

What Parts of Christianity are “Non-Essential”?

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It is very common for professing Christians to draw a distinction between *essentials* and *non-essentials* in religion, and to infer that, if any fact or doctrine rightly belongs to *non-essentials*, it must be a matter of very little importance, and may in practice be safely set aside. The majority of men take their opinions on trust; they will not undergo the toil of thinking, searching, and reasoning about anything, and one of the most usual expedients adopted to save them the trouble of inquiry, and to turn aside the force of any disagreeable fact, is to meet it by saying, “The matter is not essential to salvation; therefore, we need give ourselves little concern on the subject.”

If the distinction here specified is safe, the inference drawn from it is certainly dangerous. To say that because a fact of Divine revelation is not essential to salvation, it must of necessity be unimportant, and may or may not be received by us, is to assert a principle, the application of which would make havoc of our Christianity. *For what are the truths essential to salvation?* Are they not these: That there is a God; that all men are sinners; that the Son of God died upon the cross to make atonement for the guilty; and that whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved? There is good reason for believing that not a few souls are now in happiness, who in life knew little more than these—the first principles of the oracles of God—the very alphabet of the Christian system; and if so, no other Divine truths can be counted absolutely essential to salvation. ***But if all the other truths of revelation are unimportant, because they happen to be non-essentials, it follows that the Word of God itself is on the whole unimportant;*** for by far the greatest portion of it is occupied with matters, the knowledge of which, in the case supposed, is not absolutely indispensable to the everlasting happiness of men. Nor does it alter the case, if we regard the number of fundamental truths to be much greater. Let a man once persuade himself that importance attaches only to what he is pleased to call essentials, whatever their number, and he will, no doubt, shorten his creed and cut away the foundation of many controversies; but *he will practically set aside all except a very small part of the Scriptures. If such a principle does not mutilate the Bible, it stigmatizes much of it as trivial.* Revelation is all gold for preciousness and purity, but the very touch of such a principle would transform most of it into dross (worthlessness).

Though every statement in the Scripture cannot be regarded as absolutely essential to salvation, yet everything there is essential to some otherwise and important end, else it would not find a place in the good Word of God. Human wisdom may be baffled in attempting to specify the design of every truth that forms a component part of Divine revelation, but eternity will show us that no portion of it is useless. All Scripture is profitable. A fact written therein may not be essential to human salvation, and yet it may be highly conducive to some other great and gracious purpose in the economy of God—it may be necessary for our personal comfort, for our guidance in life, or for our growth in holiness, and most certainly it is essential to the completeness of the system of Divine truth. The law of the Lord is perfect. ***Strike out of the Bible the***

¹ This essay is based on excerpts, with updated English, from Thomas Witherow’s *The Apostolic Church*, which first appeared in 1856. Thomas Witherow (1824-1890) was a pastor in Northern Ireland and Professor of Church History in Londonberry.

truth that seems the most insignificant of all, and the law of the Lord would not be perfect any more. In architecture, the pinning that fills a crevice in the wall occupies a subordinate position, in comparison with the quoin (cornerstone or keystone); but the builder lets us know that the one has an important purpose to serve as well as the other, and does its part to promote the stability and completeness of the house. In shipbuilding, the screws and bolts that gird the ship together are insignificant, as compared with the beams of oak and masts of pine, but they contribute their full share to the safety of the vessel and the security of the passenger. ***So in the Christian system, every fact, great or small, that God has been pleased to insert in the Bible is, by its very position, invested with importance, answers its end, and, though perhaps justly considered as non-essential to salvation, does not deserve to be accounted worthless.***

Every Divine truth is important, though it may be that all Divine truths are not of equal importance. The simplest statement of the Bible is a matter of more concern to an immortal being (never-dying soul) than the most sublime (impressive) sentiment of mere human genius. The one carries with it what the other cannot show—the stamp of the approval of God. The one comes to us from Heaven, the other savors of the Earth. The one has for us a special interest, as forming a constituent portion of that Word which is a message from God to each individual man; the other is the production of a mind merely human, to which we and all our interests were alike unknown. Any truth merely human should weigh with us light as a feather in comparison with the most insignificant of the truths of God. The faith of a Christian should strive to reach and grasp everything that God has honored with a place in that Word, the design of which is to be a light to our feet as we thread our way through this dark world. Besides, this, unlike every other book, is not doomed to perish. Heaven and Earth may pass away, but the words of Christ shall not pass away. The seal of eternity is stamped on every verse of the Bible. This fact is enough of itself to make every line of it important.

There is only Truth. Every passage of Scripture only has one true meaning; although it may have a number of valid applications, there is only one true interpretation. The Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice, cannot approve of all; for, as the Word of God never contradicts itself, it cannot sanction contradictory systems. One view must be more in accordance with the will of God, as expressed in the Scriptures, than all other views; and to know which of them is so, should be a subject of deep interest to every child of God. A Christian, of all men, is bound to be a lover of truth. If a man, after he sees the difference, can hold what he knows to be merely human in the same estimation with what he knows to be Divine, let him bid farewell to his Christianity, and cease to pretend that he cherishes any attachment to the truth. The religion of the Lord Jesus, except we mistake its spirit far, binds all who receive it to prefer the true to the false, the right to the wrong, the good to the evil; and for us to be tempted by any consideration to hold them in equal reverence and render them equal support, is to fling one of the first requirements of Christianity from us.

Sadly, the bulk of mankind are not intellectual enough to search for principles and weigh them. At least, they do not take the trouble, but are influenced in their choice, either by the authority of some great man, or the moral worth of some particular persons, or the piety and eloquence of some local minister—or perhaps by paltry pique, or petty gain, or

love of the rank, or fashion of the world, or by some other equally low and vulgar consideration.

The Bible furnishes us with peculiar facilities for forming an opinion on any point of controversy or debate. It tells us of a church that was organized in the world two thousand years ago. The founders of that church were Apostles and Prophets, acting by the authority of God. *Every fact known with certainty about the original constitution of the church is preserved in the Bible; everything preserved elsewhere is only hearsay and tradition. We read in Scripture very many facts that enable us to know with tolerable accuracy the history, doctrine (teachings), worship, and government of that church which existed in apostolic days* (i.e., the days of the Apostles). The principles of government, worship, and doctrine set up in a church that was founded by inspired men must have had, we are sure, the approval of God. Corruptions in government, in worship, and in doctrine, sprang up at a very early period, but the church in apostolic days was purer than it ever has been in subsequent times.

The most obvious method, therefore, of arriving at the truth is to compare our modern beliefs and practices with the model presented in the Holy Scriptures.

That which bears the closest resemblance to the Divine original is most likely itself to be Divine (i.e., of God).