

## **How Do You Know if a Doctrine is Essential? Three Criteria**

~ C Michael Patton ~

“In Essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.” These are the words of obscure reformer Rupertus Meldenius (often wrongly attributed to others). They form somewhat of an Evangelical credo. Evangelicals have traditionally believed that there are certain doctrines that form the core of the Christian faith. They are called “cardinal doctrines.” They are what we might call the *sine quo non*—the “without which, not”—of the Christian faith. In other words, there are certain doctrines that when denied, by definition, evidence a person does not have the basic core beliefs that must be present in the truly regenerate.

Included in this credo is the belief that there are certain doctrines that are “non-essential” or non-cardinal. These are those that, while important to varying degrees, are not damnable in the proper sense. About these doctrines there can be legitimate disagreement within Christianity. We are to have liberty with regard to such doctrines. This means that we are not to properly or formally divide over them. We are to have grace.

This all sounds really nice. I have heard this touted from the Evangelical mountain-tops for quite some time. The difficulty always comes when we begin to discuss one key question: What are the essentials? Who decides? The Pope? Your local church pastor? The SBC? My private interpretation of the Scripture? Alas, with such a question, the divisions start all over.

In essentials, unity. Sounds nice, but impractical. Right?

I don’t think we have to be so pessimistic about this. I actually think that there are certain criteria that most thoughtful people can agree constitutes the foundation of our faith—the essentials. I have them narrowed to three in no certain order. It is important to note that I am persuaded that all three must be present for a doctrine to be considered essential.

### **1. Historicity: Does the doctrine have universal historical representation?**

This first criteria is one of historical agreement. This is a form of “consensual faith” (*consensus fidelium*). This criteria of universal consensus follows the canon of Saint Vincent of Lérins (died c. 445): *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*, “that which was believed everywhere, always, by everyone.” In other words, an essential cannot be something new like the doctrine of the Rapture. Neither can it be something that has lacked historic unity by Christians across time like the perpetual virginity of Mary. As well, it cannot have limited geographic representation, like certain Eastern liturgy. The question here is Have all Christians of all time everywhere believed it?

### **2. Clarity (Perspicuity): Is the doctrine represented clearly in Scripture?**

One of the principles that the Reformers sought to communicate is that of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. The Reformers did not believe that all of the Scripture was clear (a misunderstanding of the doctrine of perspicuity), but that *all that is essential for salvation* is clear. In short, if something in Scripture is obscure, then it is not essential. Augustine even held to such a principle stating that one must not build doctrines on obscure passages (*On Christian*

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*Doctrine*). For example, one should not build essential doctrine on what the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 16:19) are or what it means to be “baptized for the dead” (1 Cor. 15:29). Unfortunately, both the Catholics and the Mormons have done just that. If a passage is obscure, no essential doctrine can be derived from it.

### **3. Explicitly: Does the passage of Scripture explicitly teach that a certain doctrine is essential?**

The Scriptures speak about a great many things, but they are often explicit with regards to that which is of essential importance. For example, Paul says to the Corinthians, “For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4; emphasis mine). The “of first importance” tells us that Christ’s death and resurrection “for our sins,” from Paul’s perspective, is an essential component of Christianity. Without such, according to Paul, there is no Christianity (1 Cor. 15:12ff). As well, the Gospel of John speaks about the importance of faith. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18).

Again, these three criteria I propose must *all* be present. If one or more is lacking concerning a particular doctrine, I believe that it is not possible for one to legitimately argue for its core essentiality. As well, all three feed off each other and are somewhat self-regulating. In other words, if someone doubts whether something is clear in Scripture, all he or she has to do is look to history. If something is not clear in the Scripture, it will not find that it passes the test of historicity. This is why it is of vital importance that Christians not only be good exegetes, but also good historians.