
Essential Christianity – 1

Christianity could die in one generation. The nature of Christianity (and of any other religion, for that matter) is that the generation that professes it now, is responsible to preserve it and propagate it to the next. A failure to do so will mean that, at least as far as living adherents are concerned, Christianity will cease to be. For this reason, all Christians ought to be conservatives. Christians ought to be concerned with conserving all that it means to be Christian, so as to pass this on to others.

Broadly speaking, all Christians want to see Christianity conserved. The larger question is: what do we have to conserve to be fully Christian? To put it negatively, at what point have we failed to conserve Christianity? Some seem to think that the preservation of Christianity consists in simply preaching the Gospel. Some seem to think it consists in having large Christian institutions or denominations. Some put it down to the teaching of Christian doctrine, or perhaps propagating Christian morality.

I am going to suggest four essentials of the faith.

1) **Evangelical** – biblical Christianity must begin with a clear understanding, propagation and defence of the Gospel. Apart from the Gospel, we have Christianity. The Gospel forms the boundary of the faith, and if the boundary is eroded in any way, the whole system of faith is under threat.

2) **Orthodoxy**. Once inside the boundary, Christianity has a large body of teaching that is to cover what we are to believe on everything from the Trinity, all the way down to everyday decisions. If Christian doctrine is not taught, the faith erodes into nothing more than a set of platitudes, religious sentimentalisms, spiritual clichés, and empty assumptions. Without robust teaching, the Christian faith is empty.

3) **Orthopraxy**. The doctrine that Christians teach is not there merely to be known. It is to be practised. There is a correct way of applying Christian doctrine to how we live our lives, how we structure our churches, how we apply God's commands to all of life.

4) **Orthopathy**. Christianity is more than a set of doctrines and a set of practices. Christianity is also a life of love. It is a life of loving God and man. Christianity is a life of learning to love what God loves and hate what God hates. There is a way God loves things, and a way He does not. So Christianity is learning what that way is. It is learning right loves, right affections for all things.

I embrace this vision of conservative Christianity because I think it is a full-orbed Christianity and the only kind that will ultimately survive. I believe that it is the Christianity that had always existed in various shapes and forms before its secularization in the 19th century. I'm convinced it is the only consistently supernaturalist Christianity around.

So here is the irony and the misunderstanding. I hold that this conservative take on Christianity is not baroque and ornate; it is simply what is required to sustain healthy Christianity. As I look at those who disagree with me, I see a reduced, skeletal Christianity that can barely keep its own head above water, let alone seriously defend or propagate the faith in the challenging years ahead. I think it is abbreviated, inconsistent, and intentionally agnostic where it needn't be. I see the current state of evangelicalism and fundamentalism as emaciated and spiritually anaemic, scarcely holding on to life. Worse, it regards its weak pulse and labored breathing as evidence of its healthy commitment to "core essentials" and thanks God that it is not as other men are: legalists, cultural snobs, elitists, or even as this tax collector.

On the other hand, my brothers, on the other side of this discussion, see my take on Christianity as a massive confusion of non-essentials with essentials, turning applications into doctrines, and seeing

inferences and non-biblical knowledge as authoritative. I'm the fellow wearing four woolen jerseys on a summer's day, unnecessarily laden-down with joy-killing extras. As far as they are concerned, they have streamlined, flexible, gospel-centered Christianity, free from cultural imperia

I do not see how these two views could ever be reconciled unless we agree on what is essential to Christianity. In the Dark Age we're in, we can't afford to defend anything but the essentials. I'm convinced that's what I, and others who share these convictions, are doing. Conservative Christianity, as much as it is accused of adding non-essentials to the faith, is simply trying to preserve a healthy, full-orbed Christianity, that can weather the era it is in and be passed on to others.

Conservative Christians conserve the gospel. This is because the gospel is the boundary of Christianity and true Christian fellowship.

How does one become a Christian? By being baptised into one of the wings of Christendom? By growing up in an ostensibly Christian country? By feeling closer to the Christian religion than to say that of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism? The fact is, people become Christians, in the biblical sense, when they believe the gospel. The Bible makes it plain that the gospel is the message by which people are saved (I Cor 15:2, Rom 1:16). If there is no gospel, there can be no salvation (Romans 10:14).

Therefore, conserving the gospel is foundational to conservative Christianity. Once again, the reason for this conservation is because the gospel is continually under threat. The gospel comes under threat in numerous ways.

First, when its intention is misrepresented or misunderstood. People have often tried to take the message of our Lord, or of the apostles, and use it for their own ends – political revolution, social renovation, psychological theory, or any one of countless theories which have been advanced as the true 'purpose' of the gospel.

Second, when its meaning is warped. Since the gospel rests on actual historical events, the meaning of those events needs to be interpreted and explained. That is just what the Bible does. However, if the wrong interpretation is given to those events, the result is a corrupted gospel (Gal 1:6-8).

Third, when its centrality is undermined. When professing Christian leaders act as if there is fellowship with someone who denies the gospel, they undermine the gospel itself. They act as if there is a place in Christianity for those who deny the gospel itself.

Fourth, when its proclamation is neglected. When the church fails to preach the gospel, it will certainly not be conserved, but will die with those who presently believe it. (And if they truly believe it, why would they not declare it?)

The gospel is threatened when its intention is misrepresented or misunderstood. Paul is quite clear what the gospel deals with in I Corinthians 15:1-4:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

According to Paul, the gospel deals with our sins. This is what the gospel centres around. Therefore, by implication is gospel is about reconciliation with God, which suggests enmity with God is the default situation. This means the gospel is about a holy God's gracious work of reconciling individual sinners to Himself. It is not about social renovation. The gospel is not primarily food to the hungry, money to

the poor, employment to the unemployed, social advance for the oppressed. It might result in such benefits, but such things do not constitute the intention or purpose of the Gospel. It is not about social revolution. The gospel is not a paradigm for the revolt against forms of political tyranny or oppression as Liberation Theology in our country suggested. It is not about a psychological innovation. The gospel does not provide some kind of internal therapy to affirm 'the self' or to liberate you from 'misplaced shame'. It is not about moral influence. The gospel is not simply a revelation of God's love teaching people to sacrificially love one another. It is not about a potential supply of grace, which by human merit and cooperation (and about a thousand years in purgatory), we access and experience. It is not about realising your own godhood, coming to worship the divine within. It is not a ransom paid to Satan to release his clam on man. It is not some kind of mixed political, social and even ecological effect which brings in 'the Kingdom' (whatever the speaker in question decides that to be).

The gospel is about individual salvation from the penalty, power and eventual presence of sin, so as to enjoy restored fellowship with the Triune God. This is achieved through the substitutionary atonement of the God-man Jesus Christ, and the application of it to those who place repentant faith in Him. To capitulate to these false theories of the gospel is to lose the gospel. To lose the gospel is to lose the Christian faith itself. Therefore, conservative Christians will 'earnestly contend' (Jude 1:3) for the meaning and purpose of the gospel : Christ came to save sinners (I Tim 1:15).

The gospel is threatened when its meaning is warped. In fact, the only way one can avoid misunderstanding the gospel's purpose is by understanding its meaning. But its meaning lies in something that modern religionists hate: doctrine.

The way Paul describes the gospel in I Corinthians 15:1-4 on the surface seems to be a simple recounting of historical events: Jesus died and rose again, verified by His burial and by the witnesses that saw Him after His resurrection. This rather plain reading of the gospel has led some to think that the gospel is nothing more than mental assent to these historical events. However, the gospel is definitely more than historical events. It can never be less than those events, for if Jesus did not actually live, die and rise again, the entire Christian faith collapses (I Cor 15:14).

But the gospel lies primarily in the interpretation of those events. An interpretation will simply be the teaching that explains the significance of the events of Christ's death and resurrection. Another word for teaching is doctrine. Put simply, you cannot conserve the gospel unless you conserve the doctrines that explain the meaning of the gospel.

Paul helps us understand part of that doctrine when He says Christ died for our sins. This introduces the idea of substitutionary atonement. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, so that we might be forgiven and have Christ's righteousness imputed to us. We must conserve the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. However, why was this atonement needed? Because without it, we would have paid the penalty ourselves. What was that penalty? To offend an infinite God is an infinite offence. Yet we are finite, time-bound, mortal beings. The only way we could pay an infinite debt would be if we were punished for an infinite period of time. To conserve the gospel, we must conserve the doctrine of eternal punishment.

How then could Christ pay for our sins over a space of three hours? The answer must be that Christ was actually an infinite Person with infinite merit. If an infinite Person suffers as a substitute, He pays an infinite price. This means that Christ had to be God. To have the gospel, we must conserve the doctrine of the deity of Christ. However, Jesus was acting as a substitute for mankind, not for angels. To be a true substitute, He had to be a true human being. He had to be able to die, something God cannot do. Therefore, we know that part of the gospel is that Jesus was truly human. To have the gospel we must conserve the doctrine of the humanity of Christ.

This leads us to something else. How did Jesus enter our world as both God and man? If He had simply appeared as a fully grown man, He would not have been truly human, not having been born. But if He were simply born as all of us, He would not be God. To have the gospel, we must conserve the doctrine of the virgin birth.

Jesus could only have been a true sin-bearer had He been sinless Himself. Likewise, only if He bodily rose from the dead would He have been successful in His atonement – having rendered death itself as an unlawful act upon His sinless life – and upon all who would be found in Him. Essential to the gospel then are the doctrines of the sinless life of Christ and the bodily resurrection of Christ. The fact that Jesus was paying a penalty on the cross to God, while being Himself God leads us to another truth fundamental to the Gospel: God is more than one Person. This means that essential to the gospel is the doctrine of the Trinity.

Going back, we consider that payment for our sins means something about us. We are sinners. Man is sinful and inherits a sin nature. To say that man is innocent, or could become righteous by his own acts contradicts the gospel. To conserve the gospel, we must conserve the doctrine of human depravity. That leads us to something else. If man was able to achieve salvation through his own means, then Christ's death was needless. The gospel teaches that man cannot be saved by his own works, only by the grace of God through faith. To conserve the gospel, we must conserve the doctrine of human inability.

For that matter, does this gospel have a deadline? Does anything happen if the world keeps rejecting it? The answer of the Bible is that the same One who died to provide atonement will also personally return to execute judgement on those who rejected it, and to vindicate those who received it. Thus if we deny the doctrine of the personal return of Christ, we deny the gospel. How do we know all this? Paul tells us that these things are true because they are 'according to the Scriptures'. Thus, if the Scriptures are fallible, filled with errors, and only containing the Word of God, we are in trouble. How do we know if the Scriptures have not led us astray on one of these doctrines? Thus, to conserve the gospel is to conserve the doctrine of the authority and infallibility of Scripture.

These doctrines, as you can tell, form the very basis of understanding the gospel. They are part of the gospel itself. To deny them, is to deny the gospel. Because these doctrines are essential to the gospel, they have sometimes been called the fundamentals. People who hold to the fundamental doctrines as being the boundary of Christianity are, at least historically speaking, fundamentalists.

Now, not everyone understands all these things at the point of salvation. Most of us grow to understand these things more as we mature. But ignorance is a different matter to denial. No one can flatly deny these doctrines, without denying the gospel itself. A conservative Christian must be dedicated to studying, understanding, articulating and defending doctrines essential to the gospel. If we do not, we lose the gospel itself.

The first and primary way to achieve this in a local church is to continually clarify the meaning of the gospel. I have for some time felt that personal evangelism programs and techniques would probably be redundant if church members were thoroughly drilled in the meaning of the gospel. After all, if you are immersed in an understanding of the gospel, you will find natural ways to work it into conversations. People who know what they're talking about typically like to talk about what they know. Pastors can produce that kind of atmosphere with sermons that, in natural and appropriate ways, often summarize or re-state the essentials of the gospel. It needn't be only in the final words of application. Our sermons can have an evangelistic heart amidst material meant for Christian discipleship. At the same time, sermon series on the gospel are important. Enough nominal sub-Christian thought-debris exists in the minds of most churchgoers that a fairly regular consideration of the meaning of the gospel can be useful. Here one can take the time to unpack the key texts, consider which doctrines are essential to

the gospel, and spend time exclusively tackling the topic of the gospel.

The gospel is powerfully clarified if we devote an entire service to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. With the attention riveted on the Lord's atonement, there can hardly be a better opportunity to clarify and explain the meaning of the gospel. Well-chosen hymns and songs can preach and explain the gospel in arresting ways. Often one line in a hymn grips the imagination and teaches the essence of the gospel better than many discursive paragraphs could.

The local church's own statement of faith can also become a useful teaching tool. Along with teaching on the gospel, some teaching on the nature and effects of conversion is equally important. Here a book like 1 John becomes vital, with its insistence that eternal life has a very present-tense aspect. Teaching through this book will certainly challenge people's understanding of what the gospel is and what it does.

A final practical way of encouraging a clear understanding of the gospel within the local church is to require that prospective members or baptismal candidates be able to explain the gospel. When we require a testimony of salvation, we must beware lest we allow the subjective account of the individual's conversion to drown out the person's objective profession of the gospel itself. Both are necessary; I fear we who speak often of "accepting Jesus as your personal Savior" have perhaps erred on the subjective side

Understanding the gospel is crucial, but conserving it requires more than that.

The gospel is threatened when its importance is demeaned. How does this occur? We have stated that the gospel is the boundary of Christian fellowship. It is through your response to the gospel that determines if you are in the church and the circle of Christian fellowship or outside of it.

We have also seen that the gospel is understood within the doctrines that explain its meaning. Therefore, it is safe to say that these doctrines themselves form the boundary of Christianity. If a person denies any one of the fundamental doctrines, he denies the faith itself. Of course, if he makes no claim to be a Christian, he is simply an infidel (unbeliever). However, if he denies one of the fundamentals of the faith while simultaneously claiming to be a Christian and expecting Christian fellowship, he is an apostate. Today, we can think of many groups that expect to be recognised as Christians, while denying one or more of the fundamental doctrines: Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Unitarians, Roman Catholics and many others. Such people demean the gospel by denying the gospel itself, while insisting that they are inside the circle of Christianity.

The Bible is very clear on how Christians are to respond to apostates:

2 John 1:9-11 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; 11 for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

Apostates are not even to be extended civility while they are in the act of proselytizing their false gospel. By the way, this does not mean we do not show courtesy, kindness and neighbourly love to apostates as you work with them, study with them, or even live with them. It means you do not extend any recognition to them as Christians. You do not in any way act like you accept their message or endorse it. You do not do or say anything that might be construed as a concession to their apostasy.

But here comes the difficulty. It is fairly clear what to do with apostates. However, what do we do with people who profess the gospel themselves, but extend Christian recognition to apostates? What do we

do with Christians who believe the fundamentals, but do not make them the boundary of Christian recognition and fellowship? J. Gresham Machen had a term for such people. He called them "indifferentists". Such people show indifference towards the importance of the fundamentals, while seemingly professing it themselves.

It is quite clear that an indifferentist demeans the gospel. He sidesteps it as the gateway of Christianity, and lowers its importance overall. He essentially tramples on it, and sets something else up as the gateway for Christian fellowship.

So what do we do with indifferentists? They demean the gospel. Indifferentism is a scandal. The new evangelical, and now mainstream evangelical, answer to this question is to be indifferent towards their indifferentism, and act like nothing wrong is happening. The fundamentalist answer has been to treat the indifferentist as a very disobedient brother, and treat him accordingly.

To give the right hand of fellowship to someone who denies an essential teaching in the gospel is a kind of unauthorized diplomacy on the part of a Christian. It is as if an ambassador were extending full and open relations with a hostile nation, simply because the enemy ambassador had said, "We ought to get along." A professor is not authorized to change the passing grade on an exam simply to ingratiate himself with a student. A police officer is not authorized to change the traffic laws to appear "loving" to an offender. And a Christian is not authorized to change the terms of eternal life to appear tolerant, ecumenical and open-minded. When this is done, the gospel is demeaned. Its prominence as boundary line between believers and non-believers is eroded, and one must look elsewhere to define Christian.

Practically, this limits whom a church would recognize as Christian and which groups they would be willing to partner with. Fellowship with gospel-professors may take place at various level; fellowship with gospel-deniers is a contradiction in terms. When a person denies the gospel, by definition, we have no Christian fellowship with him.

We must remember that it is possible to undermine the gospel indirectly. It is possible to weaken the defense of the gospel by whom we cooperate with. For this reason, we must give careful thought to whom we will extend Christian fellowship.

Without the gospel, no one can become a Christian. If essential Christianity is to survive, local churches must understand the gospel and defend the gospel. Next week, we will consider further how this distinctive of evangelical is to be applied.