

An Antidote for the Most Significant Problem Facing Twenty-first Century Christianity

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The importance of essential Christian doctrine in the twenty-first century can hardly be overstated. In essence, essentials codify the main and the plain things of Scripture—what has aptly been referred to as mere Christianity. They are the very doctrines that form the line of demarcation between the Kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the cults.

While we may debate non-essentials without dividing over them, when it comes to essential Christian doctrine there must be unity. To wit the maxim: *In essentials unity, non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.*

Furthermore, essential Christian doctrine is the North Star by which the course of Christianity is set. Just as the North Star is an unchanging reference point by which sailors safely guided their ships, so essential Christian doctrine has safely guided the Church through the doctrinal storms that have sought to sink it. Shooting stars light the sky for a moment; following them, however, leads to shipwreck.

Finally, essential Christian doctrine is the foundation on which the gospel of Jesus Christ rests. From His deity to the eschatological certainty that He will appear a second time to judge the living and the dead, essential Christian doctrine is foundational to the gospel. All other religions compromise, confuse, or contradict these essentials. Muslims, for example, dogmatically denounce the doctrine of Christ's unique deity as the unforgivable sin of *shirk*. They readily affirm the sinlessness of Christ but adamantly deny His sacrifice upon the cross, and his subsequent resurrection as the only hope of salvation.

The question is: What do we deem essential? And how can we become so familiar with such doctrines that when counterfeits loom on the horizon we will recognize them instantaneously? Essential Christian doctrine begins with the mother of all questions—the very question the Master teacher posed to Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” —and logically ends with essential aspects regarding the study of end times. I have found it helpful to implant the essentials on the canvas of our consciousness using the acronym D-O-C-T-R-I-N-E.

Deity of Christ - The Biblical witness is clear and convincing that Jesus Christ is the eternal Creator God (John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, Revelation 1). Throughout His earthly ministry Jesus claimed to be God in word and deed (Mark 14:61-62; John 5:18, 20; 8:58; 10:30-33) and vindicated His claims to deity by living a sinless life (John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5; 1 Peter 2:22), by manifesting His power over nature (Mark 4:39), over fallen angels (Luke 4:35), over sickness (Matthew 4:23), and even over death itself (John 4:50; 11:43-44; 1 Corinthians 15), and by accurately prophesying God's judgment on Jerusalem through the destruction of the Temple that occurred in A.D. 70 (Matthew 24:1-2, 32-35).

Original Sin - Sin is not just murder, rape, or robbery. Sin is a word that describes any thought, word, deed, or state of being that fails to meet God's standard of holiness and perfection. The Bible unambiguously proclaims that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). While the notion of generational curses and spirits is foreign to the text of Scripture, there is a sense in which all people are cursed as a result of an ancestor's sin. Adam's rebellion brought death to us all and tainted every aspect of our being (Gen. 3; 1Cor. 15:21-22; cf. Eph. 2:3). God, however, has provided redemption through the atoning work of the "second Adam," Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-21).

Canon - The 39 books of the Hebrew Scriptures along with the 27 books of the Greek New Testament are divine rather than merely human in origin and constitute the entire Christian "canon" (meaning "standard of measurement"). In addition to the internal testimony of the Bible about itself (2 Timothy 3:16), the divine inspiration and preservation of the Bible can be demonstrated by the early dating and consistency of the many available manuscripts, the corroboration of archaeology, and the fulfillment of predictive prophecy.

Trinity - Though the word "Trinity" is nowhere found in the Bible, it aptly codifies the essential Biblical truths that 1) there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:10); 2) the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God (1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:8; Acts 5:3-4); and 3) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally distinct (Matthew 28:19; John 15:26; 17:1-26). It is important to note that when Trinitarians speak of one God they are referring to the nature or essence of God. Moreover, when they speak of persons they are referring to personal self-distinctions within the Godhead. Put another way, Trinitarians believe in one *What* and three *Who's*.

Resurrection - All four canonical gospels record the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The immutable fact of Jesus' resurrection is the cornerstone of Christian faith because it not only vindicates Jesus' claims to deity, it ensures the future bodily resurrection unto eternal life of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

and proclaim Him as Lord (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). The historical reality of the resurrection can be demonstrated through the fatal torment of Jesus on the Cross; the empty tomb--early Christianity could not have survived an identifiable tomb containing the corpse of Christ; the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus; and the transformation of believers throughout the ages whose lives have been radically altered upon experiencing the resurrected Lord.

Incarnation - The doctrine of the Incarnation is aptly summed up in the words of the apostle John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). The clear testimony of Scripture is that, in the Incarnation, Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man; that is, He existed as the perfect unity in one person of a divine and a human nature (John 1; Colossians 1). As *Theanthropos* ("God-Man"), the spotless "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) lived a perfectly sinless human life and died a sinner's death to sufficiently atone, once for all, for the sins of humanity (Romans 5:1-21; Hebrews 10:11-18).

New Creation - The essential doctrine of New Creation is aptly codified in the words of the apostle Paul: "If anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). All who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord are reconciled to God and inherit eternal life in His glorious presence (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10). Jesus' resurrection from the dead inaugurates the renewal of all things. The new creation of faithful believers and the new creation of the natural world will be consummated in the resurrection when Jesus returns bodily to earth as the conquering king (Romans 8:18-25).

Eschatology - The word *eschatology* is an intimidating word with a simple meaning—the study of end-times. While the meaning of eschatology is simple to grasp, its importance is difficult to overemphasize. Far from being a mere branch in the theological tree, eschatology is the root that provides life and luster to every fiber of its being. Put another way, eschatology is the thread that weaves the tapestry of Scripture into a harmonious pattern. It is the study of everything we long and hope for. Early in Genesis, Adam and Eve fell into a life of constant sin terminated by death. The rest of Scripture chronicles God's unfolding plan of redemption. While Christians debate secondary aspects of eschatology such as the timing of the tribulation or the meaning of the millennium, we are united in the truth that just as Christ came to earth once to bear the sins of the world, so too He will return again to gather the elect and to usher in the resurrection of all things (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Hebrews 9:27-28). On that day, the just will be resurrected to eternal life and the unjust to eternal conscious torment and separation

from the love and grace of God (John 5:28-29). Paradise lost will become paradise restored and the problem of sin and Satan will be fully and finally resolved (Revelation 20-22).

If indeed God has spoken—and the essentials made memorable thru the acronym D-O-C-T-R-I-N-E, codify the essence of the Creator's communication to his creation—the attendant question we should ask is, "What has God said?"

This involves the art and science of reading the Bible for all it's worth. As such, it is crucial that we interpret Scripture just as we would other forms of communication—in its most obvious and natural sense. Put another way, we must read the Bible literally (as literature), paying close attention to *form, figurative language and fantasy imagery.*

In order to interpret the Bible literally we must pay special attention to what is known as form or genre. In other words, to interpret the Bible as literature, it is crucial to consider the kind of literature we are interpreting. Just as a legal brief differs in form from a prophetic oracle, so too there is a difference in genre between Leviticus and Revelation. This is particularly important when considering writings that are difficult to categorize, such as Genesis, which is largely a historical narrative interlaced with symbolism and repetitive poetic structure.

If Genesis were reduced to an allegory conveying merely abstract ideas about temptation, sin, and redemption devoid of any correlation with actual events in history, the very foundation of Christianity would be destroyed. If the historical Adam and Eve did not eat the forbidden fruit and descend into a life of habitual sin resulting in death, there is no need for redemption. On the other hand, if we consider Satan to be a slithering snake, we would not only misunderstand the nature of fallen angels but we might also suppose that Jesus triumphed over the work of the devil by stepping on the head of a serpent (Genesis 3:15) rather than through his passion on the cross (Colossians 2:15).

A literalistic method of interpretation often does as much violence to the text as does a spiritualized interpretation that empties the text of objective meaning. A "literal-at-all-costs" method of interpretation is particularly troublesome when it comes to books of the Bible in which visionary imagery is the governing genre. For example, in Revelation the apostle John sees an apocalyptic vision in which an angel swinging a sharp sickle gathers grapes into "the great winepress of the wrath of God." The blood flowing out of the winepress rises as high as "the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs" (Revelation 14:19-20). Interpreting apocalyptic imagery in a woodenly literal sense inevitably leads to absurdity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that Scripture—particularly apocalyptic

portions of Scripture—is replete with figurative language. Such language differs from literal language, in which words mean exactly what they say. Figurative language requires readers to use their imagination in order to comprehend what the author is driving at. Such imaginative leaps are the rule rather than the exception in that virtually every genre of literature contains metaphorical language. In point of fact, we might well say that figurative language is the principal means by which God communicates spiritual realities to his children. In other words, God communicates spiritual realities through means of earthly, empirically perceptible events, persons, or objects—what might best be described as living metaphors.

A metaphor is an implied comparison that identifies a word or phrase with something that it does not literally represent. Far from minimizing biblical truth, metaphors serve as magnifying glasses that identify truth we might otherwise miss. This identification creates a meaning that lies beyond a woodenly literal interpretation and thus requires an imaginative leap in order to grasp what is meant. For example, when Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48), he obviously was not saying that he was literally the “staff of life” (i.e. physical bread). Rather he was metaphorically communicating that he is the “stuff of life” (i.e. the essence of true life). Biblical metaphors are never to be regarded as vacuous occasions for subjective flights of fantasy. On the contrary, biblical metaphors are always objectively meaningful, authoritative, and true.

Hyperbole is another figure of speech particularly prevalent in prophetic passages. In essence hyperbole employs exaggeration for effect or emphasis. If you step onto a scale and exclaim, “O my goodness, I weigh a ton” you are obviously not intending to say that you literally weigh two thousand pounds. Similarly, when commentator Charles Barkley during the NBA’s All-Star game breathlessly proclaimed, “The whole world’s here!” he was using hyperbole to communicate that the crowd was packed with celebrities.

While hyperbole is commonly used in our culture, it is virtually ubiquitous in the Bible. This is particularly true of prophetic passages. The prophet Isaiah used hyperbolic language when he predicted judgment on Babylon: “See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. *The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light*” (Isaiah 13:9-10, emphasis added). To those unfamiliar with biblical language these words may be taken to mean that the end of the world was at hand. In reality, Isaiah was prophesying that the Medes were about to put an end to the glories of the Babylonian empire.

In evidence one need only read the preceding verses which are packed with prophetic hyperbole: “Wail for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, *all hands will go limp, every man’s heart will melt*. Terror

will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, *their faces af/ame*" (Isaiah 13:6-8, emphasis added). Even the most pedantic literalist intuitively recognizes that Isaiah is not literally intending to infer that all hands will literally go limp and that every heart will literally melt. Nor is he literalistically predicting that every Babylonian face will be on fire any more than John is using wooden literalism to prophesy that the two witnesses in Revelation will literally emit flames of fire from their mouths (Revelation 11:5).

Finally, it is crucial to correctly interpret fantasy imagery in apocalyptic passages—such as an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (Revelation 12:3); locusts with human faces, women's hair, and lions' teeth (9:7); and a beast that resembled a leopard, but with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion (13:2). What is distinct about such fantasy images is that they do not correspond to anything in the real world. But while fantasy images are unreal, they provide a realistic means by which to ponder reality.

Fantasy imagery, of course, is fraught with danger. That danger, however, does not lie in its use but in its abuse. In Revelation 12 the apostle John describes "an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth" (vv. 3-4). Many Christians abuse such imagery by interpreting it in a woodenly literalistic fashion, thus missing the point of the passage. Not only would a single star—let alone a third of the stars—obliterate earth, but dragons are the stuff of mythology not theology. Thus, the danger does not lie in the use of fantasy imagery but in uncritically impregnating these images with unbiblical notions.

While the Scriptures must indeed be read as literature, you and I must ever be mindful that the Bible is also far more than literature. Instead, the Scriptures are uniquely inspired by the Spirit. As Peter put it, "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). We must therefore fervently pray that the Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, illuminates our minds to what is *in* the text.

As with any literature, a thorough understanding of the Bible cannot be attained without a grasp of the basic rules that govern the relationship and usages of words. The biblical text is also best understood when one is familiar with the customs, culture, and historical context of biblical times. Such background information is crucial in fully grasping what is going on in any given book of the Bible. Additionally, it is of paramount importance to understand the typological relationship between the Old and New

Testaments. This is particularly true in light of the overarching reality that Jesus is the antitype—the greater reality—that is prefigured in the types and shadows of old covenant communications. As such, the antitype of the land is found in the Lord, the antitype of Jerusalem is found in Jesus, and the antitype of the majestic temple is found in the Master Teacher.

Last but not least, we must ever be mindful that the whole of Scripture is greater than the sum of its individual passages. Scriptural synergy demands that individual Bible passages may never be interpreted in such a way as to conflict with the whole of Scripture. Nor may we assign arbitrary meanings to words or phrases that have their referent in biblical history. The biblical interpreter must keep in mind that all Scripture, though communicated through various human instruments, has one single Author. And that Author does not contradict himself nor does he confuse his servants.

I am convinced that the greatest problem facing twenty-first century Christianity is biblical illiteracy. I am equally convinced that the antidote is a consistent focus on the essentials which are ultimately discerned through learning to read the Bible for all its worth.—*Hank Hanegraaff*