

Fundamentals and Secondary Issues

By William MacDonald

There are certain doctrines of the Christian faith which are absolutely fundamental. They are of first importance. As far as they are concerned, there can be no difference of opinion. Believers must be united on these great truths.

What Are the Fundamentals?

When we speak of the fundamentals, we are referring to the following:

The Inspiration of the Scriptures. The Bible is the Word of God.

The trinity. There Is one God, existing eternally In three Persons.

The deity of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ is God.

The Incarnation. Jesus is also perfect Man.

His substitutionary death on Calvary, His burial, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

The gospel. Salvation by grace, through faith, and apart from works.

The second advent. Christ is coming again. Though not all agree on the details of His return, the fact itself is a basic tenet of the faith.

The eternal punishment of the lost.

Now these doctrines are not negotiable—We are to earnestly contend for them. They are clearly taught in the Scriptures. They have been held by the evangelical, orthodox church down through the centuries. Conflicting views have been labeled heresies. Believers have been willing to die for these precious truths. We cannot have fellowship with those who deny the fundamentals.

Important Even though Not Fundamental

Richard Baxter's well-known formula is an oversimplification. He said:

In fundamentals, unity.

In secondary matters, liberty.

In all things, charity (or love).

This might create the impression that anything that is not fundamental is nonessential or unimportant. However, there is another classification that fits between these two -- subjects that are not fundamental but are nonetheless important. Jesus implied such a distinction when He said to the Pharisees, "...ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith (**Matt. 23:23**). In other words, some parts of the law are "weightier" than others. But Jesus also reminded them that even the less weighty matters of the law require obedience: "...these ought ye to have done and not to leave the other undone."

So, In the New Testament, there are matters which are not fundamental but which require obedience. These are matters on which the Bible speaks. Some of them are described as commandments of the Lord (**I Cor. 14:37**). We must not call them nonessentials or treat them as such.

These subjects include baptism; divorce and remarriage; the outline of prophecy; women's head covering; women's public ministry in the church; the gifts of the Spirit; and the topics covered by the five points of Calvinism.

The problem is that Christians hold differing views on these matters. While there is only one right interpretation, believers do not agree as to what that interpretation is. Great and godly men do not see eye to eye. Let us look at some of these issues on which the Bible gives instruction and which are important, even though they have never been regarded as fundamentals of the faith.

Baptism

For those who practice believer's baptism by immersion, it is easy to forget that many Christians hold very different views on the meaning and mode of baptism. Paul said, "There is...one baptism" (**Eph. 4:4-5**) but the many differences in Christendom today seem to deny it. The subject is important and every assembly should adopt a position that is consistent with all that the Bible teaches.

Divorce and Remarriage

Some say, "No divorce -- PERIOD!" Some say, "Divorce, but no remarriage." Others say, "Divorce for unfaithfulness but no remarriage." Still others say, "Divorce for unfaithfulness with freedom for the innocent party to remarry." Some say, "Divorce for desertion." There is no end to the different views. And it is doubtful that there will ever be unanimity.

Sooner or later, every local assembly must adopt a position on the subject in the fear of God, and adhere to that position. Individuals may hold other interpretations, but they must not press their views publicly or privately so as to cause division.

It should be added that even after an assembly adopts a position, the elders will still have to consider each case individually. Such

complex situations arise today in the marriage relationship that no stated policy will cover every case.

The Outline of Prophecy

Some believers are premillennial, others postmillennial, and still other amillennial. Even among premillennialists, there are three major views: the pretribulation rapture, mid-tribulation rapture, and post-tribulation rapture. There are problems connected with every position. A person can hold any of these views and still be a good Christian.

It is proper that everyone knows what he believes and rejoices in it. But it is also proper that we remember there are godly, sincere believers who hold other views. These honest differences should not prevent us from breaking bread together. On the other hand, those who hold alternate views should respect the prophetic stance of an assembly, and not push their views, thereby causing dissension. When someone insists that everyone must agree with his minority view, there is bound to be trouble.

Women's Head Covering

On the one side are those who hold that Paul's instructions were just for the culture in which he lived. Others insist that they are the commandments of the Lord, that Paul bases them on the order and purpose of creation, and that they are "because of the angels," therefore, for all time. Questions arise whether the head covering is just for meetings of the church (and, if so, what is a meeting of the church?), what constitutes a proper covering, etc.?

If the elders of an assembly do not adopt a policy on the subject, there is bound to be confusion. They owe it to the saints to state clearly what they believe the Scriptures teach.

Women's Ministry

When may a woman sing or speak in a meeting of the church? The answers given today are too numerous to list. With a sincere desire to obey the Scriptures as closely as possible, elders should adopt a clear, united position. These prayerful conclusions become the policy of the assembly.

The Sign Gifts

Another issue that holds the potential for trouble is the charismatic question. Tongues, healing, and prophecy seem to be the gifts around which most controversy has swirled. The differing viewpoints, even among charismatics themselves, are legion.

We can and must love Christians who disagree with us, but we must not allow the issue to cause division. Therefore, an assembly must decide what the Bible really teaches on this score. The elders have both a right and a responsibility to deal firmly with any who insist on teaching views that conflict and threaten the peace of the assembly.

Five-Point Calvinism

A five-point Calvinist believes in man's total depravity; God's unconditional election; limited atonement (i.e., only for the elect); irresistible grace; and the perseverance of the saints.' There are those who disagree. On the third point, for example, they insist that Christ's atonement was for all in its sufficiency and availability. Others insist that extreme Calvinism rules out man's free will.

Spiritually minded, soul-winning Christians are found on both sides of the issue. The fireworks begin when someone insists on pushing his own view where it is not welcome, or when he harps on one subject as if it were the only doctrine in the Bible. When silenced, he often leaves the assembly and influences others to leave with him.

The path of wisdom is to enjoy privately one's convictions on the subject but not to force them as if they represented the whole truth.

On all these subjects which are important though not fundamental, an assembly, under its leaders, should adopt a clearly stated position. This should be done after careful study and research, after much prayer and with a sincere desire to adhere as closely as possible to the Scriptures. If an assembly adopts a position that is not Scriptural, it is conceivable that some believers will want to withdraw. If so, they should do so graciously, and without seeking to draw others away with them.

Non-essential Issues

In addition to the first class of subjects (fundamentals) and the second class (important because taught in Scripture) there is a third class that can be clearly labeled as nonessential. When it comes to these matters, there will always be differing viewpoints, and there must be liberty to disagree without causing strife or division. Here the second line of Baxter's formula applies:

In secondary matters, liberty.

Among the non-essential issues are some on which the New Testament does not legislate specifically but which some people feel embody important principles: wine vs. grape juice at the Lord's Supper; one cup vs. individual cups; and the use of musical instruments.

There are other matters that are largely a matter of usage or tradition, such as the use of "Thou" and "Thee" in addressing God.

At least one question must be decided on its own merits, that is, the whole dispute as to the "best" Bible version.

Finally, there are matters of moral indifference. These include foods, drinks, and observance of days. They are nonessentials.

Now let us look at these various non-essential subjects and see how an assembly can handle them without conflict and division.

Wine vs. Grape Juice at the Lord's Supper

Let's face it! There are valid arguments on both sides. There is no question that when the Lord instituted the Supper, He used fermented wine and unleavened bread (grape juice did not come in until Pasteur developed pasteurization). But wine stumbles people who have a problem with alcohol, and we should never do anything that stumbles others (**I Cor. 8:13**). Also, there are many places in the world where wine is not available. After all, it is not the bread and wine that are important. We must get beyond them to the Lord Himself.

One Cup vs. Individual Cups

Again, there are two sides to the matter. On the one hand, one cup symbolizes the unity of the body of Christ. But as an assembly grows, it is not uncommon to use two, three, or even four cups. If four are valid, why not forty? The argument for individual cups rests largely on the danger of spreading disease through the common cup since wine does not have sufficient alcoholic content to kill germs. In any event, this is not a matter of fundamental importance. Rather it provides an opportunity to show love and consideration to those who disagree with us.

Use of Musical Instruments

Here again there must be liberty for an assembly to adopt its own policy. No major creed has ever considered instrumental accompaniment as a fundamental of the faith. We could paraphrase Paul's words without doing violence to them: "For in Christ Jesus neither does an organ avail anything nor the absence of an organ, but a new creation" (see **Gal. 6:15**).

Times of Meetings

Clearly the Lord has left the decision to the local assembly or its leaders. Sometimes changes must be made, depending on local circumstances. The best time for reaching the unsaved in one locality may not be the best time in another. Traditional times are not sacred. We must be ready to make changes, when they are indicated.

Thou vs. You

Many older Christians prefer to address God as "Thou" and "Thee" out of a sense of reverence. Younger believers prefer to use "You" out of a sense of intimacy but without any lack of reverence. It is not a Biblical problem. In the original language of the New Testament, there is no distinction between a formal "you" and a familiar one. But when the King James Version was published, people addressed one another as "thou" (singular) and "ye" (plural). Thus, Jesus is quoted in the King James Version as saying to Judas, "Betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" -- certainly not the language of reverence.

What it boils down to is this: any assembly should be big enough to allow for both usages without creating a threatening atmosphere or driving people away.

Bible Versions

Considerable heat has been generated over this issue as a result of the proliferation of versions in recent years. Some believers sincerely believe that the truth of God is at stake. Others point out that the differences among the reputable versions are minor and do not affect any of the doctrines of the faith. As much as we might love any English version, we cannot insist that it is the only right one, because then none of the foreign language versions would be right.

Individual Christians should be allowed to have their favorite version. When speaking publicly, a person should announce the name of the one from which he is reading if it is not the one in common use. This is a simple courtesy.

Food, Drinks, and Days

There are matters of moral indifference. These are actions that are neither right nor wrong in themselves. As mentioned above, they include foods, drinks, and observance of days. It is about these non-essential matters that Paul writes:

"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind" (**Rom. 14:5b**). He would not have said this about a fundamental of the faith; but in matters of moral indifference, there is liberty for everyone to be fully convinced in his own mind.

"All things are lawful unto me" (**I Cor. 6:12; 10:23**). This can only refer to areas or activities not prohibited by God's Word, areas such as food and drink.

"All things Indeed are pure" (**Rom. 14:20b**). "Unto the pure all things are pure" (**Tit. 1:15**). This cannot mean all things absolutely, but all things that are neither right nor wrong in themselves.

"I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself" (**Rom. 14:14a**). The subject is foods. Under

the Old Testament economy, certain foods were unclean. Under grace this distinction between clean and unclean no longer holds (**Mark 7:19** NASB).

It should be clear that in these passages Paul is dealing with matters that are non-essential. He allows a difference of opinion among God's people, and yet it is often over these inconsequential matters that serious splits occur. We must learn to distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral.

Conclusion

Let us now summarize. Concerning the fundamentals, there must be unanimity in any Christian assembly.

Concerning matters that are Scripturally important, even though not fundamental, each assembly should adopt a position in the fear of God. Any contrary teaching, either public or private, that would create strife or division should not be allowed. If a person disagrees with the assembly position and feels he must leave out of faithfulness to the Lord, he should do so quietly and peaceably. Without seeking to draw others away with him.

Concerning the non-essential matters we have listed, there has to be a certain amount of give and take for the sake of unity and peace (**Eph. 4:1-6**). We may have strong convictions in these areas, but we must recognize that there are Christ-like souls who do not agree with us. Because of this, we should avoid excessive dogmatism. Cromwell said, "I beseech you by the tender mercies of Christ to conceive it possible that you may be mistaken." When someone tried to nit-pick with Dr. Ironside on some nonessential matter, he would say, "Well, brother, when we get to heaven, one of us is going to be wrong--and perhaps it will be me." The fire invariably went out, because Dr. Ironside did not add fuel to it (**Prov. 26:20**).

Leaving an assembly over a non-essential matter is never the ideal. There can be fellowship without total agreement on these topics. Where there is love and brokenness, prayer and patience, humility and forbearance, differences can be settled amicably. Believers can disagree without being disagreeable.

In all the topics we have discussed, an assembly should adopt a definite stance or policy. Failure to do so results in confusion. Believers generally want guidelines to follow. When the leadership adopts a position after much waiting on God, there is a sense in which their decision is ratified in heaven (cf. **Matt. 16:19; 18:18**), provided it does not violate any **Scriptural precept or principle**.

The only times when it is better to leave is when a person is convinced that in staying he is being unfaithful to the Lord or unable to remain without disturbing the peace of the assembly. Even then the third line of Baxter's timeless formula applies--in everything, love.