

Hermeneutics and the EFCC

Essentials, Non-essentials and means for differentiating between them

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There a number of versions of the quote and an even larger list of those who it is attributed to, but the phrase, “In essentials unity; in non-essentials charity; in all things, Jesus Christ” continues to be employed to describe the inclusive spirit of the Evangelical Free Church. This inclusive spirit has been evident in the Free Church refusal to divide over issues not directly addressed in its Statement of Faith. Michael Andrus argues that this “tolerance of viewpoints” regarding issues the Statement of Faith is silent on, is “one of the greatest strengths of the Evangelical Free Church of America” and may “also be its Achilles’ heel.”¹ This differentiation between essentials and nonessentials clearly raises the question of how does one decide on what is essential and what is not?

A point of clarification before we proceed: distinguishing between essentials and nonessentials does not mean that the EFC assumes essentials are capital “T” truths, and nonessentials are not truth issues at all – but merely matters of personal preference. While there are some issues that are matters of personal preference (like my favorite colour, music etc.) the nonessentials we are talking about are still theological truths – but they are issues over which Christians have disagreed for centuries. The Free Church has elected to be silent on these issues - we have not included them in our Statement of Faith. Yet this does not mean the Free Church believes that contradictory opinions on issues like eternal security, predestination etc. are all equally correct. The Free Church is not relativistic in this sense. Much of the Free Church stance arises out of its unique history. When the Norwegian/Danish and Swedish Free Churches merged to form the EFCA in 1950, they brought different beliefs and practices to the new family on a number of issues. For instance, the Norwegians practiced infant baptism, the Swedes, adult baptism by immersion; the Swedes ordained women, the Norwegians did not. Added to this was the belief that Christ was returning soon, that the most important matter was to share the

¹ Michael Andrus, “Distinguishing between essentials and nonessentials of the Christian Faith’, EFCA Today, Winter 2006.

gospel, not to divide over minor theological issues. As Arnold T. Olson, first president of the EFCA states,”

They were silent on those doctrines which through the centuries had divided Christians of equal dedication, biblical knowledge, spiritual maturity and love for Christ. They did not believe these differences could be resolved at a mission meeting or in one generation. In view, of the imminent return of Christ, there was no time to argue about what they considered to be non-essential.²

As Olson argues, the EFCA Statement of Faith is unique in its omissions compared to other creeds. He points out that the Free Church is neither Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist nor Holiness in its theology. Thus, when examining the Statement of Faith, “ the omissions must be considered as carefully as the inclusions”³

The need for believers to choose carefully which issues they will break fellowship over is readily apparent when one gives even a cursory look at Statement of Faiths from various denominations and movements. For example, the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada has a strong statement regarding “one baptism of the Spirit” at point of salvation, “but many fillings” and further states that sign gifts such as miracles, the gift of tongues and other sign gifts have ceased and are “not necessary to give evidence of the baptism or of the filling of the Spirit, nor are they the mark of spiritual maturity.”⁴Further, the AGC Articles of Faith and Doctrine argue for a literal thousand year reign of Christ and a clear rejection of divine healing as a necessary consequence of the Atonement.⁵ Meanwhile, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada’s “Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths” presents baptism of the spirit as an experience the believer has distinct from the new birth and which a believer should seek; that tongues are an evidence of baptism of the spirit; and that “divine healing

² Arnold T Olson, **The Significance of Silence.** Minneapolis, Free Church Press, 1981, p.16

³ Olson, Significance of Silence, p. 5

⁴ www.agcofcanada.com, Articles XII, XIII

⁵ Articles XV, XIX

provided in the atonement of Christ is the privilege of all believers.”⁶ The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada has a strong statement on baptism by immersion (in contrast to other Mennonite churches) and strong arguments against “state sanctioned violence”, swearing of oaths, and opposition to war (and a corresponding call to peace and social justice).⁷ On the other hand, the Gospel Coalition, an evangelical movement committed to defending and spreading the gospel has very little emphasis on social justice and one of their longest articles of faith is a strong argument regarding the “headship” of a husband and the duty of the wife to submit to her husband and the corresponding application that leadership roles in the church are limited to men only.⁸

Of course, this is only the tip of the iceberg – further investigation would reveal a myriad of theological and practical issues that denominations have included as essentials in their confessional statements. While scholars such as John Stackhouse have done fine work summarizing the issues that unite evangelicals in Canada, the fact remains that denominations have also chosen to distinguish themselves by theological differences. However, as Stackhouse points out, evangelicals have also typically chosen to cooperate in a transdenominational manner – they have chosen to set aside their differences over issues considered less important, in order to cooperate in spreading the gospel (an issue considered to be more important). There are some evangelicals who believe that all truth is equally important and hence, dividing truth between essential and nonessential is dangerous and heretical. Nevertheless, most evangelicals have realized that such a division is both defensible and necessary. The cause for concern however, is always, “how should one decide on what is essential and what is not?” This paper will seek to provide a framework for approaching this type of decision. In Part One I will seek to outline certain biblical, practical and EFCC principles and realities that speak to the

⁶ www.paoc.ca, “Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths”, Articles 5.6.3, 5.6.4, 5.6.5

⁷ www.mb.ca?

⁸ www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/who, “Confessional Statement”, Article 3

issue. In Part Two, I will suggest criterion that help us decide which theological truths we will hold as essentials and which we will consider to be non-essential.

I need to state at the outset, that this paper is not a balanced one – that is, it deliberately challenges those who would want to stress hermeneutical certainty so much that they would break fellowship (and find growing numbers of Christians to label as heretics) with Christians who hold to the authority of Scripture with equal fervor but do not agree with them on every issue. Hence, I emphasize things like interpretive subjectivity and exegetical uncertainty in ways that many will find disturbing. If we were being pushed by those who emphasize mystery so much that no truth was certain anymore, (by liberalism) then this paper would present arguments for hermeneutical certainty. Since the question on the table is whether we can ever consider any truth issue to be non-essential and not worth dividing over, I have focused on engaging that question. It is my hope that this paper will help us to move beyond a mere intuitive sense of what is essential and what is nonessential. Perhaps more importantly, my hope is that this paper can provide a somewhat objective framework for determining what is worth dividing over. Sometimes it seems that the heat of a discussion is generated by how passionately *feels* about the issue (basic emotional reaction) rather than on any objective sense of what is theologically more or less important. I trust that a reasoned process for assigning issues to essential or non-essential categories will save us the divisions inherent in emotionally reactionary debates.

Part I

Biblical Principles and EFCC Ethos

There are a number of biblical issues that speak to our dilemma regarding dividing over truth. In this section we will consider biblical principles and aspects of EFCC history/ethos that speak to unity, charity and Jesus Christ – the three nouns attached to “essentials, non-essentials, and all things” in our EFCC motto.

Unity and Essentials

Our first consideration is unity. While our motto declares that we are unified in essentials, biblically we would need to further clarify that and note that we are unified in a person – Jesus Christ. Jesus himself prays for the disciples in John 17:21, “I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” It is important to begin by noting that the believer’s unity is in the person of Christ rather than a certain set of propositions, our genetics, race, denomination etc. The apostle Paul further highlights the radical nature of this unity and how it trumps all other things that separate us when he says in Galatians 3:28-29, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God’s promise to Abraham belongs to you.” Paul further declares in Ephesians 2 that while Gentiles used to be excluded from the citizenship of Israel, Christ has made peace between us, breaking down the wall of hostility between us by his death on the cross, so that Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ. In Chapter 4 Paul calls us to gentleness, humility, bearing with one another’s faults in love and making every effort to keep united in the spirit – why? Because there is one body and spirit, one glorious future together - one faith, one Lord, one baptism. In fact, Paul is quite furious with the Corinthians for dividing over the teaching of their favorite teachers – Apollos, Cephas, Paul – and seems to value unity in the body over dividing over favorite teachers. In I Corinthians 1:10 he calls the Corinthians to “agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” and he embarks on an extended critique of their habit of dividing over the favorite teachers in chapter 3. Likewise he challenges Timothy to warn those who divide over foolish controversies and speculations. His desire is for the Philippian church to be “like-

minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” The apostle John echoes this in III John, citing Diotrophes as an exclusivist church leader who refused to embrace other travelling teachers and prohibited others from welcoming them as well. So, it is clear that unity of the body is a key core value in the Bible – yet, the irony, as George Budd highlights is this: once we start to study the Scriptures, we have a tendency to divide over our interpretation of it.⁹ In light of God’s desire for unity in the body, we need to ask if an issue is really worth dividing over, is it an issue that distinguishes between those in the body of Christ and those outside of it, is it something that requires us to give freedom to disagree and how can we manage the clash of opinions on these matters?

This is a brief overview, but the call to maintain the unity of the body of Christ is easily evident in the New Testament. It is also not difficult to ascertain a tendency in the New Testament to emphasizing essential truths over other issues. Consider this: the New Testament contains a number of concise, summaries of the central points of the faith. These summaries do not include every major theological category – but they contain a number of key items. For instance, consider I Corinthians 15:1-8. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the key points of the message he had preached to them earlier – the important parts of the Good News concerned Christ dying for our sins according to the Scriptures, being buried, raised from the dead on the third day, witnessed, by Peter, the Twelve and a host of others. Chris Bounds holds that this passage contains the non-negotiables in Christianity – the person of Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. He argues that other crucial doctrines arose to clarify this central doctrine of the person and work of Christ. Bounds divides beliefs into three categories: essential beliefs (regarding Jesus and His saving work), important beliefs (like predestination, eternal security, original sin, infant baptism – distinctive of groups but issues not worth dying for) and peripheral beliefs (issues that are not important).¹⁰ Norman Geisler examines this same passage and links all the historic

⁹⁹ George Budd, “Letter to the Congregation of Okotoks EFC, pp. 1-3

¹⁰ Chris Bounds, “The Christian Essential”, www.drurywriting.com/keith/TheChristianEssential.htm

doctrines such as: human depravity, Christ's virgin birth, sinlessness, deity, humanity, atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, present high priestly service, second coming, final judgment and reign; God's unity, triunity; and the necessity of God's grace and faith to this passage.¹¹

Arnold T Olson also claims that the New Testament contains a number of creeds. He gives I Corinthians 8:6 (highlighting the fact of only one God and Father who created everything and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom God made everything and through whom we have been given life); 12:13 (we are all baptized into one body by the same spirit and we all share the same Spirit) and I Timothy 2:5-6 (there is only one God and mediator who can reconcile God and humanity, the man Jesus Christ who gave his life to purchase freedom for all – this is the message God gave to the world); 3:16(Christ was revealed in a human body, and vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, announced to the nations, believed in throughout the world and taken up to heaven in glory) as examples.¹²

Others attempt to also list the “essentials” but rarely provide a justification, assuming that the Bible systematically summarizes these. For instance, Matt Slick declares that the Bible itself reveals the doctrines essential to the Christian faith and they are: The deity of Christ, salvation by grace, resurrection of Christ, the gospel and monotheism. He provides verses (with no exegesis) to proof text these claims and further asserts that the secondary essentials are those necessary truths for which there is no self-declared penalty for denying – such as Jesus' as the only way to salvation, Jesus' virgin birth, and the trinity.¹³ Geisler argues that for a doctrine to be essential, it must be connected to our salvation, or our salvation would not be possible if the doctrine wasn't true (for example, Christ's virgin birth was necessary for our salvation, but not directly connected to salvation). This leads Geisler to distinguish between soteriological essentials (necessary for our justification and sanctification),

¹¹ Norman Geisler, 'The Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith: A Logical Approach', in **Christian Research Journal**, volume 28, number 06, p.24.

¹² Arnold T Olson, **This We Believe**, Minneapolis, Free Church Press, 1961, p. 26.

¹³ Matt Slick, "Essential Doctrines of Christianity", www.carm.org/essential-doctrines-of-christianity

epistemological essentials (beliefs about the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture that are not connected with salvation, but rather about how we know and understand God), and hermeneutical essentials (a literal historical-grammatical approach to interpreting the biblical text). Geisler concedes that the last two essentials are not contained in any of the historical creeds, but assumes they are implicit in understanding the first category of essentials.¹⁴

There are other summaries of essential doctrines in the New Testament - sermons preached in Acts 2 (where Peter highlights Jesus as the Messiah, killed, buried, resurrected by God, exalted and witnessed by the Spirit), 3 (where Peter highlights the same issues plus the need to repent, turn to God and have sins wiped away), 10 (where Peter summarizes these issues again plus the fact that peace with God through Jesus is available to Gentiles as well as Jews) and 13:16-43 (where Paul begins with the Old Testament to draw out the story of redemption). These all contain the basic doctrines that seemed core to the apostles that Jesus was killed, raised, exalted, saved those who repented and believed in Him. Norman Geisler highlights the credal expression of the faith found in I Timothy 3:16,

**God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels,
preached among the Gentiles, believed in the world, received up in glory.**¹⁵

Geisler also draws attention to Peter's use of the *kerygma* in the sermon recorded by Luke in Acts 10:36-43. This "proclamation" centers on preaching peace through Jesus, Lord of all, anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and power, witnessed by the disciples, killed on the cross, raised by God, witnessed by many, commands us to preach to all that he is ordained by God to be Judge of living and dead, and all who believe in him will receive remission of sins.¹⁶

¹⁴ Geisler, "Essential Doctrines, Logical Approach, pp.25-26.

¹⁵ Norman Geisler, "The Essential Doctrines of the Christian Faith: A Historical Approach", **Christian Research Journal**, Volume 28, number 05.p.26.

¹⁶ Geisler, p. 26.

Besides the biblical creeds, there are, of course, other historical creeds of the church. Everett Ferguson claims that the early church fathers followed the “rule of faith”, highlighting the person and saving work of Christ, the Trinity and the work of the Spirit, using it to refute heretics until the early creeds were accepted.¹⁷ Beyond this are the historical creeds of the church – The Apostles’ Creed (which focuses on human depravity; Christ’s virgin birth, sinlessness, deity, humanity, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and second coming to judge and reign; God’s unity, triunity; and the necessity of God’s grace and of faith), the Nicene Creed and Chalcedon Creed. Additionally, Geisler argues that the three above creeds and the four councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon) are accepted by most Christian groups as authoritative summaries of orthodoxy. Geisler further claims that the essential doctrines summarized in the creeds are the basis for our unity –they are the essential doctrines that distinguish cults of Christianity from true Christianity and that the essential doctrines are also the only truths over which we rightly can divide.¹⁸

Nonessentials and Charity

Arnold T Olson reminds us that the downside to creeds is that they can become a substitute for the Scriptures themselves and they can become a dogma that “turns its adherents into super-critical, cold hearted, hot-headed, witch-hunters.”¹⁹ Olson notes that the EFCA Statement of Faith is deliberately silent on many areas considered to be non-essential including questions of Arminianism and Calvinism, the sacraments and discipline of the church. Olson logically argues that each man has a

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson, “Rule of Faith” in Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, second edition. NY:1998, p. 1003

¹⁸ Geisler, *Essential Doctrines, Historical approach*, pp. 27-30

¹⁹ Olson, *This We Believe*, pp. 43, 45.

right to his own conviction, but to deny that same right to a brother or for the church to include in its constitution a statement which denies that right to each member is “to revert to narrow sectarianism”.²⁰

Olson’s key work, *Significance of Silence*, is an important book he wrote primarily for lay members of Free Churches in order to help them “be more tolerant of each other.”²¹ Olson tells of a man who couldn’t accept Free Church openness on a doctrine that he would give his right arm for – Olson’s response is telling. He replied that he wouldn’t give his smallest finger for a doctrine over which theologians, equally knowledgeable, dedicated and evangelical had disagreed over throughout the history of the church (though he would call on the grace of God to die for Christ if that was necessary). We will return to this last point regarding placing loyalty to the person of Christ over systematic theology later. Olson argues that the founders of the Free Church chose to remain silent on some issues so that there would be no second class members in the Free Church. They did not overlook these issues; they simply chose not to introduce these divisive elements into the fellowship, choosing to respect the views of all believers. Olson declares that this silence does not imply timidity or compromise. One of the favorite slogans of Free Church pioneers was “How Stands it Written”, but they discovered that among students of the Bible there were different views of interpretation. The other favorite Free Church slogan, “Believers only, but all believers” moved these pioneers to place more emphasis on personal salvation and to less on issues where differences of opinion had existed for centuries.²²

Both the Free Church propensity to distinguish between non-essentials and the call for charity have New Testament precedents. The early church was certainly forced to decide which Old Testament laws would be deemed to be essential and which would be deemed not to be essential early in its history. For instance, Peter was confronted with the whole relationship between Gentiles and the Levitical laws concerning clean and unclean food and peoples in Acts 10-11. He had the help of a vision

²⁰ Olson, *This We Believe*, pp. 47, 49.

²¹²¹ Arnold T Olson, *The Significance of Silence*, Minneapolis: Free Church Press, 1981, p. 6.

²² Olson, *Significance of Silence*, pp. 6, 17, 27.

from God, but it is clear that Peter was directed to set the demand of the gospel above the demands of Levitical law. Peter struggled with this, not only in the original instance of dealing with Cornelius, but Paul records in Galatians 2 the conflict he had with Peter who apparently reverted back to his old approach of prioritizing the old categories of clean/unclean over the new demands of the gospel.

The Apostle Paul fought bitterly to keep the gospel free from Old Testament ceremonial laws such as circumcision as his epistle to the Galatians and his behavior at the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council indicate. Acts 15: 2 indicates that Paul and Barnabas disagreed vehemently with those who wanted the Gentiles to carry out the requirements of the Old Testament law. James appealed to the Old Testament prophets who looked forward to the inclusion of the Gentiles and urged the others to decide in the spirit of that prophecy and not burden Gentiles with the demands of the law. They then sent out Paul and Silas as messengers to inform the churches of this freedom that would be granted in Christ.

Time and again we see leaders such as Paul mentoring their young charges to teach the truth gently and to avoid being quarrels and divisions. Paul instructs Timothy to make sure people aren't fighting over words (II Timothy 2:14-16) and Titus to avoid foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees and quarrels as they lead to divisions (Titus 3:9-11). He reminds the Romans to watch out for those who cause divisions (Romans 15:17-20). In Acts 18 we see Priscilla and Aquilla gently taking Apollos aside in order to teach him the way of God more adequately, even though his knowledge of Christ and the gospel was missing Jesus' death and resurrection – and the atonement! Apparently they showed him the way of God more adequately, but they didn't publically attack him - their charitable attitude is instructive.

This of course brings us to the mandate to conduct ourselves in love. Jesus called his disciples to be known by their love in John 13 and it seems that all of the disciples who authored New Testament books remembered this. John of course, is known as the apostle of love. Not only does he highlight

Jesus' words on love in the gospel he authored, but has strong words in I John 3, connecting love with truth and in I John 4:7-8 declaring that "anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Peter is typically not known as an "apostle of love", but in I Peter 4:7-11 he reminds his readers that "the end of all things is near" and then goes on to list loving each other as **the** crucial ("above all") implication (not "get your theology in order"). Even James, Jesus' brother seems to have understood more after Jesus death – being especially concerned about practical love issues like oppression of the poor by rich (chapter 2)and chastising them for quarrels and fights that were rife in their midst (4:1-3). And in case we set Paul against Jesus or some of the other apostles, as some authors like to do, we can easily see Paul focus on loving relationships in every one of his epistles from Roman 13:8 where he calls us to owe no one anything except the obligation to love one another, to similar calls to love in I Corinthians 13, Galatians 5, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3. Paul was no cold hearted "theologian" who elevated adherence to a systematic theology above practical theology of how we treat people.

This then, not only shows us the Free Church ethos intentionally distinguishes between essentials and nonessentials in order to carry out the biblical call to unity and charity, but also highlights the biblical precedent for both nonessentials and the call to charity. We now turn to the third part of our motto: Jesus Christ.

All Things Jesus Christ

In this section I would like to argue that the Free Church has made the person of Jesus Christ central to how we define the family and to our hermeneutic. Jim Belcher reminds us that what binds Christianity together is the unity of the gospel, but quotes John Stott regarding what he calls our “pathological tendency to fragment.” Belcher claims that evangelicals vacillate between placing doctrinal purity over unity and stressing relational unity over sound doctrine. He claims that “Jesus wants us to be equally committed to both.”²³ Belcher argues that orthodoxy is the ancient consensual tradition of spirit-guided discernment of Scripture and that there are two tiers that divide the essentials of orthodoxy from the particularities of differing traditions. He, like others, posits that the top tier matches the creeds of the early church which have historically and universally defined orthodoxy, while the bottom tier corresponds to the distinctive of each church body. This bottom tier would be those things that Calvin defined as “things indifferent”. Belcher believes that we ought to draw people to the well of the gospel and that we should keep that well central in our preaching. He states that the gospel can be spoken with dogmatic boldness, but when we do not highlight the gospel in every text we slip into works orientated motivation. Belcher calls evangelicals, in light of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 to be gospel centered in our preaching, uniting around the gospel not dividing over non-essentials.²⁴

This placing of the gospel at the centre of things is central to the Free Church ethos. Arnold Olson reminds us that the EFC was established on a broad basis in order to make room for all who believed in Christ and accepted the Bible as the Word of God. He further explains that “it sought no separating shibboleths in doctrine or confession to which applicants to membership had to subscribe. The simple statement of the New Testament that all who believed, “were added to the church” was the guiding principle.”²⁵ The thought was if Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church admitted all who believe in Him into the Church, upon what authority could an earthly organization exclude such believers? The

²³ Jim Belcher, **Deep Church**, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009, pp. 53-4.

²⁴ Belcher, **Deep Church**, pp. 59-62, 156-9.

²⁵ Olson, **Significance of Silence**, p.13.

visible church then should have no other stipulation for membership than those “prevailing in the invisible Church of God.”²⁶ Olson quotes early Free Church leaders such as L J Pederson who believed that the Free Church stood for the unity of all Christians. Pederson claimed that Lutheran churches were gatherings of Lutherans, Methodist churches were gatherings of Methodists, but Free Churches were a gathering for all Christians and that “Christ is our point of unity, not agreement in every doctrine.”²⁷ Hence the question asked by the pioneers as they met fellow Scandinavians was not “what do you believe about (baptism, eternal security, speaking in tongues) but “Are you saved?”²⁸

Thus the Free Church has always placed salvation at the centre of our hermeneutic and identity. The phrase “believers only, but all believers” was a two edged sword that not only moved people away from identifying membership with a State church that downplayed personal salvation, but also moved them to downplay conformity to a systematic theology. Instead they emphasized membership in the universal church through salvation in Christ as the basis of joining together in a local church. In fact, from 1884-1947 the Swedish Free Church in the United States opposed the adoption of a comprehensive doctrinal creed, instead embracing the simple declaration “ this organization accepts the Bible both Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God, containing the gospel of salvation for all men and the only perfect rule for teaching, faith and life.”²⁹ Olson reminds us that the break with the Lutheran State church was over the Lord’s Supper – but not over doctrines relative to physical presence or whether it was only a memorial service, but rather over the claim that it could only be celebrated in the state church and served by ordained government - appointed clergy. Thus, Free Churches separated from the state church not over baptism, Arminianism, Calvinism or other doctrinal issues but over the

²⁶ Olson, *Significance of Silence*, p. 13.

²⁷ Olson, *Significance of Silence*, p. 14.

²⁸ Olson, *Significance of Silence*, p. 15.

²⁹ Olson, *Significance of Silence*, p. 29.

issue of whether the Lord's Supper was for believers only and could be held wherever and whenever people gathered in Christ's name, even without the benefit of clergy.³⁰

Hence the gospel of personal salvation is the key basis for our unity in the body and is at the heart of our essentials. Norm Geisler also argues that soteriological essentials are central in defining orthodoxy but reminds us that while some things like the virgin birth must be true in order for one to be saved, they don't need to be believed in order for one to be saved. Geisler argues that the gospel must be believed –that Christ died for our sins and was resurrected (I Corinthians 15:1-6), one must believe “on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31), and believe in his heart that “God rose him from the dead” (Romans 10:9).³¹

The second area that the phrase “all things Jesus Christ” impacts is hermeneutics. Jesus is at the centre of the gospel story – hence we need a Christo-centric hermeneutic. Leland Ryken reminds us that the overall framework of the Bible is story. He argues that it begins with the creator, ends with the consummation of history and the recreation of the world. The plot in between these two events is of a prolonged spiritual battle between good and evil where the central character is God and “every creature and nation interact with this mighty protagonist. Every story, poem or proverb in the Bible fits into this overarching story.”³² I have already noted how early church leaders such as Peter, Paul and Stephen reflect this story in their sermons – where Jesus emerges as the central figure in the historical drama of redemption.

³⁰ Olson, *Significance of Silence*, pp. 85-86, 99, 127.

³¹ Geisler, *Essential Doctrines, a logical approach*, pp.26-27.

³² Leland Ryken, “The Bible as Literature” in **The Origin of the Bible**, Philip Comfort ed. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishing, 1992, pp.146-7.

George Budd argues that Paul and John recognized the difference between issues core to the gospel and those that arose as part of living life and organizing themselves to function as a community. He highlights Galatians 5:4 where Paul argues that the Gentiles do not have to follow the Old Testament Law in order to complete their salvation, declaring instead that they will be cut off from the church and that their faith will be useless to them if they try to add the law to their faith. Paul consistently fights against Old Testament law being connected to the gospel – citing freedom from Sabbath days in Colossians 2 and refusing to have Titus (Galatians 2:3) circumcised. However, in Acts 16 Paul, in delivering the good news of freedom decided at the Jerusalem Council turns around and has Timothy circumcised! One wonders at his inconsistency, but the answer is probably that Paul is always willing to set aside his freedom so that the gospel will be accepted (I Corinthians 9). Since Timothy was half Jewish, it would have been offensive to the Jews that he was not circumcised – so Paul has him circumcised even though by the letter of the Jerusalem Council decrees, he need not do so. Titus, who was a Gentile, did not need to be circumcised because as a Gentile the Jews could not expect him to uphold the Old Testament law. For Paul, the acceptance of the gospel was always the key determining factor. Freedom was to be fought for unless giving up freedom better served the acceptance of the good news.

Manfred Brauch posits that the highest view of Scripture is one that is faithful to the intention of the author and takes seriously the fact that God's final, ultimate form of Revelation is the incarnation – Jesus the Word made flesh. The exegete must give the text priority and our understanding of Scripture must be based on its own stated purposes and intentions (inductively), not on our theological assumptions that impose a particular view of Scripture from the outside (deductively). He reminds us that Jesus never recommended the Bible as a divinely given summary of facts about things in general but rather pointed to the Old Testament writings and said "it is they that testify on my behalf" (John

5:39). This, declares Brauch, is the basis for “my insistence on a “Christocentric hermeneutic.”³³ This would seem to square with such passages as John 1 where Jesus is clearly the “Word who was made flesh” and “tabernacled” among us. Jesus testifies in John 14:4 that He is the “way, the truth and the life” and in Hebrews 1 the author reminds us that throughout history God has spoken to us in many different ways but in these “last days He has spoken to us through his Son”. In 2:3 the author declares that “this great salvation was first announced by the Lord Jesus himself and then delivered to us by those who heard him speak”. The centrality of Christ changes everything – not only is our unity in Him, but He is the key to understanding the biblical narrative. Hence, “all things Jesus Christ” will become a key part of our framework for choosing to make something an essential and something else non-essential.

Part II

Hermeneutics and implications for distinguishing essentials from non-essentials

A. The Bible, Hermeneutical Challenges and the need for humility

I would like to begin this section by thinking a little about hermeneutics and how we as evangelicals approach the Bible. Leland Ryken states that there are five fallacies about the Bible

It is a uniformly simple book, that it is predominantly a book of ideas, that it is essentially a modern book, that it needs correcting in some areas, and that it was intended to be without mystery and ambiguity. I believe all of this to be the reverse of what is actually true. The truth is that the Bible is sometimes simple and sometimes difficult and complex. It is a book of stories and poetic images more than a book of abstract propositions. Furthermore the Bible is an indisputably ancient book. As such,

³³ Manfred Brauch, Abusing Scripture. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2009, pp. 25-27.

it is the book that in its original form is the book that God wants us to have, including much that is mysterious and requires careful pondering and insight.³⁴

Henry Virkler reminds us that there are several blocks to a spontaneous understanding of the original meaning such as the historical, cultural, linguistic and philosophical gaps between the reader and the text. The task of the exegete is to determine as closely as possible what God meant in a passage, not what it means to *me*. Throughout history there have been variances in approach to Scripture – from allegorical and moral to a literal – grammatical approach. Virkler posits that the literal-grammatical approach gradually emerged through history to become the preferred approach, but that all conservative theologians agree that words can be used in literal, figurative and symbolic senses and that this presents a challenge to the interpreter.³⁵

These blocks to spontaneous understanding of the original meaning of the text explain why there was widespread disagreement as to biblical understanding regarding the atonement among Free Church founders in spite of the fact that they accepted the Bible, “both the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God.” Arnold Olson claims that in the early Free Church leaders agreed on the final authority of the Bible but were anything but dogmatically agreed on many of the doctrines that are taken for granted today. Indeed, he argues that evangelicals may accept the entire Bible as God’s inspired Word and “still be poles apart on such doctrines as sanctification, the ordinances and eschatology.”³⁶ This of course, helps to explain the fact that, as David Buttrick declares, one can let fifty preachers loose with the same passage and can

³⁴ Leland Ryken, ***The Word of God in English***, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002, p.78.

³⁵ Henry Virkler, ***Word of God***, pp. 27,48-63, 73.

³⁶ Olson, ***This We Believe***, pp. 26-27.

safely expect at least a dozen different “distillations of God’s Word”. The issue is not always one of deplorable exegesis but that ascertaining the meaning of ancient texts *now* is difficult.³⁷

Postmodern authors have picked up on the challenges to interpreters and urged a more humble reading of the Bible. Brian McLaren agrees with Buttrick arguing that late night cable TV has a dozen different preachers with a dozen different spins on the truth all proclaiming with apparent certainty that their version is right and everyone else’s is wrong. He cautions us that this arrogance is unwarranted and humility in interpretation important. It is not that post-moderns don’t care about truth, says McLaren; in fact the opposite is true. They care so much that they don’t want to pretend a subjective opinion or “view from a point” is more than it really is and they also question the ability of language to convey a truth adequately. Thus post-moderns believe in truth, but doubt one’s ability to apprehend, comprehend, remember and encode it in language and communicate it to others and then have them understand it in an absolutely accurate way. McLaren argues that we must distinguish between genuine Christianity and our individual and culturally encoded versions of it and that while he believes Christianity is true, he does not believe that his version of it is completely true – that everyone’s version is weighed down with extra baggage – hence humility is the appropriate attitude. So for McLaren the issue is not faith versus certainty but good faith versus bad faith and he summarizes his approach to belief with Augustine’s old adage “I believe in order to understand”.³⁸ Of course, while McLaren makes some good points here, the EFCC doesn’t want to embrace “mystery” so much that we end up sharing some of McLaren’s other, less orthodox, views.

³⁷ David Buttrick, **Homiletic**. Pp.242-243.

³⁸ Brian McLaren, **Reinventing Your Church**. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, pp. 173-182.

Scot McKnight makes some helpful comments regarding our approach to Scripture. He reminds us that our relationship to the Bible really needs to be transformed into a relationship with the God who speaks to us in and through the Bible. He notes that sometimes our obsession with advocating for the authority of Scripture causes us to miss the point of how God wants us to interact with His Word. He notes that the Psalmist doesn't say "Your words are authoritative and I am called to submit to them" but instead says "Your words are delightful and I love to do what you ask". He posits that the difference between the two is enormous – one is a relationship to the Bible and the other reflects a relationship with God.³⁹ McKnight claims that traditionalists read the Bible as a law book and a puzzle, hence we read the Bible as a series of topical issues *through* tradition instead of reading the Bible *with* tradition. Instead, he calls us to read it as a story of God's redemptive work through individuals and communities of reconciliation.⁴⁰ While the nation of Israel and the church have not always performed well in this story of redemption, the differing books of the Bible can be viewed as part of this story. I often hear that the Bible is God's textbook. I believe that this is patently wrong and likely leads to much abuse of Scripture - for a textbook is a systematic ordering of specialized information – and the Bible is not this at all. A better analogy might be that the Bible is more like a scrapbook – where God superintended the collection of His true stories of redemption, history, encouragement notes, proverbs, teachings, autobiography, plans for the future and pictures of the family. This is not meant to diminish the value attributed to the Word (although valuing a textbook more than a scrapbook would say more about how we value things, not about how God does), but to contrast two different kinds of works.

³⁹ Scot McKnight, **The Blue Parakeet**, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, pp. 85, 90.

⁴⁰ McKnight, **Blue Parakeet**, pp. 146-7.

McKnight is likely responding to authors such as Wayne Grudem, who while emphasizing the fact that individual disagreement over a proper interpretation is not a problem with Scripture but with us, includes in his book on Christian beliefs, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) which clearly distances Scripture from tradition stating, “we deny that the Scriptures receive their authority from the Church, tradition or any other human source.”⁴¹ It also declares that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the church’s faith throughout its history, objecting to the charge that it is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism and denies that church creeds and councils have authority equal to or greater than the authority of the Bible. In fact, the Chicago Statement also claims that confession of the full authority, infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture are vital to a sound understanding of the whole Christian faith and should lead to increasing conformity to the image of Christ.⁴²

James Smith takes this approach to task arguing that Scripture must be taken on its own terms counter to the “neo-scholasticism of Protestant Fundamentalism as well as the imposition of modern criteria of interpretation as preached in the Enlightenment historical critical approaches.” He further maintains that the site of interpretation is properly situated in the believing community of the church, and that the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy begs the question when it asserts the criterion for interpreting the Bible is the Bible itself.⁴³ Smith asserts that every interpretation happens within an interpretive tradition and that there is a traditional hermeneutic that has been accepted as hermeneutical orthodoxy, but the problem with much of evangelical theology is that it does not perceive itself as being governed by such an interpretive tradition, much like scientists who claim to present the world as it really is. He

⁴¹ Wayne Grudem, **Christian Beliefs**. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, pp. 17, 142.

⁴² Grudem, **Christian Beliefs**, pp. 143, 146.

⁴³ James Smith, **The Fall of Interpretation**. pp. 55-56.

argues that the myth of a pure, objective reading prevents evangelicals from appreciating the impact that their tradition has on their reading of the Bible.⁴⁴

Smith asserts that the evangelical response to the Catholics (authored by Chuck Colson and others) is a classic example of this lack of self perception. He claims that the authors critique Roman Catholic doctrine according to Reformation assumptions regarding justification by faith alone as disclosing the essence of the gospel. However, they fail to recognize their hermeneutic essentialism and the fact that justification constitutes only one interpretation of the gospel and that their own development is mediated by Martin Luther's interpretation of Paul – so it is an interpretation of an interpretation. Smith claims that the apostle John never mentions the forensic notion of justification by faith, so Luther's distillation of the gospel to this one concept turns out to be privileging a certain tradition over Johannine and Petrine traditions and the witness of James. Hence, Smith, agreeing with McLaren, asserts that every interpretive judgment needs to be accompanied by a corresponding hermeneutic humility or uncertainty.⁴⁵ While Smith makes some good points, unfortunately he doesn't offer a better alternative than the Chicago Statement and his critique seems to dangerously undermine any objective hermeneutic altogether.

Manfred Brauch agrees with both the need for exegetical humility and a commitment to avoiding what might be termed "hermeneutical overreach" - where one takes a passage and twists or expands it to support a position that is unwarranted from the text. Brauch states that he has a deep concern that the integrity and viability of our Christian witness is frequently undermined and distorted by this abuse of Scripture. He defines this abuse as "interpreting and applying the Bible in questionable or irresponsible ways...interpreting a text without proper

⁴⁴ Smith, *Fall of Interpretation*, p. 154.

⁴⁵ Smith, pp. 156-157.

regard for its literary or historical context in order to justify a particular theological position, or applying Scripture to a current political issue in a way it was never intended to be applied.”⁴⁶

Brauch claims that this violence to the Word can be intentional or non-intentional, but he registers his concern that many evangelicals who hold the Bible to be the uniquely inspired and authoritative Word of God abuse it regularly in their interpretation and application. He calls those of us who believe in divinely inspired Scripture to a higher level of accountability with regard to how we handle and interpret Scripture.⁴⁷

Brauch declares that evangelicals affirm the Bible as the vehicle of the gospel of God’s redemptive love but then use it as a weapon of bitter warfare, condemning, judging and demeaning those inside and outside of our circles. Further we announce that the Bible speaks God’s truth about human relationships yet use “proof texts”, quoted out of context, not in keeping with their original intent, to “prove” they are of the devil. Further, evangelicals often selectively use biblical texts to build arguments for doctrines while conveniently ignoring other texts that stand in tension with our views or employ what he calls “exegetical gymnastics” to eliminate tensions between diverse texts – he wonders what this says regarding our integrity. Further, he charges we invest tremendous time and energy on matters Jesus told us were not our primary concern (such as end times timetables) while ignoring issues the prophets and the early church spent much time on such as the poor, a passion for justice and righteousness. How can we then claim that the whole Bible is authoritative? And lastly, Brauch worries that while we champion Scripture’s call to holiness in sexuality, we “blithely set aside or ignore the cancers eating away at the communal life and witness of our churches – such as strife, bitterness, gossip, backbiting, greed, divisiveness – all named in New Testament texts as incompatible with

⁴⁶ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, p. 16.

kingdom values (I Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 4:25-32; 5:3-5) – are we distorting the Bible’s claim in all areas of human life and community?”⁴⁸ This of course, doesn’t mean we ignore issues like sexuality, but that we attempt to focus on “the whole counsel of God.”

One consequence of the challenges in reaching one hundred percent certainty regarding interpretation of the biblical text has been a history of debate and search for unity. Geisler discusses how most of the main creeds arose out of controversy over doctrinal issues such as the trinity. In fact different traditions accept different councils and creeds as authoritative.⁴⁹ Geisler also differentiates between what the creeds would affirm as orthodox and Reformation standards of faith: the three “solas”, Christ alone, faith alone and grace alone. In the former case, the Roman Catholic Church would be orthodox, in the latter it would be a false church with significant truth.⁵⁰

Michael Andrus compares theological truth with scientific truth, proposing four levels of theological thought that correspond to scientific thought: dogma (corresponding to scientific law), doctrine (scientific principle), theory (scientific theory) and speculation (scientific hypothesis). Andrus highlights four things he believes help us determine which category of theological “truth” to place an issue: they are exegetical certainty, theological importance, biblical emphasis and historical agreement in the church. Andrus points out that keeping these factors in mind helps in making decisions in a local church, providing a basis for choosing appropriate levels of fellowship, giving a rational basis for doctrinal discipline and are useful guides for writing or evaluating a Statement of Faith. On this last point, Andrus notes that the EFCA has included mainly dogma issues in its Statement of Faith and has lived with significant diversity in the movement because some doctrine, and most theory and speculation are left out

⁴⁸ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁹ Geisler, “Essential Doctrines, Historical approach”, pp. 31-32.

⁵⁰ Geisler, “Essential Doctrines, Logical approach”, p. 28.

of the Statement of Faith.⁵¹ While this is open to the charge of being a “modern” approach to truth, it is a helpful comparison and starting point for categorizing truth.

At the end of the day a certain hermeneutical humility and recognition of the subjective biases every interpreter approaches the text with is key to even admitting that all believers should not be forced to agree on every truth issue. This does not mean that all non-essentials are not truth issues (or that they are unimportant) it just recognizes as Paul did that “now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see things with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.” (I Corinthians 13:12). Paul says this in the context that now our knowledge is partial and incomplete and even the gift of prophecy reveals part of the whole picture” (I Corinthians 13:8-9) but all the gifts will become useless once “perfection” comes, so in the meantime we ought to love one another – because at the end of time only three things last forever – and love is the greatest. This does not undermine the truthfulness and reliability of the Word – it simply means that we are able to speak with more certainty on some truth issues than on others.

B. Markers for differentiating essentials from non-essentials

This brings us to the end of the matter – from our previous discussion regarding EFCC ethos and biblical values on unity, charity, and the centrality of Jesus, what are the key factors that help us to distinguish an essential from a non-essential? Here are a few markers/indicators that should help us in this quest. The first marker is perhaps the easiest one to recognize and to agree upon – that is historic disagreement in the church. The Calvinist -Arminian debate over

⁵¹ Michael Andrus, “A Look at our Essentials’ in EFCA Today, Winter 2006, pp. 14-15.

issues such as eternal security and predestination is a case in point. This historic disagreement is almost 500 years old and scholars who equally believe in the authority of Scripture have not achieved agreement. This alone is a sign that some of the other markers are also at play - there must be some reasons why consensus has eluded scholars. However, one must be careful when one claims that “historically the church has been united or divided on such and such an issue.” When one claims that “the church” has been united or divided on an issue for 2000 years, what “church” do we mean? Are we including the Roman Catholic Church? Are we really just thinking of Western European and North American Church? And does diversity or unanimity “prove” an issue should be a non-essential or essential anyway? Research could reveal that there was widespread agreement for centuries in the Western Church on the moral inferiority of women, the natural state of slavery and the unnatural/unbiblical nature of interracial marriage – but we (in the Western Church) would have hermeneutical problems with all three of these positions today. Hence, while the marker from history – of agreement or disagreement, needs to be held in tension with other markers – it is perhaps a necessary but not sufficient indicator.

This brings us to the second issue connected with history – that is culture. Is there a disagreement between Christians, equally committed to the Word of God, but from differing cultural backgrounds? It is easy for North Americans to assume that everyone reads the Bible and comes to the same conclusions as we do on issues such as leadership styles, gender roles, the role of suffering etc. Scot McKnight reminds us that the Bible was written in a cultural context and that we now must interpret and apply it in a modern context. Christians, at different times and in different cultures have a tendency to read into the text issues that may not have been intended in the original cultural context. For example, how much does the New Testament really teach us regarding 21st Century North American style church membership, or ordination? McKnight relates how upon asking F.F. Bruce his thoughts on women ordination,

Bruce replied, “I don’t think the New Testament talks about ordination”.⁵² Different cultures at different times go looking for answers to issues that were never issues in the culture in which the author wrote. It should not surprise us then that even at the same point in history, different cultures will find different “answers” to the same issue.

Manfred Brauch reminds us that the two biggest reasons we abuse Scripture is that first, we don’t take the intention of the author seriously enough and second, we disregard the incarnational nature of Scripture. Scripture was written in a particular historical and cultural setting, and if it is not interpreted in that setting or within the whole redemptive framework of the gospel story, we compromise its message. This disregard for the culture in which the Bible was written can also lead us to abuse words. God chose the language with which to communicate Scripture and Brauch reminds us that language gives voice to a peoples’ beliefs and practices. This means we must be attentive to the range of meanings of words in the original and translated languages.⁵³ A good example of this reality is the debate between Wayne Grudem and Gordon Fee over the meaning of “headship” in I Corinthians 11. The definition one accepts for the Greek word “kephale” and the word one chooses to translate it, make a huge difference in the conclusion one draws from the passage. So culture – the incarnational nature of the Bible, but also the culture that then has to interpret and apply that Scripture, is a marker in this quest to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. If different cultures disagree over a biblical issue then one could take this as cause to consider the issue to be non-essential. However, just as history is a necessary but not sufficient marker, so too is culture – differing views of cultures on an issue, taken alone should not move one to immediately identify an issue as non-essential.

⁵² McKnight, *Blue Parakeet*, pp. 149, 201.

⁵³ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, pp. 32, 119, 157-8.

This moves us to the third marker and that is what Andrus calls biblical emphasis. Where there is very little emphasis on an issue, it makes sense for us to consider it less important than issues that receive more emphasis. Additionally one could argue that where the Bible seems to intentionally remain silent or openly counsels freedom, we should consider this to be an issue over which charity and diversity should be expected. So, for instance, the New Testament is pretty silent on church board models, tithing, Sabbath keeping and governance. This would explain why there are a number of different models of governance among churches. Additionally Paul seems to speak against enforcing unity of belief and practice in Romans 14-15, asking believers to hold their own convictions, avoid judging each other, not flaunt their freedom – basically act in love and accept each other. And in Colossians 2 he seems to recognize that some people hold to special days, and some treat all days alike.

Connected with this issue of biblical silence is the issue of balancing seemingly contradictory biblical passages – Andrus would call this exegetical certainty. Leland Ryken reminds us that the Bible is largely a literary book that comes to us in a variety of distinct genres, each with its own conventions and craft – and each text needs to be interpreted in light of this genre.⁵⁴ Passages in different genres of literature in the Bible may seem to contradict each other. While determining authorial intent is always our goal, some genres make that difficult. Did Jesus really mean that we literally should pluck our eye out if it offended us? Henry Virkler reminds us that we must ask what the general historical milieu was in which the writer spoke, what the specific historical-cultural context and purpose of the book and the immediate context of the passage under consideration. Further, is the passage stating a descriptive truth or prescriptive truth that is claiming to articulate normative principles?⁵⁵ A

⁵⁴ Ryken, *Word of God*, pp. 147, 158.

⁵⁵ Virkler, *Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 79, 86.

great example of this problem is the debate about the nature of the curse found in Genesis 3. Is God being descriptive or prescriptive when he tells Eve that her “desire will be for her husband but that he will rule over her?” The implications arising out of these two different ways of looking at the passage are massively different.

Dealing with contradictory passages begins with just admitting that they exist. Manfred Brauch calls evangelicals to avoid the abuse of selectivity of biblical passages. For instance, we may choose to emphasize God’s sovereignty over human freedom, the use of force over the call to be peacemakers, submitting to government over obeying God and a host of other ways where we ignore some passages and focus on others. He reminds us that we abuse the whole gospel in the same manner by not putting the personal and social sides together. He calls evangelicals to handle seemingly contradictory passages by refusing to dictate in advance what the passages must say, but to treat passages as complementary “both/and” texts instead of having an “either/or” mindset. He also pleads with evangelicals to heed the biblical call to humility and to avoid separating over these issues, emphasizing both orthodoxy and orthopraxy.⁵⁶ At the end of the day, exegetical certainty is hindered by genres of literature and seemingly conflicting passages – in these cases, this is a marker that would move us to allow disagreement on that issue.

Andrus’ last marker for delineating essentials from non-essentials is theological importance. Intuitively this makes sense – if an issue is less important theologically then we would declare it to be a non-essential. But who gets to decide what is less important? Is the issue of eternal security less important than gender roles? Do we use the creeds to decide? Or church councils? I would like to suggest that we use a Christ and gospel centered hermeneutic

⁵⁶ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, pp. 44-47, 117.

to assess theological importance. Brauch calls evangelicals to use the “redemptive movement” of Scripture to help mediate between contradictory passages. For instance, Jesus declared all foods clean in Mark 7:19, declaring that what goes into the stomach doesn’t defile you. This was a radical departure from Old Testament Levitical law. Peter was faced with this same dilemma of either holding to Old Testament laws regarding clean/unclean or rubbing shoulders and sharing with Gentiles in Acts 10-11. As Brauch notes, Christ is the hermeneutical key.⁵⁷ In Colossians 1-2 Paul seems to argue this same thing – that human traditions, philosophy and rules all seem to have wisdom in manmade religion, but are all subject to the person of Christ. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the entire law and prophets –in effect the law gives way to grace. Paul’s approach to sharing the gospel reflects this in I Corinthians 9 where he reminds us that he becomes all things to all men that by all means he may save some. Jesus is the Word (John 1), the fullest revelation from God and in these last days God has spoken to us in His Son. Our call to speak the truth in love is grounded in the fact that Jesus is both.

We are unified in the Son and Paul seems to have understood the radical nature of this reality. In his letter to Philemon he reminds Philemon of the fact that while Onesimus is Philemon’s slave, since he had come to faith in Christ he was now much more. Paul says Onesimus “is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will be much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” This unity is in “the Lord” not in social status, race, tradition or doctrinal statements, as important as they are. In the EFCC, our Statement of Faith has intentionally been silent regarding issues that would exclude those from the body who while united with us in Jesus Christ, do not agree on every theological issue. The only other statement of essentials we have would be the “Covenant of Personal and Professional Ethics” which governs how our ministers are to live - it really acts as our statement of moral essentials. Issues

⁵⁷ Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, pp. 79, 248.

not listed in these two documents are those we have intentionally relegated to the status of “non-essential”. This is all part of a building a church that is for “believers only but all believers.”

CS Lewis called the basic beliefs of all who are part of the family of God, “Mere Christianity.” He asked his readers to not draw “fanciful inferences from my silence on certain disputed matters”, stating that it didn’t mean he was sitting on the fence or that he either thought the matter important or unimportant. Lewis declared that he wasn’t presenting an alternative to the creeds but bringing people into the hall – but people were not to wait in the hall but go into the rooms where there “are fires and chairs and meals”⁵⁸. The rooms of course, were the denominational traditions we all choose to find a home in eventually. But Lewis closes by asking us that once we have chosen our room/family to be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. “If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house”.⁵⁹

Ultimately “all things Jesus Christ” is our key – He sets the rules for the whole house – and his apostles reminded us to avoid quarrels and foolish controversies, to be gentle, kind, to keep Christ and the gospel at the centre of our message and efforts. Other markers that indicate that an issue is a non-essential are a history of disagreement, disagreement between cultures and exegetical uncertainty – either because of a lack of biblical emphasis or apparently contradictory texts. While one of the markers alone may not be a sign that the issue is a minor one, a number taken together is a good sign that the issue is one on which charity toward diversity should be applied. And above all, how closely the issue is connected to the person of

⁵⁸ C.S.Lewis, **Mere Christianity**. New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1943, pp. 6-7, 11.

⁵⁹ Lewis, **Mere Christianity**, p. 12.

Christ and the gospel determines how essential the issue is to us. May we, in the EFCC be known as those who have the wisdom and humility to “rightly divide the Word of truth.”