the only true apostles who ever existed were the original twelve whom Jesus chose and when they died in the first century that was the end of the apostle in the New Testament sense.

Likewise, some denominations recognize the ministry call and office of the modern day prophet. For these Christians the office or ministry of the prophet is working in the church today. For others it is not. (See section 9 below.)

The office of teacher is very often just ignored by most Christians or it is mixed in with pastor so that a pastor is presumed to be the called teacher of the congregation. On a personal note, I am sure that I am a called Bible teacher and I am equally sure that I am not a called pastor although I have pastored in the past. Thus, for me, the call of the teacher is certainly a stand alone call and it is alive and well in the world today!

I believe that all true Christ centered denominations recognize at least two offices as existing and operating today, the pastor and the evangelist. The pastor shepherds the local church and the evangelist's primary call is to reach the lost with the gospel of Christ. As I have already said, for those who recognize only these two offices,

they generally just ignore the office of teacher or always combine it with the pastor's office.

8. Prophecy

Non-Pentecostal churches do not recognize modern day prophecy as it existed in the first century church or the Old Testament. They usually define preaching as today's prophecy. For these Christians the matter ends there.

Pentecostal churches embrace the belief that prophecy continues to be one of the ways God speaks to His people. In the pentecostal sense, prophecy can be defined as the word of God, usually directed at the church, about things of the Kingdom of God. Thus Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit moves on an individual to bring a specific, verbal message that they call prophecy. For these believers, there are still safeguards such as the need to judge any prophecy that comes forth to either a group or to an individual. (For a fuller explanation on prophets and prophecy, see our book entitled [Prophets and Prophecy in Today's Church.](#))

9. Prophets

As already discussed in Ministry Calls above, some in today's church believe that there have been no prophets since the first century church. For these people there is no prophecy and thus no need for the person of the prophet.

Others believe that prophets, as one of the five offices described in Scripture, exist and operate in the church today. Even among those who do believe there are prophets today, there are differing views as to whom is a prophet and what he or she does.

My own personal belief is that there are people in the body of Christ today who are prophets and who do fulfill that role even in denominations that do not recognize the office. In these settings the prophet is the person who is very conscious of right and wrong. He or she is usually the one who is talking about sin in the camp when others, including the pastor, simply do not see it as that big an issue.

(For a much more detailed discussion of both prophecy and prophets, see our book entitled [Prophets and Prophecy in Today's Church.](#))

10. Calvinism

Many denominations embrace Calvinism. John Calvin (1509-1564) was a leader in the Reformation of the church in the 16th century and was a contemporary of Martin Luther. He was a very prolific writer and wrote a multi-volume commentary on the Bible that is still, even today, one of the best selling Bible commentaries.

When Calvin focused his studies on the sovereignty of God, he concluded that God has chosen from all people certain ones which Calvin called "the elect." These

people are the recipients of the "irresistible grace of God" and God will save them. For Calvin, if someone is not a member of the elect, he or she is eternally lost.

We know this doctrinally as the *Five Points of Calvinism*.

1. The total depravity of man.
2. Unconditional election.
3. Limited atonement.
4. Irresistible grace.
5. Perseverance of the saints.

The ultimate conclusion of Calvinism is that since it is God who is choosing those to be saved, they can never become unsaved, or lost, once they are saved or born again.

11. Arminianism

Other denominations embrace Arminianism. Arminianism is a teaching of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) that evolved during the late 16th century as a reaction to the teachings of John Calvin. Arminius taught that man chooses to accept God's salvation by an act of his will, and that he can, likewise, choose to reject that salvation. He further taught that man, once saved, can become lost, or unsaved, through sin thereby rejecting the salvation he once had.

All major denominations today hold the teachings of either Calvinism or Arminianism as a tenet of faith. European churches have historically tended to be Calvinistic while American churches tend to be Arminianistic. By their nature Arminianists are more evangelistic than Calvinists since Arminianists believe man's salvation comes by his or her own choice. Calvinists are less evangelistic since they believe God is the principal agent in salvation thus making evangelism less important.

12. Water Baptism

Water baptism is an ordinance of the church. Both Jesus and the apostles taught baptism. Water baptism is universally practiced in Christian churches. It does, however, take on different forms. For those denominations that believe that water baptism is for only those who chose it, baptism is a declaration by the convert to the world that says, "I have died to the old way of life. Sin will no longer have a hold over me for my old self has been buried. I have been resurrected by the power of God to live a new life in Christ Jesus."

Concerning infant baptism, I believe that Scripture makes it quite clear that in the first century church, it was only those who received Jesus as Savior who were baptized. My research reveals that infant baptism came into the church later because well meaning parents and family were so anxious that their babies go to heaven that they had them baptized more as insurance against going to hell if the child died before being able to willfully choose

Christ. While this motive is understandable, I believe that it is far closer to Scripture to wait and be baptized as truly born-again believers.

There are many ways to water baptize someone. It can be done by complete immersion into water or it can be done by sprinkling. It is customary for the pastor to do the baptizing but I believe any Christian can baptize another. I have even heard of someone who was in a very isolated situation and literally baptized himself by immersing his body in water because there was no one around to do it for him!

Let me say again, water baptism is one of those doctrines that should not divide the body of Christ. There is awesome power in baptism, however it is done, and we all should respect each other's forms of baptism. Our love, fellowship, and acceptance of a fellow believer should not be based upon his form of baptism, or even whether or not he has undergone water baptism.

13. Communion

The Bible gives some specific instructions about communion. It is one of the two ordinances of the church (along with water baptism) which every church should practice. Yet there are many ways to experience communion. Some denominations use wine, others use juice. I was at a service recently where the celebrant offered both and each recipient could choose whether he or she wanted juice or wine. Some churches have closed communion which means you must be a member of that church to partake. Others have open communion requiring only that you be born-again to receive. There are also different doctrines as to who may administer communion.

This is yet another doctrine which is, at its core, a very sacred tenet of the Christian church and should be done with reverence and the proper appreciation of what Christ's sacrifice means to us as believers. But the different methods and models of communion should not divide God's church.

Conclusion

In part two we will conclude our examinations of different doctrines within the church by looking at sanctification, church discipline, divorce and remarriage, fasting, women in ministry, and worship. We will also have a section on the customs and traditions of various Christian churches.

I want to conclude as I started. In no sense am I saying that these nonessential doctrines are not important. They are. I am simply making the point that these doctrines should not be a point of such division within the church that we break fellowship with other believers over them. We are called on to love and be in relationship with all other true believers in Christ. That is our privilege and our responsibility as Christians. It is also one of the biggest blessings of being a Christian, and especially of being in church leadership. Some of the best times I have had in my ministry have been when I was moving in my calling while in fellowship with others, whether or not they were of my denomination or believed exactly as I did.

We must constantly honor our Lord's prayer for us:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (Joh 17:20-23 NIV)

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