Fundamental Doctrine, Says Who? Part 2
Scripture: John 1:1; John 14:6; Romans 3:27–28; 1 Corinthians 15:14
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Does the Bible itself identify specific doctrines as fundamental? Absolutely. Last time we looked at two guidelines: (1) Fundamental Doctrines Come from the Scriptures, and (2) Fundamental Doctrines Are Clear in Scripture. Here are three more . . .

Fundamental Doctrines Include Everything Essential to Saving Faith

Third, we should consider a doctrine as fundamental if eternal life depends on it. Scripture is full of statements that identify the terms of salvation and the marks of genuine faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). That verse makes faith itself essential to a right relationship with God. It also expressly identifies both the existence and the veracity of God as fundamental articles of the Christian faith.

Elsewhere we are told that eternal life is obtained through the knowledge of the true God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3; 14:6; Acts 4:12). Since Jesus Himself *is* the true God incarnate (John 8:58; 10:30; 1 John 5:20), the fact of His deity (and by implication, the whole doctrine of the Trinity) is a fundamental article of faith (see 1 John 2:23). Our Lord Himself confirmed this when He said all must honor Him as they honor the Father (John 5:23).

The truths of Jesus' divine sonship and messiahship are also fundamental articles of faith (John 20:31).

Of course, the bodily resurrection of Christ is a fundamental doctrine, because 1 Corinthians 15:14 tells us, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain."

Romans 10:9 confirms that the resurrection is a fundamental doctrine, and adds another: the lordship of Christ. "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

And according to Romans 4:4–5, justification by faith is a fundamental doctrine as well: "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, *but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly*, his faith is credited as righteousness" (emphasis added). In other words, those who seek acceptance before God on the ground of their own righteousness will find they fall short (Romans 3:27–28; Galatians 2:16–3:29). Only those who trust God to impute Christ's perfect righteousness are counted as truly righteous. This is precisely the difference between Roman Catholic doctrine and the gospel set forth in Scripture. It is at the heart of all doctrine that is truly fundamental.

In fact, an error in understanding justification is the very thing that was responsible for the apostasy

of the Jewish nation: "For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3). That's precisely the failure of every system of works salvation, canonized in the Roman Catholic system. But "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4).

Fundamental Doctrines Include Every Doctrine We Are Forbidden to Deny

Certain teachings of Scripture carry threats of damnation to those who deny them. Other ideas are expressly stated to be affirmed only by unbelievers. Such doctrines, obviously, involve fundamental articles of genuine Christianity.

The apostle John began his first epistle with a series of statements that establish key points of the doctrine of sin (hamartiology) as fundamental articles of faith. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6). That condemns wanton antinomianism (the idea that Christians are under no law whatsoever) and makes some degree of doctrinal and moral enlightenment essential to true Christianity. A second statement rules out the humanistic notion that people are basically good: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). And a third suggests that no true Christian would deny his or her own sinfulness: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:10).

First Corinthians 16:22 makes love for Christ a fundamental issue: "If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed." And a similar verse, 1 Corinthians 12:3, says that no one speaking by the Spirit of God can call Jesus accursed.

The truth of Jesus' incarnation is also clearly designated a fundamental doctrine: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist" (1 John 4:2–3). "For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7). Those verses by implication also condemn those who deny the virgin birth of our Lord, for if He was not virgin-born, He would be merely human, not eternal God come in the flesh.

And since those who twist and distort the Word of God are threatened with destruction (2 Peter 3:16), it is evident that both a lofty view of Scripture and a sound method of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) are fundamental tenets of true Christianity.

Fundamental Doctrines Are All Summed Up in the Person and Work of Christ

Paul wrote, "No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11). Christ Himself embodied or established every doctrine that is essential to genuine Christianity. Those who reject any of the cardinal doctrines of the faith worship a christ who is not the Christ of Scripture.

How are the fundamentals of the faith personified in Christ?

With regard to *the inspiration and authority of Scripture,* He is the incarnate Word (John 1:1, 14). He

upheld the written Word's absolute authority (Matthew 5:18). Christ Himself established *sola Scriptura* as a fundamental doctrine when He upbraided the Pharisees for nullifying Scripture with their own traditions: "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men. . . . You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:6–9). Our Lord had much to say about the authority and infallibility of the Word of God.

In the doctrine of *justification by faith*, it is Christ's own perfect righteousness, imputed to the believer, that makes the pivotal difference between true biblical justification and the corrupted doctrine of Roman Catholicism and the cults. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). It is also why Paul wrote that Christ is become to us righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30), and it is why Jeremiah called Him "The Lord our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6). The Lord Himself, Jesus Christ, is our righteousness (Jeremiah 33:16). That is the very essence of justification by faith alone, *sola fide*.

Of course, all the fundamental doctrines related to the incarnation—the virgin birth of Christ, His deity, His humanity, and His sinlessness—are part and parcel of who He is. To deny any of those doctrines is to attack Christ Himself.

The essential doctrines related to His work—His atoning death, His resurrection, and the reality of His miracles—are the very basis of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1–4; Hebrews 2:3–4). Reject them and you nullify the heart of the Christian message.

The fundamentals of the faith are so closely identified with Christ that the apostle John used the expression "the teaching of Christ" as a kind of shorthand for the set of doctrines he regarded as fundamental. To him, these doctrines represented the difference between true Christianity and false religion.

That is why he wrote, "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Far from encouraging union with those who denied the fundamental truths of the faith, John forbade any form of spiritual fellowship with or encouragement of such false religion (2 John 10–11).

Here are a few thoughts for the comment thread. Fundamental doctrines include everything essential to saving faith, every doctrine we're forbidden to deny, and everything that's summed up in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's a lot to know!

How does that contrast with those who want to whittle the fundamental doctrines of Christianity down to Trinitarianism, or to the Apostles' Creed? What's at the root of such a minimalistic approach to the question of Christian fundamentals?

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