

Nonessential Doctrines

By Jim and Carolyn Murphy

Part II

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In Part I of this teaching we examined thirteen doctrines which I call nonessential doctrines of our Christian faith. By nonessential, I mean those doctrines which are not absolutely foundational to Christianity. I do not mean to say that all nonessential doctrines are unimportant. Many of these doctrines are very important. The thirteen doctrines we discussed in Part I were the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, spiritual warfare, deliverance, gifts of the Holy Spirit, healing, ministry calls, prophecy, prophets, Calvinism, Arminianism, water baptism, and communion.

Different views concerning these doctrines should not divide the church. It is wrong for believers to be so divided that they do not fellowship with one another based on differing views of these nonessential doctrines.

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. Several months ago we wrote a two-part article on the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. In that article we included the foundational doctrines concerning Jesus. By that I mean Jesus as the Son of God, the virgin birth, the blood of Christ, Jesus as fully man yet sinless, His death, burial and resurrection, and His return to earth. We also examined the Trinity, salvation, and the inerrancy of Scripture.

For us to differ with our brothers and sisters in Christ on any of the other doctrines we are discussing in this two part teaching is permissible. We can differ and even differ strongly. But it should not cause a breach between us. With that said, let us continue with the discussion of nonessential doctrines.

14. Sanctification

The object of sanctification is holiness. The general doctrinal belief is that sanctification is a process through which we are made holy. The Holy Spirit is the worker. Faith, the word of God, and the blood of Jesus, are the vessels He uses. Sanctification starts the moment Jesus saves us and continues until He calls us home. Every choice in life we make that pleases God is part of the process. Every act of turning from sin and sinful thoughts is part of the process.

Others believe that we are fully sanctified the moment we are born again. If the new believer goes out and sins again, then he was not really born again, or he was born again, but became lost through his sin. Thus he needs to be born again. This belief can result in someone being born again, then lost, then born again, then lost, over and over. I do not think this belief is as strong as it was years ago. I think more and more churches are embracing the idea that sanctification is a life-long process which is the view I embrace.

15. Church Discipline

Church discipline is the doctrine which holds that the church has the authority and responsibility to discipline its members for sinful conduct. Most churches today practice some sort of church discipline. Some churches discipline in very

private ways, others tend to require more public methods, up to and including even having the whole congregation vote to discipline or even expel a person from the congregation.

Scripture mandates that, at a minimum, church leaders deal with sin among its members. Unfortunately, this is an area in which I believe that many churches today are not nearly as diligent as they should be in this aspect of Christian community.

16. Divorce and Remarriage

Today different countries have different laws dealing with divorce. In America about 50% of all current marriages will end in divorce. In the Philippines, divorce is illegal so people there don't divorce. But they do separate and many eventually find another partner, possibly live together with that new partner, and often even have children. These different national laws, as well as the changing moral standards of the world today, can cause serious problems for today's church.

Divorce was permitted in the Old Testament. Jesus told us that Moses permitted divorce because of hardness of heart. (Mat 19:8) Jesus also said that marital unfaithfulness was a reason for divorce. (Mat 5:32)

The issue of divorce has plagued the church for centuries.

Historically the church has been very strict on divorced people, forbidding them to hold church office usually citing, "A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well." (1 Tim 3:12 NIV) There are two possible interpretations of Paul's words in this verse, 1) divorce and remarriage, and 2) polygamy. I personally believe that polygamy was what Paul was referring to here since it was common in the pagan world in which he ministered.

We also encounter the problem of, "Did this person divorce and remarry before becoming a Christian?" If the answer is yes, then are we to say that the blood of Jesus is inadequate to cleanse this sin?

Each church must make its own judgment on this matter. Let me just say that I believe we are closer to the heart of Jesus when we come down on the side of mercy rather than judgment. In my pastorates I have never forbidden a divorced and remarried person who is living a godly life from holding church office.

17. Fasting

Fasting is going without (or with reduced) food and drink to deny the physical being in order to focus on spiritual matters. We usually associate fasting with a time of intense prayer. Jesus fasted during the time the devil tempted Him in the wilderness. Jesus told John the Baptist's disciples that his followers would fast after He left them. (Mat 9:14-15) I believe fasting is one of those areas that much of the church just ignores. If we don't teach our people to fast, most won't, thereby missing the enormous blessings associated with fasting. It is a mighty spiritual tool which many believers never experience.

18. Women in Ministry

There has been a strong resistance to women serving in places of ministry for centuries, and in some churches it continues today. Other churches believe that it is Jesus who calls someone to ministry and it is up to the Lord to choose whomever He decides to call. I personally believe that both men and women are called to preach the gospel in every form to accomplish the great commission. I do not want to put myself in a position of challenging the Lord as to whom He anoints as His servant and how He chooses to use that person.

19. Worship

There are many different styles of worship. Worshiping the Lord differently offends some Christians because they are set in their particular style of worship. I am comfortable with the Western style of worship. But some of the most beautiful worship services I have ever experienced have been in Africa with drums, handmade instruments and dancing! Or some of us older Christians may not like the way our young people worship, and vice versa. I think Jesus loves all kinds of worship if the heart of the worshiper is pure. We need to be tolerant of the worship styles of other believers.

Customs, Traditions, and Historical Problems for the Church

I will now address some of the customs and traditions which have caused problems within the church, sometimes for centuries. I do not regard the areas listed below as biblical doctrines because, to my mind, they don't rise to the level of doctrines. The reader may differ with me on this distinction which is fine with me. Let me just say again that whatever your position may be on the following, do not allow them to bring division between you and other Christians.

The problem is that sometimes Christians don't make a distinction between customs and traditions and what the Bible teaches. We need to be careful not to place too much importance on our customs and traditions so we allow the Holy Spirit's free reign in our own lives, our churches, our services, and our people.

1. Bible Versions

Today there are many versions of Scripture in many different languages. In the English language alone there are at least a dozen or more differing translations. Some people become very dogmatic about a particular translation, usually the King James Version.

We must understand that all current versions of the Bible are at best translations. Those who speak more than one language readily tell us that there are times when it is impossible to translate accurately what has been spoken in one language into another language. So it is with Scripture which was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

I find that there are certain verses translated in one version that I like while other verses I like better in another version. That's just my personal preference. Or maybe one version better illustrates a point I am trying to make.

When it comes to various translations, only two factors are important. One, who were the translators? Were they born-again or were they merely language scholars who set out to do a task? And two, which ancient manuscript[s] did they use? While we are certain we have nearly original Old Testament manuscripts, New Testament manuscripts are another matter. The oldest complete New Testament manuscripts date to the sixth century. A younger manuscript, called the *Textus Receptus*, appears to be slightly edited, or enhanced. This is the manuscript from which King James' scholars translated the Bible. The apparent manuscript editing is the reason some Bible scholars view the King James Bible as less than perfect. They also reason the older the manuscript, the more accurate the translation.

One last point, no one should use a Bible translated by a cult. These versions are contaminated. An example of this is the Bible produced by Jehovah's Witnesses. In English they call it *The New World Translation*. Christians should not use any Bible or literature from any cult, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

2. Church Government

Church government is the method and structure by which we operate or run a church. Every church needs some governing structure. There are three principal scriptural governing methods, 1) democratic, 2) presbyterian, and 3) episcopal. If a church is governed by the democratic method, that usually means that the members hold open meetings and vote on most or all matters involving the church. The presbyterian method is where a small group of elders or presbyters of a church decide most matters in a church but the congregation does have some say so and even votes on certain matters. The episcopal method is that system of governing whereby there is an overseer of a church or group of churches and that one person makes all the important decisions concerning every church over which he has authority.

I personally favor the presbyterian form of government, but that doesn't mean it is infallible, or even the best form. All three forms of government are biblical. I don't think it matters to God which form is used, as long as He has the final word!

3. Alcohol Use

Historically churches have frowned on the use of alcohol by its members. There is some wisdom in this policy since the possibility of alcohol abuse is ever present. And remember, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, we should be ever mindful of the need to keep ourselves pure from abusive substances including alcohol, tobacco and unnecessary drugs.

However, Scripture does not teach against alcohol use, though it does condemn drunkenness. Jesus Himself made wine at the wedding feast in John, 2. We know Jesus drank wine from His teaching on communion and the comments made about Him by the Jews.

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a

drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' (Luk 7:33-34 NIV)

Scripture declares that Jesus was without sin. Therefore we must conclude that drinking wine is not sin, **but drunkenness is a sin**. Should a denomination or church declare that it is against all alcohol use, that is a directive of the church board or leadership and it is a good policy, but it is not supported by Scripture.

4. Dancing

Some Christians believe that dancing is a sin while others do not. The basis for prohibiting dancing is that it can create or heighten lust in the dancers. But this assumes that everyone who dances is lusting. Scripture is quite clear on the fact that David danced before the Lord. (2 Sam 6:14) I myself have witnessed many people, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, dancing before the Lord. Their dance is a beautiful expression of worship. Some churches I have been in have dancers dancing during the worship services.

Again, a church or denomination may have a prohibition against dancing, and it may be a good policy, but it is not supported by Scripture.

5. Dress

I believe we should all wear appropriate clothing when we come together to worship the Lord. But what is appropriate to me may differ from someone else's opinion. Historically, many have tried to settle this matter by requiring certain clothing for worship services. For example, women must have their arms covered or cannot wear pants of any kind in church. However, this can become a religious bondage. And what about the person who wishes to come to church but doesn't have the required clothing? Often they stay away. I believe that the only clothing restriction for both men and women found in Scripture is a ban on immodest clothing.

6. Women's Jewelry

Peter commented that women's beauty should not be from jewelry. (1 Pet 3:3) Some have taken that to mean that women should not wear any jewelry. But Peter went on to say that their beauty should be rather from the inner self and the unfading beauty of a quiet spirit. (v 4) Thus it is only in the most narrow reading of this Scripture that someone can justify the custom that women are to wear no jewelry at all.

7. Women's Hair

Historically some churches have prohibited women from cutting their hair based on Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians, 11. Such churches may also insist that women wear a covering or hat of some sort in church. This teaching is based on the belief that if a woman does not wear a covering, or if she does not have long hair, she is dishonoring Jesus. But, as with the jewelry, that isn't what Paul taught. He said that the woman dishonored her *spiritual head*, that is, her husband. This was obviously cultural, for few men today feel personally dishonored when their wives cut their hair or they don't wear a hat in

church!

8. Falling Down

In many altar ministry services today it is quite common to see people fall down, presumably under the power of the Lord. The practice is so common in some churches that "catchers" stand behind each person as the minister prays for them.

I believe that being unable to stand in the presence of the Lord is valid and biblical. We see in Ezekiel that he fell facedown before the Lord's glory several times. (See as examples, Ez 1:28, and 3:23.) John fell at the Lord's feet as though dead. (Rev 1:17) When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus they all fell backwards to the ground. (Jn 18:6)

The only problem I have with people falling down is when some ministers actually push them. This is wrong. If the power of God is present, let Him do as He wills. Whether people stand or fall is not important.

9. Laughter

Recently in many churches all over the world, there has been holy laughter in worship services. Many disapprove of this practice as carnal, distracting to others, or say it is of the devil.

A careful study of revivals of the past two centuries reveals that this type of laughter has been quite common as the revivals spread. The most logical explanation is that deeply felt joy in the Lord gives birth to such laughter.

I have witnessed this laughter many times and fully believe it is a legitimate byproduct of the presence of the Lord. I personally know people who have experienced this holy laughter and testify that it was a life-changing experience for them. Of course, occasionally someone may laugh more from fleshly motivation but these examples do not negate all Holy Spirit inspired laughter.

10. Music

Today's church encompasses a wide variety of music ranging from the quiet, traditional hymns all the way to loud, Christian rock. The hymns turn off some people while the Christian rock deeply offends others. Usually it is the older Christians who like the traditional music and it is the younger people who like the more lively contemporary music.

I have traveled over much of the world and have been in hundreds of church services of many varieties. I have learned to worship the Lord despite the style, or volume, of music. Remember, we all believe that Jesus' favorite music is the same as our own!

11. Musical Instruments

A small minority of Christians today believe that since the New Testament does not mention musical instruments in worship, there should be no musical instruments in our churches. They believe that only the voices of people are true worship.

For others, the use of certain instruments such as guitars and saxophones in worship services is offensive. I don't

believe the Bible restricts any musical instrument from being used in worship to the Lord. A reading of Psalm 150 lays out a call to worship that must have been loud and with many different instruments!

12. Polygamy

In some parts of the world polygamy is still practiced, that is, a man having more than one wife as part of his household. In my travels I have been asked by pastors what I think a church should do when a polygamist becomes a Christian. I believe when a person comes to Christ and he (presently) has more than one wife, you are to receive him as an equal brother in the Lord. You are to look upon his wives and children as equal brothers and sisters in the church. Their status in the church is that of a church member (assuming each has been born-again) with all rights and privileges that church membership offers. They may partake of the communion and baptism.

However, he cannot take any more wives after he becomes a Christian. Nor can he or any of his wives hold any office in the church. (1 Tim 3:2,12, Tit 1:6) But, this does not prevent them from serving in other areas, such as music, or a Sunday school teacher.

The blood of Jesus cleanses all sins/wrongs a man commits before he becomes a Christian. Often there are deep social consequences of past acts that cannot be easily corrected. Polygamy is one such case. Billy Graham states it wisely, "You can't unscramble eggs!"

I know that in the past missionaries have insisted that a man with multiple wives put away all but his first wife. This is wrong! Who is going to care for the rejected wife or wives? Who is going to house and feed her and her children? What will the unbelieving world think of our Jesus when they view the church as destroying a man's household?

13. Worship Day

The traditional Christian worship day is the day Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the week, or Sunday. However, some believe that the Bible teaches Sabbath day worship which is on Saturday. Both positions have a valid biblical basis. Neither group should look down on the other

since we are brothers in Christ.

CONCLUSION

I trust that this overview of the differences between essential doctrines and nonessential doctrines has been helpful. It is so critical to the Great Commission that all believers stand side by side in love and fellowship in the harvest fields. And I am absolutely sure that this pleases the heart of God.

Just last week we attended a very powerful prayer meeting here in San Diego. Once a month a group of pastors and members of their congregations get together to pray for our city. These pastors and churches are from several different denominations and speak two languages, English and Spanish, so we had interpreters for those who spoke only one language.

These pastors and churches are mature enough to put aside their differences on the nonessential doctrines of our faith. It is enough to know that every person there was and is absolutely committed to Christ and to each other. You see, these pastors understand that we are called together for a higher purpose - reaching San Diego for Christ. The presence of the Lord, the anointing, and the spiritual power to defeat our enemy was there at that prayer meeting. I am absolutely sure that it was a significant gathering in the spirit realm. And the key was the unity among the brothers and sisters. As long as demonic darkness and our own critical spirits keep us divided over nonessential doctrines, that kind of prayer meeting could never happen.

So let me encourage you to make every effort to get to know your fellow pastors and church leaders in your area. Meet them and pray with them. There is so much power in that. Remember Psalm 133:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. (NIV)

HUNDREDFOLD MINISTRIES, INTERNATIONAL

P. O. Box 625
Blue Jay, CA 92317

Telephone 909/336-9701

E-mail: jim.murphy@hundredfold.org Web site: www.hundredfold.org

Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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