

## ESSENTIALS (MATTHEW 25:34-40 Ministries)

Saint Augustine has a famous maxim: “In **ESSENTIALS** unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity.” This maxim begs the question of what is meant by “the essentials”.

Initially, one can say that which is essential is in the context of SALVATION. After all, everybody who has salvation in Christ is a Christian and part of the Body of Christ. Augustine was concerned with sound doctrine, and clearly the doctrine of salvation is an essential. Certainly, this is of critical importance from an evangelical perspective, but it is probably less than what was contemplated by Augustine. There is also a set of doctrines that are essential for a transforming relationship with God through Christ Jesus. Many of these were set down in the early creeds of the Church: the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian (or Second Nicene or Symbolum Quicunque) Creed. An examination of these creeds shows that they were increasingly more complex, responding to heresies of the day. If we look at statements of creed since then, we find them growing in size and scope. Compare, for instance, the Westminster Confession or the Philadelphia Confession of Faith—both require a book rather than a page. What are these creeds and confessions addressing? They attempt to define that which is essential for Christian communication or fellowship. Various denominations have developed catechisms to define the beliefs needed for a sound relationship with God. The Ministry Library contains at least 58 different creeds, confessions, and catechisms of different Christian denominations. All of them developed over the past 400 years are many pages of text.

One should ask if the body of ESSENTIALS is growing or if we merely need a larger dictionary or if there is a growing schism in the Church that is violating Augustine’s maxim. If we take the position that it is God who defines what is essential, then we can answer that the body of essentials is the same yesterday, today, and forever; it is a part of God’s plan. There have been schisms in the Church through history, but there have also been healings. This ministry has not found it difficult to work with the variety of Christian denominations, leading us to conclude that the creeds and catechisms are growing in order to provide greater definition in the face of various heretical teachings and philosophies in our societies. If the writers of the New Testament, especially Peter, John, and Jude, were concerned with false teachers, certainly the variety of false teachings has grown. This has created a need for additional statements of faith that are more specific or clear in a variety of areas. Many heresies pervert the meanings of words common in the Christian vocabulary, so clarity is important to prevent their spread within the Church.

For instance, the Apostle’s Creed states, “I believe in God the Father Almighty; (Maker of Heaven and Earth;) And in Jesus Christ His only *begotten* Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost (or *Spirit*); born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified dead and buried; (He descended into hell (or *Hades*);) the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven; and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost (or *Spirit*), the holy (catholic or *universal*) Church, (the communion of saints,) the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, (and life everlasting).” Note that even this earliest (circa 110 AD) and simplest of creeds has been modified over the years (variations are in parentheses, alternate words are in italics).

While the early creeds only focused on the nature of God and of Christ, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the universal church, the latter creeds expound on the inspiration of the Bible, the nature of man, salvation, the last times, and other elements of doctrinal importance. The extensive teachings of the New Testament (on which the early creeds were built) warning about false teachings point to 3 pillars of faith:

1. Who is Jesus Christ?—God come in the flesh. (See Philippians 2)
2. What is the work of Christ?—He who fulfilled the Law, was crucified for our sins, and was resurrected that we might have eternal life through Him. (See 1 Corinthians 15)
3. What is the Bible?—The Word of God, immutably and infallibly expressing the will and character of God. (See 2 Timothy 3 and 2 Peter 1)

All false teachings and doctrinal perversions deviate from the orthodox (universally accepted) answers to these questions.

**The common elements of confession:** The ESSENTIALS can then be summarized as those elements that we must all hold in common in our beliefs, teachings, practices, and world-view in order to BE Christians. That would include the things necessary for salvation as well as the things necessary for the practice of true Christian faith. The various creeds, confessions, and catechisms of Christian denominations do have differences; however, they share a remarkable commonality. Although the fine details and wordings and orderings may differ, the confessional articles are essentially common. It is true that the later confessions address more topics of faith, but many of these topics were never a matter of question in the early church. The following list of common elements is derived from the 2 dozen or so most widely used confessions, creeds, and catechisms. The various creeds, confessions, and catechisms have from 5 to 200 articles or statements of varying complexities and levels of detail. Nevertheless, the common elements are either explicitly stated or alluded to in almost all of these confessions and catechisms and creeds. The dozens of confessional articles and catechism questions which go beyond this list embody many traditions of a particular denomination and Bible interpretations that are not universally shared by all Christian churches. Furthermore, each of the common elements below often has one or more explanatory interpretations attached to them, which may differ from one confession to another. Therefore, while believers following two different confessions should agree on this list, they may disagree on the application to their life in faith. These differences should be treated as elements in which we can honestly differ without dividing, respecting one another's interpretations. Doctrines that differ substantially from this list should be considered aberrant or heretical and diligently tested against the Bible.

1. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, authoritatively true. (True above every other standard of truth.)
2. God is One God manifest in the Trinity, the only true God.
3. God is sovereign, almighty to do His will and incapable of having His will corrupted or influenced.
4. God created everything out of nothing (that is visible).
5. God is providentially in control of all things.
6. Man is utterly sinful resulting from the disobedience of Adam, the original man. (There is none righteous, not even one.) Without the salvation of Christ, each man is guilty of sin and stands condemned.
7. God provided for the redemption of man from sin. Man is incapable of saving himself.
8. The redemption of man is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who is both God and man.
9. Christ lived as a man, yet without sin.
10. Christ died for our sins on the cross and was buried, according to the Scriptures. (He is the propitiatory sacrifice our sins, the innocent for the guilty.)
11. Christ was raised from death in a bodily resurrection.
12. Christ has made eternal life available to those who believe in His work on the cross in His resurrection.
13. Man has a (free)will by which he chooses obedience or disobedience to God, yet not transcending the will of God.
14. All of mankind is not saved, but only those to whom God has chosen by His grace.
15. Believers can be assured that they are in a state of grace (saved).
16. There is a moral law, which is decreed by God. (There is an absolute right and wrong).
17. Christ is the ultimate judge of all mankind.
18. Believers are charged to do good works and to keep the laws of men and to obey the (elders) over them in the congregation, so far as they are consistent with those of God, yet from faith in Christ rather than by obligation. The good works and obedience to authority in a believer's life will grow as a result of the sanctifying work of Christ in that believer's life.
19. The sacraments of baptism and of communion are to be held in common by all saints.
20. Christ was born by the Virgin Mary, who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.
21. Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father.

22. Christ is the head of the Church, having appointed (elders) over the individual congregations. These (elders) have the authority and responsibility to rightly divide the Word of God and to determine right conduct within the congregation. (The (elders) are especially accountable before Christ.)
23. Those who believe in Christ as their Lord and Savior shall be raised to eternal life in the likeness of Christ's resurrection, to be with Him in glory.
24. The Law of God, including (or especially) the Ten Commandments, is God's expressed will as to how we should live. The Law of God cannot be kept by sinful man, pointing to our need for a Savior.
25. Unbelievers are condemned and shall spend eternity in the Lake of Fire (some creeds say "Hell").
26. *Believers are given spiritual gifts by the Holy Spirit to benefit them in the service in the Church (Body of Christ).*
27. *The Church has a responsibility to make Disciples of Christ from all peoples.*

Notes: The term "elders" is placed in parentheses to signify that the different confessions use many different terms. (26) and (27) are in italics as these only occur in very recent confessions and remain unstated by most denominations; however, they are derived directly from Scripture (1 Corinthians 12 for (26) and Matthew 28:19-20 for (27)) and are not disputed by any authoritative denominational sources.

In considering these elements of common confession, the essentials, we note that there are a variety of opinions on the practical application of these beliefs. For instance, we all confess that God is sovereign (3) and that man has a free will (13), but how these beliefs are worked together in so many areas where they seem to be in contradiction is an area debated widely within the Church. Element (22) identifies the need for governance in the Church. This is probably the area of greatest divergence among denominations; many different models for congregational and church governance exist (all models have worked and all models have sometimes failed). We find that there are many details upon which we can disagree. Some of the disagreements are very strong. After all, we are taught that our doctrines are things upon which we base our everyday lives. Many people would add several dozen other items to the list above.

This is where Augustine's maxim becomes valuable to us. We need to recognize that we struggle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, world forces of darkness, and spiritual forces of wickedness. We are in a spiritual war not of our choosing; therefore, it is essential for us to be united in our Lord Jesus Christ and to work together to be used by Him in winning the spiritual battles of everyday life in our society. One can always cite too many examples in history or current events where the Church has become fractured and failed to perform adequately or Biblically in this world. The Church has one head, even Jesus Christ; therefore, we must be united. Therefore, we must also grant grace and liberty to those with whom we might disagree on nonessential issues in order for us to cooperate together in LOVE.

It is the love of Christ transparently manifest in the lives of the saints that attracts people to Him in spite of the suffering that will surely result.