

Essential Doctrines

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A list of the key elements of Christianity

What are the essential doctrines of the Christian faith? There are differences of opinion throughout the history of the church on this issue. For example, you might find a different group of doctrines at different times from the Catholic Church than you might from a Protestant church. As a matter of fact, as I understand it, believing in the primacy of the Catholic Church was an essential doctrine at one time. Now, not only need you not believe in that, but you don't even need to believe in any of these six doctrines I'll list to go to heaven now according to Catholic doctrine. I'm just making the observation that there are differences of opinion about what is an essential doctrine. I'll give you what I believe are the essential doctrines, and I will give you the verses that I believe support them.

The first one is that you must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him in order to please God (Hebrews 11). But of course, it is clear that it is not enough to believe just in God and leave it at that because the First Commandment condemns those who have other gods before them other than the true God. So the first essential doctrine is that you must believe in God as He is in Himself. You must have an accurate picture about the fundamental nature of God. I think that entails the Trinity. You cannot deny the nature of God, the God of the Scripture, and still call yourself a Christian. In John 4:24 Jesus says, "God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." **Must**. Exodus 20:2,3 says, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

The God of the Bible is a triune God, one God in three Persons. Jesus seems to hint at the necessity of that in John 8 when he says, "Unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins." He might have meant, You must believe that I am He (i.e. the Messiah), but it looks like it was probably a reference to His deity because later on He uses the same language and makes a very clear reference to His deity when he says, "Before Abraham was, I Am." You must believe in God as He is in Himself and He is a Trinity.

Secondly, you have to believe in Jesus as He is in Himself. That entails believing in the deity of Christ and His full humanity. One reason that I can say this is because the Scripture makes distinctions between another Jesus and the true Jesus. It does this in 2 Corinthians, and I believe Galatians does as well. There are at least two places that warn against another Jesus. Galatians refers to another gospel.

So there is Jesus and then there is another Jesus. The Jesus who is an incarnation of the angel Michael is not the Jesus of the Scriptures, but the Jesus of the Watchtower Society. The Jesus who is the spirit brother of Lucifer is not the Jesus of the Scriptures and of salvation, but it is the Jesus of Mormonism. The Jesus who is a Hindu guru is not the Jesus of the Scriptures, but the Jesus of the New Age movement. You cannot believe in these other Jesuses and be saved because you believe in someone who can't save you.

There is an issue of general theology in the Trinity and an issue of Christology.

Third, you must also believe the bodily resurrection. Paul makes the comment in I Corinthians 15, "If the dead are not raised and Christ is in the grave, our faith is worthless. We are still in our sins and those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." Romans 10:9 says very clearly, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved."

Those are the usual five you get on a list: the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Christ, the bodily resurrection, salvation by grace through faith.

What is the resurrection that is referred to here? It is the bodily resurrection, not a spiritual resurrection because a spiritual resurrection is not a resurrection. In a spiritual resurrection nothing is resurrected. A resurrection is when something is revived, resuscitated, re-surrected. It is done again. The body that was once dead is now alive. It may be that the body has some qualities that are changed, but the original body is the body that is raised. That's the bodily resurrection. When you say a spiritual resurrection, the spiritual resurrection is not a resurrection. Only a bodily resurrection is a real resurrection.

Fourth, you must believe in man's fallenness and culpability. This follows from the gospel message. Romans 6:23 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Frankly, the issue of salvation is that you get forgiven because you've sinned. If you say you haven't sinned and man has no sin and hasn't fallen, 1 John 1 says that you've called God a liar and you are still in your sins. Man is guilty. He may not even **feel** guilty of certain things, but guilt is not a feeling. Guilt is a judicial reality. If we say that we have not sinned, then the truth is not in us and we call God a liar. Romans 11:32 says, "God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all." Because of the gospel message, if you don't acknowledge the bad news, you can't make use of the good news. The bad news is that we have sinned and are guilty before God.

Fifth, salvation is by grace through faith. You must believe in the substitutionary atonement. Romans 11:6 says, "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works otherwise grace is no longer grace." "This is the work that we are to do, believe in Him whom He has sent," Jesus says in John 6. We are saved by grace through faith in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. There are quite a number of verses that make the point that Jesus is the only way. This is probably the best substantiated of all of these.

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Sometimes people add the Scriptures. You've got to believe that the Bible is inspired. That is not essential doctrine, although I would consider the authority of Scripture is a functional necessity because without it none of the other truth could be affirmed or asserted with confidence. Once you get rid of the authority of Scripture, the other ones fall one by one like dominoes. I've added man's fallenness and culpability because it seems to be a necessary qualifier for the gospel, although most don't include that on other lists.

I will tell you another essential doctrine that the Scripture makes very, very clear that I have never seen included on a list. You must believe that Jesus is the Messiah. If you repudiate such a notion, you cannot be saved. By the way, whenever the word "Christ" appears in the New Testament, that is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *meshiach*. Christ is the Greek for Messiah. When the Bible says "Jesus the Christ" it means Jesus the Messiah. Whenever it says Jesus Christ--by the way, Christ isn't Jesus' last name, that's His title--it means Messiah. 1 John 2:22 says, "Who is the liar, but the one who denies that Jesus is the Messiah? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father, the one who confesses the Son has the Father." That's pretty clear. 1 John 4:2 says, "By this you know the Spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Messiah has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of antichrist." 2 John 7 says, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world. Those who do not acknowledge Jesus Messiah as coming in the flesh, this is the deceiver and the antichrist."

The Scripture has no kind words for people who repudiate the Messiahship of Christ. A very strong conclusion can be drawn from this. The New Testament teaches that Jews who repudiate Jesus as the Messiah do not ultimately have a love for the Father. That is not my opinion. That is the opinion of the Apostle John, and it is also the opinion of Jesus Christ. "You have rejected Me because the love of the Father is not in you." Those are strong words.

Someone could say, How can you say that about Jews? You don't know all the Jews. No, I don't. God does. This is not my opinion. To be honest with you, I don't personally like this particular teaching. If it were up to me, I would change it. But it's not up to me. It is not my opinion. I don't like it, but there it is. It is God's opinion. And if we are people who hold the Bible to be revelatory on the issue of salvation, then we cannot at the same time be people who acknowledge that nice people who are Jewish but reject Jesus as Messiah find their way into heaven. That is not in the Bible. If we say that, we are saying something that is contrary to the biblical teaching. The Bible makes it clear that an essential doctrine is a belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

The six essential doctrines would be: the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Christ, the bodily resurrection, man's fallenness and guilt, salvation by grace through faith by the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, and belief that Jesus is the Messiah. And you have a seventh doctrine that strikes me as a functional necessity, that is the ultimate authority of Scripture without which none of the other truths can be affirmed or asserted with confidence.

By the way, it's really important that people know these doctrines because many Christians are quite kind-hearted and they end up not being very careful about drawing distinctions between truth and falsity because they don't want to

disagree. I understand that. But if you were really kind-hearted then you would be honest and straight-forward with people about the demands of the gospel on their lives. The demand of the gospel is that you believe particular things to be true. It's not just a matter of mere belief, as if these are just some incidental details of theology that you might happen to be mistaken about. And if you just happen to be mistaken, why should you go to hell because of that?

You don't go to hell because you just happen to mistake a doctrine. You go to hell because you have broken God's law. It is very critical to understand that. God only judges guilty people. People get judged by God not because they mess up on their theology but because they are guilty. People who are guilty get condemned. That's it. There is a way to get around that but you've to know a couple of particular things that are true before you can take advantage of the forgiveness God offers. That's where the essential doctrines come in.
