

## #12 “The Extremely Dangerous Fallacy of Partitioning the Bible into Essentials and Non-essentials”

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There is a famous quote that floats around Christian circles and has untold influence upon church philosophy and practice. I dare say that many times we give this quote more credibility than the Bible in terms of shaping our approach to ministry and the proclamation of the Word. Let me explain. The quote reads, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity." Though the original meaning is somewhat unclear, the quote has almost universally been taken to mean a partitioning of the Scripture into two distinct categories, "essentials" and "nonessentials." The "essentials" are the things that all Christians must agree upon. To disagree with an essential doctrine would be to imply that one is not saved or part of the Christian faith at all. The essential doctrines would include the inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the sacrificial death of Christ and atonement for sin, original sin, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone. The "nonessentials" are any doctrine that a Christian might hold outside of what is required for saving faith. Thus, anything that does not deal directly with the person and deity of Christ or with the gospel message can be considered a "nonessential" or peripheral issue, according to this philosophy. A "nonessential" doctrine, for example, might include things such as how one interprets the creation account, what position one takes on roles in marriage, where one stands on predestination and free will, what someone believes about speaking in tongues, and how one makes decisions in matters pertaining to Christian morality and conscience. There are many, many important truths contained in the Scriptures, yet according to this philosophy of partitioning, if they are not directly pertaining to salvation or the deity of Christ, we can label them as unnecessary. The "advantage" in this, according to this philosophy, is that it should keep Christians from experiencing conflict, division, and controversy over difficult matters of Christian doctrine. The goal, they say, is to keep it simple and make the gospel the major issue. If only we major on the major issues, in other words, then we can disregard, minimize, and just tolerate our differences when it comes to the minor, peripheral, and nonessential issues. Some go so far as to conclude that it really isn't even worth discussing, analyzing, or working through these "minor" issues because they are just that, "minor." As long as we all believe in Jesus, they say, do the other things really matter?

Herein lies the danger of parceling the Scripture into essential and nonessential categories. If everything besides Jesus and the gospel is nonessential, then what motivates us to study the Scriptures to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)? If the vast majority of Scripture is really "up for grabs" and not absolutely important, then why did God bother to include it in the first place? Why would He make claims about cursing anyone who adds or subtracts even one word of it (Revelation 22:18-19)? Why would He say that He has inspired all of the Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16)? Why would Paul say that the things

written in the Old Testament were for our learning (Romans 15:4)? We must understand that we have no right or authority to categorize the Scripture and to decide what is necessary and what is not. Sure, some things are necessary for salvation while some are not. But how dare we tell God that some part of His revelation to us is irrelevant and extraneous. One Christian college professor told me once in the course of making an argument about one of these "peripheral" issues that, when arriving at his position, he simply tossed out one of the key verses that would lend credibility to the opposing view. The danger of placing ourselves as those in authority and judgment over the Scripture is that we then tell God what part of His Word we will accept and what part we will ignore or reject. This denies God's authority and perfection, and it opens the door to a wide variety of fallacies, deceptions, and worldly philosophies.

The point of salvation is not to continue as we are as babes in Christ forever. We are to grow up into Christian adults, attaining to maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:13-14) and a full assurance of our faith (Hebrews 10:22). If all we ever know are merely the "essentials," God is still merciful to let us into heaven if we put our faith in the right truths. Yet God's intention was never to simply leave us in such a place as immature babies as we declare that the rest of Scripture is unknowable, irrelevant, boring, or doomed to a plurality of viewpoints no matter what. The reality is that Scripture does have an intended interpretation. Do we honestly think that God wasn't sure what He was trying to say? He put into Scripture exactly what was supposed to be there, every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and grammatical subtlety. They are all there for a reason and for our learning. Some things He has kept secret, but what He has revealed to us in His Word, He has revealed that we might obey it (Deuteronomy 29:29). Thus, the entirety of Scripture is necessary and essential and ought to be believed, studied, understood, analyzed, discussed, and contended for. We need to have an appreciation for the whole counsel of God, and together we ought to humbly strive to attain to the unity of the faith, which is only possible as we take the Scripture to mean what God intended it to mean, a difficult and lifelong challenge and task. But it is well worth it, for the only other option is to minimize the importance of Scripture and to tolerate Biblical ignorance and erroneous viewpoints, mistakenly calling such worldly tolerance Christian love. In order to have charity in all things, we must not let go of truth in order to achieve the unity we all desire. Unity of doctrinal truth and Christian love must go hand in hand.