

The Essentials of the Christian Faith

There are many theological themes in the Bible that believers can differ on and still be able to have open and loving fellowship with one another. But there are some core beliefs of our faith that do not allow for compromise.

I believe that what the church needs most in our generation is a solid understanding of the major, foundational doctrines of our faith that are not being taught as consistently or thoroughly as they need to be. People often find themselves off balance as they attempt to combat the enemy by knowing and defending the truth.

There are truths in God's Word that the Lord has wanted all of His followers to know for the past 2000 years regardless of what generation they lived in. They allow each generation of believers to not only be rooted in the essential doctrines of scripture, but also to have the kind of relationship with the Lord that can honor Him regardless of the time we live in.

Doctrinal disagreements are a given, because none of us has a corner on the truth; those disagreements can even be among the most mature believers. But disagreement about non-essential doctrines is not the same as disagreements about doctrines central to our faith.

Non-essentials are things like abstaining from meat offered to idols, cessation of spiritual gifts, various interpretations of the symbols in the eschatological sections of the Bible, head coverings, Worship styles (liturgical v. contemporary, hymns v. choruses, etc.)

We're going to be looking at two essential doctrines, and the biggest challenge we face is not going to be intellectual; we won't have a hard time understanding them. The danger and battle we face is the human tendency to detach what we learn from the implications. If we can't make the connection between what we learn in the scriptures to real-life applications, we won't gain what we need to advance spiritually.

I will try to help with this by giving examples and counter-arguments to some of these doctrines in case you come up against them, but obviously, personal applications are *personal* – it's how we see the knowledge we get being worked out in our lives, and that is something we can only experience between us and the Lord.

I want to introduce this discussion with something that is a perfect reminder of the extreme importance of what we are going to study. These comments are by L.S. Chafer;

“Theology” is made up of two Greek words, “theos” (God) and “logos” (a word; the expression of thought – i.e. God's thinking in spoken or written form). Theology is the study of God's thoughts.

Theology, the greatest of the sciences, has fallen upon evil days. Between the rejection and ridicule of it by so-called progressives and the neglect and abridgment of it by the orthodox, it, as a potent influence, is approaching the point of extinction. . . The unchanging emphasis in the Scriptures upon doctrine, which subject is referred to in the New Testament more than forty times and is that to which a Christian is to ‘take heed’ stands as a silent rebuke, whether heeded or not, to all modern notions which belittle the

importance of dogmatic theology, and also stands as a corrective to those who neglect any part of it.

The present situation is not one of passing moment. As well might a medical doctor discard his books on anatomy as for a preacher to discard his books on theology; and since doctrine is the bone structure of the body of revealed truth, the neglect of it must result in a message characterized by uncertainties, inaccuracies, and immaturity. . . To the preacher is committed a responsibility of surpassing import. Men of other professions are tireless in their attempts to discover the truths and to perfect themselves in the use of the forces belonging to their various callings, though these are in the restricted field of material things. The preacher is called upon to deal with the things of God, the supernatural and eternal.

No substitute will ever be found for the knowledge of the Word of God. That Word alone deals with things eternal and infinite, and it alone has power to convert the soul and to develop a God-honoring spiritual life. There is a limitless yet hidden spiritual content within the Bible which contributes much to its supernatural character. . . Acquiring the knowledge of the spiritual content of the Bible is a life task. The great preachers who have moved the hearts of men with divine power have been saturated with Bible truths secured through a first-hand, daily study of its text. General facts of human leaning may be acquired by the usual means, but spiritual truths are apprehended only as taught to the individual heart by the Spirit through diligent study and prayer.

I'll give one additional quote by Sparks related to Chafer's comments;

As we contemplate the state of things in the world today, we are very deeply impressed with the prevailing malady of spiritual blindness. It is the root malady of the time. We should not be far wrong if we said that most, if not all, of the troubles from which the world is suffering, are traceable to that root, namely, blindness. The masses are blind; there is no doubt about that. In a day which is supposed to be a day of unequaled enlightenment, the masses are deceived. The leaders are also blind, blind leaders of the blind. But in a very large measure, the same is true of the Lord's people. Speaking quite generally, Christians are today very blind.

Every bit of new spiritual seeing in God's word is a work from heaven. Spiritual Life and understanding are not only a miracle in its inception; they are a continuous miracle in this matter right on to the last. We do not say or suggest that you may have anything extra to the Word of God, but we *do* claim that there is a vast amount in the Word of God that we have never seen or understood. Surely everybody agrees with that: and it is just that – to *see*, and the more you see, I mean *really* see, the more overwhelmed you feel about the whole thing, because you know that you have come to the borders of the land of far distances, lying beyond a short lifetime's power of experience. May the Lord allow us all to be of those whose eyes have been opened.

This is exactly what our Lord taught and did in Lk. 24:45; "He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." They had the scriptures, they read the scriptures, but apart of a

miracle work from God, they could not *understand* the scriptures. Diligently studying the scriptures without constant prayer to understand them is an exercise in futility.

Finally, entire books have been written expounding and defending what we will be looking at. I will only be giving an introduction to each of the doctrines we're going to discuss.

We're going to begin with the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith;

(Eph. 2:8) By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Each of the primary terms in this passage are packed with vital information, much of which has gone through massive interpretative dishonesty over the years.

In the original language of the New Testament, "grace" emphasizes divine favor and refers to that which is completely unmerited by the recipient – it is a gift that cannot be earned by any effort on our part.

The word for "faith" is describing the trust we place in someone else to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. In the instance of salvation, we are helpless. If God does not act, we cannot be saved. His action on our behalf is in response to our faith or trust in Him to do so.

And "not of works" means "not of works". The work needed for our salvation was fully accomplished on the Cross. When Christ said, "It is finished" it was.

(Rom. 4:2-5; 11:6) If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness . . . if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise, grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise, work is no longer work."

We can receive the gift of salvation by faith or we can reject it by unbelief, but there is nothing we can do to earn it.

All that, I'm sure, seems clear enough, until you start reading articles or position papers on the various approaches theologians have taken to this. We obviously can't explore all of them, but we can look at some aberrations that can give us an idea of how the enemy has complicated and distorted what was meant to be something we could understand. Let's look at some of the unfortunate additions to "faith alone";

First, "Repent and believe" - Mk. 1:15; "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

The Greek word for repent means to have a change of mind. You didn't believe in Christ; now you do. You 'repented' when you decided to believe. This is from Lewis Sperry Chafer,

There is no reason why sorrow for sin cannot accompany repentance, but the sorrow, whatever it may be, is not repentance. In 2 Cor. 7:10, it is said that 'godly sorrow works repentance,' that is, it leads on to repentance; but the sorrow is not to be mistaken for the change of mind which it may serve to produce. Likewise, people are led by this error to measure the validity, the assurance, of their salvation by the intensity of anguish which preceded or accompanied it. Sorrow of heart becomes a most subtle form of meritorious work, and to that extent, a contradiction of grace.

Since emotions cannot be produced at will, the way of salvation has thus been made impossible for all who do not experience the required anguish. The New Testament call to repentance is not an urge to self-condemnation, but a call to a change of mind (about Jesus of Nazareth)."

Repentance, which is a change of mind, is *included* in believing. No one can turn to Christ from some other confidence without a change of mind, and that is all the repentance a spiritually dead individual can ever effect."

Second, "Believe and surrender to God";

From Earl Radmacher;

Dedication, which is voluntary in the case of the believer, is made imperative in the case of the unsaved. The error of imposing Christ's requirements as Lord and Master upon the unsaved is disastrous. They are not able to intelligently (understand) it or to remind the preacher of the fact that he, in calling upon them to dedicate their lives, is demanding of them what they have no ability to produce.

For example, Rom. 12:1 is written to *believers*, not to *unbelievers*;

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . .

Third, "Believe and be baptized" - Acts 2:38; Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . ."

The correct interpretation of this passage hinges on the word "for". This is 'causal' in the sense of an imperative or command to us, and the word is not "for" it's "on account of", meaning that "on account of" or "because of" your "forgiveness of sins", you should be baptized.

Here's Chafer's input;

"Remission of sins, here equivalent to personal salvation, is made dependent on the believing that comes from repentance (a change of mind), not on baptism. To make salvation dependent on baptism, which is a human work, is to add works to faith and thereby to both negate the 150 passages that assure us that salvation is by faith alone; and it is also lessen the completeness of the work of Christ on the Cross.

Finally, "Believe and endure to the end"; (Matt. 24:12) "But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."

First, the word “saved” can refer to either eternal salvation or temporal deliverance from a crisis – as in Matt. 14:29-30 which says,

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the strength of the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

I doubt anyone would think that Peter was asking to go to heaven; he was actually asking *not* to go to heaven (at least, not yet). The *context* shows us how to interpret the word “saved” in this event.

Our passage in Matt. 24 is also a simple matter of context. We are familiar with the Lord’s instruction on the conditions which will prevail on earth during the final seven years of Daniel’s prophecy considering the Age of Israel. This time is also known as the tribulation period.

The “saved” Jesus is referring to deals with the protection and deliverance of a remnant of God’s people from being destroyed by the Antichrist. There will be a number of Messianic Jews living during this period of global judgment and persecution will “endure” and be delivered into the Kingdom of Christ.

Now, let’s look at two presentations of the gospel; the first given by the Lord and the second by Paul;

(John 3:16) For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

(Acts 16:31) Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

When the Lord and Paul explained the way of salvation, they didn’t add any of the conditions we just discussed to their explanation- for the simple reason that nothing needs to be (or should be) added.

So, *why* faith alone with nothing added? Why did God require that it be this way? Because when we exercise faith, we have done nothing meritorious. People can’t emote, surrender or publicly confess their way to heaven. We don’t help Jesus save us. Salvation is completely “of the Lord”.

When we trust in Christ, all the merit and honor go to Him, not us. That’s why faith must be the only path to salvation; it’s the only thing we can do that completely eliminates any credit going to us, and assures that all the glory goes to the Lord.

Here are some additional comments by L.S. Chafer;

It has been asserted that the primary divine purpose in saving a soul is the satisfying of infinite divine love for that soul and the exercise of the attribute of sovereign grace. Should the slightest human word of merit be allowed to intrude into this great divine undertaking, the purpose of manifesting divine grace would be shattered. It therefore follows that, of necessity, men are saved by believing, apart from every form of human worthiness.

Nearly 50 years ago I stumbled upon a verse in Job that contains a word that I think is only found in the King James translation, the word is “daysman”. Here’s the verse:

(Job 9:32-33) For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any daysman between us, that might lay his hand upon us both.

A “daysman” is a person who is able to put one hand on God’s shoulder and the other on Man’s and bring them together. Job was desiring such a person to come; but whoever He was, He would have to be fully God and fully Man to accomplish this.

(1 Tim. 2:5) For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.

Salvation is exclusively the “daysman” work of the Son of God who is also the Son of Man.

Nearly all Christians in the world of evangelicalism claim to believe this, but many of those same Christians will add something to faith alone – they may add perseverance, baptism or even something of their own invention. But for our purposes in this study, the goal is to make sure that we realize how and why “by grace through faith” is the only way to be saved and that this truth is an essential doctrine of our faith that needs to be defended, against all who would distort or misrepresent it.

(Gal. 1:8) Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be accursed.

(Jude 3) While I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

This leads us to our second essential doctrine, which is Eternal Security. The truth of the security of God’s children is, in reality, one of the tests of whether those who claim to believe in salvation by faith alone *actually* believe that.

As we’ll see, if someone claims to believe the gospel of grace that we’ve just examined, but also believes that a Christian can lose their salvation, they are contradicting the exclusive merit and work of God in our salvation and they are adding a condition to be fulfilled by man.

Proponents of the ‘loss of salvation’ teaching are saying that salvation comes by faith plus not falling away – in other words, faith plus endurance is needed to guarantee heaven. Salvation is no longer the exclusive work of the Lord in response to faith, man has brought his *own* works or effort into the equation. And even though endurance may play a significant role in spiritual growth and rewards in the presence of Christ, it has no place in the justification of the one who believes in Christ.

I was able to get an explanation from a local pastor on why he believes Christians can lose their salvation. I thought it might be good to dissect what he said in the light of what we’ve just talked about. Here’s what he said;

If you are saved, you are saved. If someone has confessed, then they are saved. If they fall away then we continue to pray for them, as they are not walking with the Lord and God will be the final judge. If they come back we rejoice in their salvation. To quote Chuck Smith, "I don't know if you can ever lose your salvation, but I hope to never find out." Meaning, I don't think that all you need is the sinners prayer and then you can go about your way, but I also don't think that because of one mess up, you may not have ever been saved.

What's he saying? Salvation begins with confession. If they fall away, God will make the ultimate decision on their salvation. One mess up won't condemn a person, but falling away might.

Salvation then becomes faith plus not falling away. "Not falling away" involves an effort on our part – it's the endurance or perseverance factor.

The gospel of grace of God is "faith alone", which is not the same gospel as "faith plus perseverance".

(Gal. 1:6) I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the *grace* of Christ, to a different gospel . . ."

Nearly the entire book of Romans is addressing and expounding on Paul's gospel. This is one of the reasons, among many, that I have cited Eternal Security as one of the essentials of our faith. So, let's begin by giving a definition;

"The absolute assurance that once a person places his trust in Christ, his salvation can never be lost. The believer's unbreakable relationship with God cannot be abrogated."

Or to put it in layman's terms, it means "once saved, always saved" – no exceptions.

There are a number of things that happened to us the second we believed in Christ. Each of them forms various elements of the infrastructure of Eternal Security;

- 1) God instantly imputes His own eternal life to that person (1 John 5:11-12)
- 2) God also imputes His own righteousness to the believer (Rom. 3:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; 5:21)
- 3) When a person is born again, they move from a "Judge/Defendant" relationship with God to a "Father/Child" relationship. From that point on there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1), their sins have been removed forever (Heb. 8:12).
- 4) The sins of a child in a parent/child relationship are dealt with in discipline, not condemnation. For the child who honors the family, the Father honors that child; for the child who dishonors the family, the Father disciplines the child, but He never condemns him. When a person is born again, they are not only declared righteous and indwelt by His Spirit, they are "bone of His bones . . ."; they are His children. God would no more send one of his own children to hell for rebelling than you would send one of your children to hell for being a teenager.
- 5) It is impossible for us, or any other creation, to remove us from being held securely in God's hand (John 10:28; Rom. 8:38-39).
- 6) When we believe we are sealed by God's Spirit – the Seal is the guarantee of ownership and destiny (Eph. 4:30).

- 7) For a believer to lose his salvation for any reason, Jesus would be shown to have deceived His disciples when He personally addresses this issue in John 6:38-40;

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but to do the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of those He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day. For it is My Father's will that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Here's one author's summation of this;

The believer who understands the doctrine of Eternal Security lives in the light of eternity and stands on the conviction that he cannot do anything to cancel what God has accomplished. Assured of eternal life forever in the presence of God, he leaves the settled issue of salvation behind and realizes meaningful life on earth by faithfully serving the Lord. Conversely, the believer who lives in doubt of his security, squanders his opportunity and cannot move forward in the Christian life. (RBT)

When the author referred to "squandering our opportunity" and being sidetracked from moving forward in the Christ life, he's simply acknowledging the fact the uncertain believer does not understand grace, which is the foundation of the New Covenant; he lacks an understanding of positional truth which surfaces every time Paul uses the phrase "in Christ", which is Paul's most frequent explanation of what happened to us when we were saved. The believer's position is "in Christ", not "in Adam".

So, only those who understand and believe they are eternally secure by no merit of their own, are serving God from the position of gratitude, rather than from reliance on personal endurance.

Now, as we did with the doctrine of Salvation, let's look at some of the subtleties of deception around this and at some objections.

You may come across someone that tells you they believe in Eternal Security and you feel a wave of peace flow over you because you've found a spiritual brother. But as the conversation continues, you notice they say things like, "Of course, this only applies to genuine believers" and you say, "of course", but you wonder why they brought up something so obvious. Then you discover that they encourage you to make sure you are dealing with a true, born-again believer before you bestow the assurance of salvation on them.

So, you ask them how one can know who is and who isn't saved. They say, "By their fruits you shall know them." And they tell you that "perseverance" is the real test of authentic salvation. You thought that this was a growth issue for believers; you didn't know it was an acid test for salvation. You might start wondering how much perseverance is needed- and who decides that? Now red flags are popping up – as they should be.

And maybe this thought has also crossed your mind; if this really *is* the acid test, how comforting would it be to know salvation can't be lost, but not know if you have it?

(Matt. 7:15-20) Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them.

What's the context? Is Jesus telling them how to identify someone who isn't saved or is He showing them how to spot a false teacher? The Lord's exhortation is not a blanket statement regarding all of unsaved humanity. As a matter of fact, when it comes to "judging" the lost, listen to what Paul says in 1 Cor. 5:12;

What have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges.

If our job was "fruit inspection" with the goal of identifying who is saved and who isn't, there are some passages that show how incredibly difficult that job would be. For example;

(Matt. 23:27-28) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but *inside* are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

It's hard enough to determine whether the lifestyle of someone who appears to be righteous is revealing their salvation or lack thereof, but try seeing the "dead men's bones" and the "hypocrisy and lawlessness" inside of them. You'd have to be able to be as confident about calling their *motives* false as about calling their *righteousness* false.

I'm not saying the Lord can't show us someone's heart if He wants, I'm just saying without Him doing so, we'd never get past the surface. And as we've seen, that's not our job anyway.

There's a major problem with thinking that people who do Christian things are Christians, and those who don't, aren't.

(Matt. 7:21-23) Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Let's break that down. What specifically were these people doing?

- 1) Prophesying *in the name of Jesus*
- 2) Casting out demons, also *in His name*
- 3) Doing many mighty (some translations have "wonderful") works *in the name of the Lord*

What more evidence would we need that we are dealing with genuine believers? Anyone who thinks we can decide someone's status as saved or unsaved based on their "fruits" is going to have to explain how these "fruits" in Matt 7 were being done by people Jesus condemned to hell.

And we could easily flip this coin to the other side and demonstrate how wrong this approach is by showing that, in many cases, people with a complete lack of any fruit at all, are definitely saved.

As always, the best place to look for this is the church at Corinth. I won't list all the verses, they are scattered through both letters, but the 'fruit' of the Corinthians in terms of the outward observation of their lives included incest, drunkenness, idolatry, strife, envying, and fellowship with demons. Here's a passage (among many) that shows Paul response to this; (1 Cor. 3:3) "... are ye not carnal and walk as men?"

Carnality is the dominion of the flesh in the life of a believer, and the phrase "walk as men" means that to the outside observer, the lives of the Corinthians were indistinguishable from that of the natural man – the unbeliever.

If we believed we could know who is and who isn't saved by their lifestyle, we could not only end up classifying unbelieving religious people as saved, we could also end up condemning carnal Christians.

I'll show one last contextual misinterpretation that is occasionally taught. It's an attempt to 'qualify' a person's stand on Eternal Security by using James to teach that even though it's true that those who are saved are secure forever, we can't know for sure who actually *is* saved, because as James taught-"faith without works is dead". If we see works, we are looking at someone who is likely saved, if we see a lack of works, we are looking at someone who only *thinks* he is saved.

(Jas. 2:14) What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?

The single most important tool in Biblical hermeneutics (in interpreting the Bible) is context. It is hermeneutically dishonest to ascribe a meaning to a word or phrase solely based on how it's used in other places. You have to take into consideration the context, the audience, and the purpose the author had in mind when he wrote his letter.

James isn't targeting or challenging his reader's salvation (he calls them his "beloved brethren" in James 2:5); he's challenging (and even rebuking) the *condition of their faith*.

If, as "beloved brethren", they claim to have a healthy, genuine faith, then where's the evidence? This doesn't just apply to the readers of James' letter; it applies to every Christian who's ever lived.

We can't claim the quality of our faith in the word of God is strong and healthy if we are living in disobedience to what the Lord has asked us to do.

So, in James 2:5 he adds this; "... Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Works for the believer are the evidence of the *condition* of his faith. There are

two kinds of faith being addressed in James' letter; a living faith which produces works and a dead faith which producing nothing.

I will to share one last, brief comment by Chafer on our security in Christ;

If salvation is no more than a detached coin which one holds in the hand and is secure only by virtue of a feeble human grasp, it might easily, no, almost certainly, be lost. On the other hand, if salvation is the creation of a new being composed of unchangeable and imperishable elements, and in every aspect of it, is made to depend on the perfect and immutable merit of the Son of God, there can be no failure. Doubts about the security of those who are saved may be traced almost universally to the failure to comprehend the reality of that which God accomplished in sovereign grace.