

An Essential Doctrine

Introduction

When we speak of essential doctrines we need to differentiate between three levels of error. Before listing the levels we should point out that from a Biblical standpoint fellowship is established when there is willingness to share in the work of the ministry. In this sense, eating a meal with another is not fellowship but allowing another to occupy a pulpit without censorship is fellowship. Regular and/or participatory involvement with a church is fellowship.

The three levels of errors in doctrine and practice are:

1. Errors over which fellowship should never be broken. Certainly, most doctrines fall into this category for there are literally thousands of doctrines in the Word of God. Relatively few of them are basis for the breaking of fellowship.
2. Errors which are the basis for the breaking of fellowship but which could possibly be held by those who are children of God.
3. Errors which are the basis for regarding another as lost and headed for hell.

Of course, we do not claim to know the heart. But, there are many circumstances in which we must make a judgment regarding these matters. We must judge regarding these matters when,

- testifying.
- discussing spiritual things in the presence of others.
- considering another for inclusion in certain church activities.
- considering another for church membership.
- considering another for church leadership.
- considering another for a pulpit ministry.
- considering another for marriage (or advising people on this).
- praying for others.

There certainly is a kind of judgment that is condemned by the scriptures (e.g., Matt. 7: 1-6). It is not our purpose to exegete this and similar passages here but we should hasten to add that **the believer** is often called upon to discern the spirituality of another. We are not the final judge and must not act as such but we are fruit inspectors and we must make such 'judgments'.

One further comment is in order. There are Biblically proper terms to apply to those who hold these levels of error.

Apostate : A person who has claimed salvation who holds an error so serious that we must regard that person as lost and headed for hell.

Heretic: A person who is saved but whose error is so serious that we must, after warning him, break fellowship (Tit. 3 : 10, 11).

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Heretics And Christian Fellowship

Fellowship

The English word fellowship does not have the same meaning today that it had when the King James Version was translated. Consequently, there are a number of misunderstandings when we talk of 'breaking fellowship'.

The word 'fellowship' now means 'companionship; friendly association; etc.' The word fellowship in the scripture (Gal. 2: 9; Phil. 1: 5; et al.) has quite a different meaning.

The Greek words translated 'fellowship' in the King James Version are

koinonia: This is the more common term for 'fellowship'. The verb form (koinoneo) is translated 'to be partaker' (I Tim. 5: 22) and the noun form (koinonos) is translated 'partner' (Lk. 5: 10). This last usage clearly indicates a 'business partnership'.

metoche: This word has very similar usage to the previous word. The verb is translated 'to be partaker' (I Cor. 10: 17, 21, 30) and the noun is translated 'partner' (Lk. 5: 7).

Thus, when we talk of breaking fellowship we are talking of breaking the partnership. We are clearly in partnership with a ministry when we do one of the following.

- Contribute financially.
- Attend regularly.
- Allow those of that ministry to occupy our pulpit without clear restrictions.

Thus, the items in the above are not to be done lightly. Nor is the refusal to do these things a light matter. To refuse the pulpit or leadership to one is a serious matter.

In fact, when a new church (or an independent Bible class) is started, this is an admission of breaking fellowship with others that are within a reasonable distance.

Heretics

For some reason there is confusion on the word 'heretic' as we have used it. This is true even though we have used it in accordance with standard English usage.

The dictionary (New World Dictionary) defines a heresy as 'a religious belief opposed to the orthodox doctrines of a church; especially, such a belief specifically denounced by the church and regarded as likely to cause schism.'

The Greek word (hairesitikos) for heretic is actually a bit broader in meaning. It means 'one who causes divisions'.

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Now, a person can cause divisions due to

- personalities or politics.
- error on serious doctrines.

It is important that an organization or local assembly carefully choose and publicize those doctrines that are the basis of their definition of heresy. It has often been the case in church history that what was really a clash of personalities was masked as a doctrinal problem.

Those doctrines which are the basis of a group's definition of heresy are often called that group's 'creed' or 'doctrinal statement'. Every group has such. There are those who do not publish their 'creed' and, as a result, the leaders can declare any doctrine a heresy. This ought not to be.

The Relationship between the Two

There is a strong relationship between your attitude on fellowship (partnership) and your definition of heretic. If you refuse partnership to one otherwise qualified then that person or ministry is heretic. If you enter into fellowship with another than that person or ministry is not heretic.

One further note: If your words or actions label another a heretic and he isn't then you have become a heretic for you have divided the Body of Christ when it shouldn't have been. (The only proper divisions are when we divide from those who are heretics.) As a result, we must carefully define our 'creed' and then stick to it.

When we deviate from it, we have let something other than our convictions based on scripture to dominate our activities. Please study very carefully Titus 3: 10, 11 and its context.

Are There Apostate Doctrines and Practices?

There are some sincere believers that believe that the Bible teaches that there are no such doctrines and practices. It is their understanding that if a person has asked Jesus Christ to save them, then no matter what their doctrines and practices, they are saved and we must so regard them.

The Bible talks of saving faith and it also talks of faith that is not saving faith. In John 8, we have the following verses (30-37).

“As he spoke these words, many believed on him. Then said Jesus to those Jews who believed on him, If ye continue in my word then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. They answered him, We are Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man. How sayest thou, Ye shall be made free. Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you. Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house forever; but the Son abideth ever. If the Son, therefore, shall make you free ye shall be free indeed. I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you.”

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Please read the entire passage. It is totally unthinkable that those who are truly saved would want to do our Lord bodily harm. In addition, it is not possible to say of a saved man that God's Word has no place in him. Other examples in scripture could be given but this is enough to establish the fact that men can believe on Christ without having saving faith.

Many examples could be given from modern time. If all who claim faith in Christ are truly saved, then clearly over 40% of the people in our country are truly saved. If you doubt that they claim to have trusted in Christ, ask them.

Several years ago, there was a man in Columbia who claimed faith in Christ. He was very active in several Christian organizations. Today, this man is an active atheist who denies everything he ever believed.

Indeed, just from the doctrinal standpoint alone we can assert that one is lost who

- denies the existence of God.
- denies the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.
- denies the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- denies the deity of Jesus Christ.

And, there are other doctrines in this category but these ought to be without question.

Enter John 6

There is a most important and frightening passage in John 6. The passage starts in verse 29 and continues through verse 71. In this passage there are three participants or groups and two areas of doctrine.

The people involved are:

- Christ
- His disciples
- The Jews -- the unbelieving throng.

It is very clear from verse 30 that the Jews made no pretense of faith. They were requesting Christ to give them a basis for belief.

It is just as clear from the passage that the 'disciples' in the passage were those who were identified as the true followers of Christ. Of course, Christ knew the hearts. But, from all appearances, these were followers of Christ.

Imagine in your mind the scene. The whole audience (unbelieving throng and disciples) followed Christ that day. The disciples were those who were identified with Christ and had followed Christ on other days as well.

Before continuing we must identify the doctrinal areas involved:

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- The area of doctrine requiring the believer to spiritually imbibe Christ. It is here called eating Christ's flesh and drinking Christ's blood. (See verses 53-59.)
- The area of doctrine including the doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace. (See verses 37, 44, 65, etc.) These doctrines are included in what is generally called Calvinism.

So great is the confusion on the doctrines of Calvinism that we list them here.

Key Point	Description
Total Depravity	The teaching that man is totally unable to do anything that is pleasing to God. Since the Bible clearly teaches that faith pleases God, this doctrine must include the teaching that man is unable even to want to come to God.
Unconditional Election	The teaching that God chose certain ones to be His own apart from any conditions or foreseen faith or foreseen qualities.
Limited Redemption	The teaching that Christ on the cross of Calvary affected a certain redemption for those of the Father's choosing and for them alone.
Irresistible Grace	The teaching that the Holy Spirit does a work of grace in the hearts of the elect that can't be resisted. This work of grace results in their certain salvation.
Perseverance	The teaching that God causes his own elect to persevere in their lives.

What makes John 6:65,66 so important is what we find there,

“And he said, Therefore said I unto you that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father. From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him.”

Now, one thing is clear -- men who walk no more with Jesus Christ are lost. Indeed, the conversation in verses 67-69 reinforces this. Very clearly, Peter equates saving faith with continuing with Christ. Men can be saved and refuse fellowship with you or me but that person who wishes to have no more to do with our Lord is lost. Any other understanding is unthinkable.

Which Doctrine Was Pivotal?

Since two doctrines occur in this passage, it is natural to ask which one was that which drove the unsaved disciples away from Christ.

Unfortunately, the King James Version is not accurate here. The word 'time' is not in the original. The Greek is 'ek toutou' and means 'from this' or 'because of this' or 'out of this'. The meaning is that 'because of the last statement', they left Christ.

The last statement was that of verse 65:

“And he said, Therefore said I unto you that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.”

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In other words, they left Christ because he taught them Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace.

We urge the reader to examine the passage. Very clearly, one of the doctrines is pivotal. Those disciples who hated that doctrine left Christ and walked no more with him. The doctrinal area which forced that was that which includes Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace.

Application

So far, we have been commenting on a historical incident. But, there is an important application to our time. Samuel was assured that when men rejected him they were rejecting God on the issue at hand (I Samuel 8:7). In addition, in a different era, we find the teaching that when men spurn the ministry of the Lord, they prove they were never of that ministry (I John 2:19). Finally, we find in John 6 that the doctrines of Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace are pivotal in the area of whether men are saved or not. We conclude then that when men reject our ministry on the basis that we teach these precious truths, they are proving that they are unsaved.

Clearly then, those who do not understand the doctrines of total depravity and irresistible grace are heretics. However, those who openly oppose these truths and reject others because of these truths are apostates.

Humanly speaking, one might wish this were not so. But, we must proclaim the Word of God as it is and apply when possible its truths. Such Bible preaching does not make for popularity with men but it pleases God. It is my prayer that those who do not know these truths will come to see them and that those who oppose these truths will come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, whom to know is life eternal.