

## **Our Second Mark of Maturity □ “Doctrinal Education”**

**“The early church devoted themselves to the Apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42) and the leaders of the church were exhorted to teach sound doctrine (Titus 1:9; 2:1; 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:3) and ‘faithful sayings’ (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Titus 3:8). Such both enabled the believer to discern what was false and to clearly understand the fundamental truths of Scripture and the Gospel. Such an education was the result of faithful teaching (2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:11-13, 15-1; 6:3) and the reading and study of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-17; 1 Tim. 4:13; Acts 17:11; Eph. 6:17). Characteristic of maturity is the ability to feed oneself and to teach others from the solid food of God’s Word (Heb. 5:11-14). Thus, one should have the solid discipline of reading Scripture and through the study of Scripture to answer questions of the faith. In addition, the mature should have a clear knowledge of the fundamental doctrines represented in our Statement of Faith. Further, one’s doctrinal understanding will be greatly enhanced by a thorough reading and familiarity with the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms of the Christian Faith (e.g. The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Larger and The Smaller Catechisms, The Heidelberg Catechism), etc.”**

Each of our Marks of Maturity describes a Biblically targeted area of a Christian’s growth. Each maturing believer will attain each of these marks to a varying degree (Mt. 13:23), but each mark describes an area in which every disciple of Jesus Christ should grow to the degree which she or he can attain by the serious application of oneself. Such growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord is to be viewed synergistically; that is, it is both the work of the Holy Spirit and the fully invested and intense pursuit by the disciple (Phil. 2:12,13; 3:12-16). Maturity in Christ is the result of growth, not simply in one or two of these Marks of Maturity, though growth in any area marks progress toward maturity. We may grow in one or two to a greater degree than the others because of giftedness, but full maturity is to grow in all of them. Such growth is not attained simply by intellectually grasping and understanding the Marks, but they must be mastered to the degree that you both are practicing them in your daily walk and you can teach others how to grow in each area (Heb. 5:12; 6:1,2).

In developing and describing this Second Mark we will look first at its terminology and the importance assigned to it in the New Testament. Next, we will point out its benefits of renewing our minds and as a fundamental component of the Church’s growth and unity. This Mark also prevents the Church from being deceived, then we will look at what doctrine is generally and then specifically. In this latter category we will distinguish between what is essential and nonessential doctrine. We then will briefly discuss the seven essential doctrines of our Statement of Faith and distinguish between two types of nonessential doctrines. Finally, we will suggest some ways for you to begin or continue to grow in your Doctrinal Education.

## **Apostolic Doctrine □ The Keys of the Kingdom**

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian Church instructing them, so they would understand the nature of their salvation and the nature of the community, which they entered through their salvation. There is something fundamental in this before we touch upon any of the specifics. The Apostle Paul found it a necessary part of his ministry, being an Apostle (cf. Eph. 3:1-12), to instruct the Church as to whom the Church is and further to instruct them as to the salvation by which they have been saved. Such instruction was called “doctrine.” This was the authoritative “teaching” of the “Truth” (the Gospel) from God, the Father, through the eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, inspired and illuminated by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 10:1-41; 28:18-20; Jn. 16:12-15; Jn. 12:44-50; 13:20; Lu. 10:16; 6:12-16; Rom. 10:14; Mk. 3:14; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; 10:8; 13:10; Acts 2:42; Gal. 1:6-9). It was this teaching of the Apostles which Jesus referred to as “*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt. 16:19; 18:18; Jn. 20:22, 23; cf. Eph. 2:20; 3:5). These teachings contained the power to “*bind and loose*” heaven and the sins of men. What the Apostles taught was the teaching of God as Moses had spoken for God in the Old Testament, so the Apostles spoke for Christ in the New Testament. So when they said, “this is sin,” then it was bound as sin on earth and in heaven, not by their authority but by the authority of the One who had given them the Word to speak. For this reason the test of whether a book would be included in the New Testament was whether it was Apostolic, was it the teaching of the Apostles? Only as the Church could confirm that it was indeed that which the Apostles preached and taught did it become a part of the New Testament and authoritative for the Church.

One might ask, what’s the point here? Simply this, the Apostles preached and wrote to the Church of Jesus Christ, so the Church would know what was the Truth that had come from God. The Truth of God and what the Church was to believe were not subject to democratic process. Neither are they relative to what we “feel” is right, nor is it utilitarian or pragmatic that if it “works for you” it must be right and true. In other words, there is absolute truth, and it has been revealed by God and communicated through the Apostolic ministry. This is not subject to negotiation or compromise; it is not put up to a vote; it was given to the Church to be “preached,” to be “believed,” to be “obeyed, and to be “proclaimed” to the world. It is this Truth which is called the Gospel, and it alone “*is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes*” (Rom. 1:16). This is referred to as “*apostolic doctrine*” (Acts 2:42) or “*the faith*” (Eph. 4:13, i.e., the content of what we believe).

## **Doctrinal Education and Renewing Our Minds**

We live in a societal environment, in a culture, which prefers to “feel” rather than to “think.” A Biblical faith demands thinking. For this reason the Apostle prayed that we might be given (in the sense of continual filling) the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that our eyes might be enlightened with understanding in our knowledge of Christ (Eph. 1:17, 18; cf. Col. 1:9; 1 Cor. 2:9-16). By this we are enabled to “*renew our minds*” and to refuse to be conformed to this age (culture) (Rom. 12:2). We are commanded to

take “*every thought captive*” (2 Cor. 10:1-6). The Church is commanded to detect and reject “*false doctrine*” (Acts 20:25-32; 1 Tim. 4:1ff.; 2 Tim 3:1ff.; Col. 2:8, 18-23; Gal. 1:6-9; etc.). The Spirit’s ministry is particularly directed at our minds (Rom. 8:5; 1 Cor. 2:10-16), so that we might have the “*mind of Christ*” on all things. Further, the Spirit, in the ministry of Christ to His Church, washes and purifies us with His Word (Eph. 5:26). In the Word of God Christ’s Church takes up the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) against the schemes of the devil and the heavenly forces of darkness (vv. 11,12). Why all this focus on the “mind,” because we think with our minds. Doctrine is the frame of reference by which we evaluate, assess, confirm, or deny our thoughts and even our feelings. We should note that what we “feel” is the result of what we think. We do not experience feelings in a vacuum. If you feel fear or joy it is because you are thinking fearful or joyous thoughts. Therefore, doctrine is to screen both thought and feelings. It is through thinking rightly, according to the “*mind of Christ*,” that we can begin to think, act and feel rightly. “*He who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. ...We have the mind of Christ*” (1 Cor. 2:15, 16).

### **How to Measure the Growth of the Church**

Again, what is the point of these things? The Church’s progress and growth is to be measured not by “nickels and numbers,” but rather she is to be equipped by the “pastor-teachers” who Christ has given to His Church (Eph. 4:11,12). The end of this equipping is “*...the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to **the unity of the faith**, and of **the knowledge of the Son of God**, to a mature man, to **the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ**. As a result, we are no longer children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming...*” (Eph. 4:13,14). In these three objectives: (1) “*the unity of the faith*,” (2) “*the knowledge of the Son of God*,” and (3) “*the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ*,” we have that which will measure the growth of Christ’s Church. The second objective, “*the knowledge of the Son of God*” refers to a personal knowing of Jesus Christ. The emphasis is not simply knowing about Him but rather an intimate, personal knowing, loving, trusting, and clinging to Him (Eph. 3:17-19). The third objective, “*the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ*,” refers to the transformation of the Christian’s character. It is conformity to Christ. It is to be measured by the character of Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, we love in reflection to Jesus’ love. We forgive in reflection to Jesus’ forgiveness, etc.

The first maturity objective is the one germane to our topic: “*the unity of the faith*.” This refers very specifically to our “**Second Mark of Maturity—Doctrinal Education**.” The Church is to have a commonly held content of what we believe—“*the faith*” (e.g. Eph. 4:1-6; Heb. 6:1-3; 1 Tim. 3:16). This is the Apostolic doctrine or teaching (e.g. Acts 2:42—“*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching...*”). Without it, the Church becomes like a bunch of children unable to stand against the waves at the beach or against any contrary winds which simply bowl them over and send them rolling. Without it, we become victims of every false teacher, every

diviner, every false prophet, and every foolish person (cf. Deut. 13:1-11; 18:9-14). With it, we are called, “*the church of the living God, **the pillar and support of the truth***” (1 Tim. 3:14) because we believe “*By common confession*” (v. 15), in “*the unity of the faith.*”

### **A Doctrinal Education Enables Us to Stand for the Truth**

I have said all of this to say this, to the degree that the Church is doctrinally educated to that degree and only to that degree will they be able to **stand for the Truth**, which God has given us in the Gospel. Here are two illustrations that I hope will communicate this fact. The popular preacher and author, Max Lucado was speaking at a past Promise Keepers’ Conference. He drove home the point of the unity of the attendees by asking two questions of the over 50,000 men gathered. “What is the denomination of your church?” Their answering shouts formed a cacophony of indistinguishable and confused responses. Then came his second question. “Who is your Savior?” As though on cue, a united chorus rang out in clarity, “Jesus!” His point was well made. The One who saves us is Jesus Christ, and He is the One who makes us one. Though this demonstration dramatically served his purpose it is in reality a dangerous oversimplification. Remember Jesus’ reminder to His disciples that not everyone who calls to Him, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. “*Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you...’*”(Mt. 7:22,23). Do you know what tells me the illustration is an oversimplification? Doctrine! It is not simply naming Jesus that makes us Christians and makes us one. It is first being named and known by God, but then more subjectively it is naming Jesus with the understanding of Who He truly is! For example, a Mormon will gloriously talk about Jesus, but Mormon doctrine declares Jesus to be a pre-existent spirit who was a spirit brother to the devil, Satan. Others believe Him to be the archangel Michael. Still more commonly, Jesus is held to be a good moral teacher, perhaps even the best and the greatest of all teachers. The Muslims think Him to be a great prophet. Jesus asked the question of His disciples, “*Who do men say that I am?*” Their reply was, “*some say you are John the Baptist; others Elijah; still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets*” (Mt. 16:13,14). The amazing fact is that most people do not know who Jesus is! The problem is compounded by the fact that they really think they do. The fact is that only God can reveal to a person who Jesus really is. Remember Jesus’ words to Peter after his good confession: “*Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven*”(Mt. 16:17). Now we will turn to the second illustration.

T. A. McMahan related the experience he had with a Muslim friend.

He is a joy to be with, one of the friendliest men I know. Though a committed Muslim, he regards himself as an ecumenist. He’s proud of the fact that he shares some of the beliefs of both Jews and Christians. Occasionally he attends a Presbyterian church...and truly enjoys the experience and their

fellowship. Once in a restaurant he was expressing to me and our Christian friends his love for Jesus. He ended his proclamation with these words: “If I could tear away my flesh so that all of you could see deep into my heart, you would know how much I love Jesus.”

...A nagging thought hit me: *Jesus who?* “Tell me about the Jesus you love?” He responded, “The same one you love.”

I used his neighbor, who is a great friend to both of us, as an example. He and I really love the guy. After agreeing on our mutual feelings, I began to give a description of our common friend’s physical attributes: “He’s 5’6”; he’s completely bald; he weighs 320; he wears a ring in his left nostril.”

“Wait a minute...he’s easily over 6’4, I wish I had all his hair, and he’s the thinnest man I know!” My friend added that it was obvious that we weren’t talking about the same person.

“Does it matter”? I asked.

He gave me an incredulous look. “Of course it does! I don’t have a neighbor fitting your description. You may know someone else like that, but it’s not my good friend and neighbor.”

What followed was my description of the Jesus I knew. “He was crucified and died on the cross for my sins. Did the Jesus you know do that”?

“No, Allah took him to heaven before the crucifixion. Judas died on the cross.”

“The Jesus I know is God Himself, who became a man. Is that your Jesus”?

He shook his head. “No, Allah alone is God. Jesus was a great prophet, but just a man.”

Mr. McMahan is a good example of being “**doctrinally educated.**”

## **A Doctrinal Education Is for Every Christian**

This kind of understanding is not meant for just a few people in the Church but rather for everyone in the Church. Every believer needs to be equipped to know what we believe as Christians. Those who are not will be tossed, blown, and fooled (Eph. 4:14). Is that God’s will for any of His Children? Not according to Doctrine!

## **Doctrine □ First as Revelation and Second as Interpretation**

“Doctrine” is first and foremost that which has been given to us in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Because the Bible has been “inspired” by God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21) and, thus, authoring it through men and having providentially maintained it pure through the ages, it is the “Word of God.” It is the “rule of faith and practice” for God’s people (2 Pet. 1:3,4). The rub of this process is the interpretation of Scripture. The same gentleman I referred to above said, “the problem with the Bible is all the different interpretations. Anyone can make it say whatever he wants.” I responded to him, “not if they follow the basic rules of interpretation.” With regard to these, the Second Helvetic Confession states, “...we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the

circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation" (Chap. 2:1; cf. Westminster Confession, Chap. 1:9). Yet, I went on to point out that there is fundamental agreement on the fundamentals of the faith. They have been believed and preached by the Church since the beginning. It was this agreement on the fundamentals of the faith that served as a limitation for "private judgment."

### **Doctrine Tested by Universality, Antiquity, and Consent**

Vincent of Lerins (d. 450) asked a fundamental question and answering it he drew out the limitation of private interpretations on Scripture.

"I have often ...inquired ...how and by what sure and so to speak Universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic (i.e. universal not Roman Catholic) faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect... This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality, if we confess that one faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at least of almost all priests and doctors" (in Robert Webber, Common Roots, 138).

This may be illustrated by the second century Church's response to the Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics used Scripture to represent their philosophic system teaching that there was more than one god though there was a God. He was spirit and good, but He was not the god of creation that was Yahweh of the OT. Yahweh was evil. God sent Jesus, a lesser god with secret knowledge, and Christ gave this knowledge to the Gnostics. How did the Church combat this perversion of the Scriptures? They said Gnosticism is an aberration of the Scriptures because this interpretation does not agree with the "rules of faith." These "rules of faith" were summaries of what the Church had received from the Apostles and confessed. Irenaeus, a second century Church Father, wrote of these "rules of faith" (space does not permit a quotation from one the rules of faith; see John Leith, Creeeds of the Churches, third ed., 20-23), "As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points (of doctrine) just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth" (in Webber, 124). In other words, the Church knew every heretic and any false teacher with his or her twisted interpretation of Scripture would appeal to the authority of Scripture. First, by the "rules of faith" and, later, by her early creeds and confessions the Church affirmed the right interpretation of the Scriptures in its fundamental and essential points. The explanation and justification was simple, "this is what the Apostles preached!" There was one more development in this progression of doctrine.

## **Doctrine Rightly Balanced**

The Protestant Reformation recognized the need of this further progression. Though early the Church had been well served by its confessed and published summaries of the faith, her creeds and confessions, yet the Roman Catholic Church had abused and rejected Scripture in its papal and council decrees. Therefore the Reformation brought the Church back to its authority, the Scriptures. For example, the Westminster Confession clearly stated, “The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (Mt. 22:29,31; Acts 28:25; Lu. 10:26) (Chap. 1:10). All synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both (Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 2:5; 2 Cor. 1:24)” (Chap. XXXI: 2,3; cf. Second Helvetic, Chap. II: 2ff.). Note the balance of their understanding. On the one hand, they affirmed that the authority of the Church was the Scriptures, and, on the other, they recognized that the place of councils and creeds was that they were to be a help both to the rule of faith and practice. A. A. Hodge in his The Confession of Faith commented,

“...the Church has advanced very gradually in this work of the accurate interpretation of Scripture and definition of the great doctrines which compose the system of truth it reveals. And as she has thus gradually advanced in the clear discrimination of gospel truth, she has at different periods set down an accurate statement of the results of her new attainments in a Creed or Confession of Faith, for the purpose of preservation and popular instruction. In the meantime, heretics spring up on all occasions, who pervert the Scriptures, who exaggerate certain aspects of the truth and deny others equally essential, and thus in effect turn the truth of God into a lie. The Church is forced, therefore, on the great principle of self-preservation, to form such accurate definitions of every particular doctrine misrepresented as shall include the whole truth and exclude all error; and to make such comprehensive exhibitions of the system of revealed truth as a whole that no one part shall be either unduly diminished or exaggerated, but the true proportion of the whole be preserved. ...Creeds and confessions have thus been found useful in all ages and branches of the Church. ...Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. ...If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God’s people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds” (Introduction, Chap. 1: introduction).

The Reformation rule was this: the early councils and creeds of the Church should help us rightly interpret Scripture, unless, what they teach clearly goes against Scripture.

### **Distinguishing Between Essential and Nonessential**

From this foundation we can now move both to establish what is essential and to distinguish between what is nonessential and essential. The creeds, which were affirmed by the Church through the Reformation and modern times, are primarily the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Definition of Chalcedon, and the Athanasian Creed. In them we learn a fundamental lesson. They simply stated what they believed, and they defined no more than was necessary. Webber writes, "...the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds pointed to the truth contained in Scriptures and summarized in the rule of faith... but affirmed the ultimate mystery of Christ... (145)." These creeds proclaimed the truth rather than explaining it. Note the simplicity of the Apostles Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth: and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into Hell (Hades); the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on 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; the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting." The same is true of the Nicene Creed:

"I believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible: and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son (filioque); who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the prophets. And I believe in one Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Herein is the difference between the essential and the nonessential. These creeds stated the necessary propositions of the faith. These were the truth taught by Jesus, transmitted by the apostles, and received by the Church. These truths were what the Apostles preached; they were the Gospel refined to its barest elements. The theology or the formulation of these elements of doctrine was considered a nonessential. They were not the statements of Scripture but the human thinking about the things of

Scripture. A formulation or theology is the drawing out of relationships between the parts and then drawing these parts together in a way to make a systematic whole. “While the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian definition has been accepted by all...the same cannot be said for the problem of man and salvation. Although the entire church is united in its belief that man is a sinner and the Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection procures salvation, there exist a number of explanations about man’s sinful nature and the means of receiving the benefits of Christ’s death. ...In other words, the church is divided not over her agreement to soteriological truth, i.e., that man is a sinner whose only hope is in the death and resurrection of Christ, but in her disagreement on how this is to be explained” (Webber, 137).

### **Nonessential Is Not Non-Important**

It is important to note that “nonessential” does not mean non-important! A nonessential may be very important, but it is not essential to salvation, therefore it is not essential for unity though it might describe how great is our salvation. An essential is that which is necessary to gain heaven, to secure our identity in Jesus Christ, and, therefore, it is necessary for unity and fellowship in Christ. It is both what makes us Christians and unites us in Christ. The essentials were what the lost needed to be found, and what made the Church the Church. The nonessentials are not essential to salvation or necessary for unity. They often explain the Gospel systematically. In some cases they reflect a decided opinion on an ambiguity of Scripture which is without other Scriptural clarification. Martin Lloyd-Jones in his What Is An Evangelical gives this illustration of a nonessential.

“One is the belief in election and predestination. Now I am a Calvinist; I believe in election and predestination; but I would not dream of putting it under the heading of essential. I put it under the heading of nonessential. Mark you, I would condemn Pelagianism; I would say that Pelagianism is a denial of the truth of the Scripture with regard to salvation □ that goes out. But I am thinking of Arminianism in its various forms and therefore I do not put this into the category of essential. I do not for the reason that this, for me is a matter of understanding. You are not saved by your precise understanding of how this great salvation comes to you. What you must be clear about is that you are lost and damned, hopeless and helpless, and that nothing can save you but the grace of God in Jesus Christ and only Him crucified, bearing the punishment of your sins, dying, rising again, ascending, sending the Spirit, regeneration. Those are the essentials. Now when you come to ask me, How exactly do I come to a belief in this? I say that that is a matter of the understanding of the mechanism of salvation, not of the way of salvation. And here, while I myself hold very definite and strong views on the subject, I will not separate from a man who cannot accept and believe the doctrines of election and predestination and is Arminian, as long as he tells me that we are all saved by grace, and as long as the Calvinist agrees, as he must, that God calls all men everywhere to repentance. As long as both are prepared to agree about these things I say we must not break fellowship. So I put election into the category of non-essential” (87,88).

Lloyd-Jones goes on to list age and modes of baptism, church polity, prophecy, ways of sanctification, baptism of the Spirit, and spiritual gifts as further examples of nonessentials. He closes with this important insight. “We have got to be clear and specific in establishing the evangelical position, but having done that, we must be very careful to draw this distinction between essentials and non-essentials lest we become guilty of schism and begin to rend the body of Christ” (91).

### **Seven Essential Doctrines**

What then are the essential doctrines of the faith? In our Statement of Faith we have listed seven essential areas of the faith. The first is the inspiration, infallibility, authority, and sufficiency of the **Bible**. This is essential because it is the source of the revelation we have about God, Jesus Christ, and salvation. It must be the final arbiter of all things pertaining to faith and practice. It is non-negotiable; it is essential. The second is the doctrine of **God** □ His unity, His triunity, His equality and His attributes. This is essential to affirm that God is Spirit and unique by virtue of divine attributes, is Creator, is not three gods, but He is one God in essence or substance, and He eternally is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without this critical balance we are polytheists and blasphemous in our worship of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The third is the doctrine of **Christ**. Here we affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ and His full manhood □ two natures in one person. Without this essential affirmation Jesus cannot be our representative and His death cannot be sufficient for our atonement. Only a man can die for men and only God’s glory can atone for the offense against God’s glory. Essentially several other affirmations about Jesus are necessary: His virgin birth, sinless life, substitutory death for the sin of mankind, His resurrection, ascension, intercession, and His visible return for the salvation of His Church and His judgment of the all others. The fourth is the doctrine of **man** □ created in the image of God, the Fall, the curse of eternal death, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is essential because it establishes the identity, frailty, condemnation, desperate helplessness of man’s state apart from God’s redemption in Christ, and his ultimate judgment before the tribunal of Christ. Without this affirmation a Savior is unnecessary, and there is no need to fear God. The fifth is the doctrine of the **Holy Spirit** □ His deity, and His work of the applying salvation in regeneration, conversion, adoption, and sanctification. His deity is essential to His personal attributes and equality to the Father and the Son, and His work is essential because of the helplessness of man in his own salvation. The sixth doctrine is that of the **Church**, the Body of Christ. Here we state who the Church is □ those regenerated, saved by grace, converted through genuine faith in Christ, repentance, and baptism, and confirmed by a persevering faith, obedience to God’s Word, and the testimony and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are necessary to distinguish those who are saved from those who are not. Last is a continuation of the doctrine of the Church □ the nature of the **Church’s ministry**. The Church is to carry on the ministry of Jesus and as such they are the Body of Christ. They are to live in obedience to God’s Word, worship God, mutually love and edify one another, evangelize the world, and minister benevolently to one another and the world. Every member has been equipped by the Spirit with a spiritual

gift to minister faithfully until the return of Christ. At Christ's return the Church will fully enter into all the blessings of their Head and King. This is essential to establish the Master's mandate upon the Church for her direction, accountability, and hope.

## **Two Categories of Nonessential Doctrines**

As we assert these to be the essentials, we need to distinguish two categories of nonessentials. **First**, there are those nonessentials, which are very important to us. These would be the explanations of the essential doctrines, which are agreed upon in certain confessions but not universally accepted by the Church. For example, we teach baptism by immersion as the New Testament mode of baptism performed upon those who confess their faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism's mode is important but not essential. We teach and encourage the reading of the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms. Their clarity and the Biblical consistency of their teaching make them excellent sources for a doctrinal education, but they are not essential. Other examples of such nonessential doctrines would be different views of the End Time: pretribulational, midtribulational, or posttribulational rapture, whether Christ's millennial reign will be premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. Another example is the various views on the Lord's Supper: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, spiritual presence, or as a memorial. The first category of nonessentials is the important and systematic explanations of the doctrines of Scripture. We should note that the point of necessary agreement or a doctrine's essentialness is the primary doctrine contained in our explanation. For example, the primary doctrine of Christ's Second Coming is affirming the visible Second Coming of Christ. Our explanation of that doctrine may be premillennial and posttribulational, but these are explanation and nonessential. The primary doctrine of Salvation is affirming salvation by grace through faith in the sacrifice of Christ. Our explanation would explain regeneration, election, etc. in the Reformed tradition though not baptism, but again these though very important are nonessentials. The primary doctrine of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is it as a memorial of Christ's death and promised return, but our explanation of the way Christ is present at the Supper would be a nonessential though personally very important.

The **second** category of nonessentials is the personal convictions of our consciences on any number of issues. These issues can be mentioned in Scripture, but their practice is unspecified, unclear, or left to one's conscience. The Apostle Paul called these "opinions," "scruples," or "personal convictions" (Rom. 14:1). The Reformers referred to them as externals (Mt. 15:16-20) and thereby to be considered as indifferent means. Under the guidance of Scripture (1 Cor. 4:6), one's own conscience (1 Cor. 8:7, 11, 12), and the fruit of the practice of such liberty (Rom. 14:14; Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 10:23) one was free to enjoy Christian liberty in such issues (1 Tim. 4:4, 5). They are issues which do not violate God's moral law, and therefore they are not constrained by what is written (1 Cor. 4:6), but they should not be the result of the defrauding legalism of men's commandments (Col. 2:18-23). Paul listed such things as food, days of worship, eating meat dedicated to demons, etc. The key to these issues was that for one person they were sin because participation would violate one's conscience (Jas. 4:17). Paul

explained that to violate your conscience is sin (Rom. 14:14, 23). There are many, many issues on which brothers and sisters form personal convictions □ movies, music, dress code, alcohol, smoking, worship styles, money management, head coverings, length of hair, role of women in ministry, etc., etc., but these are nonessentials. They can be sin for one, but not sin for the next because of personal conviction and conscience. Each person must be accountable to his own conscience and ultimately to the Lord for his or her exercise or restraint upon Christian liberty. We each must always be sensitive that the practice of one's liberty does not lead others to violate their consciences and fall into sin (Rom. 14:13-23; 1 Cor. 8:1-18; 10:23-33).

### **In Essentials Unity, and In Nonessentials Liberty**

Augustine first coined the adage: In essentials unity but in nonessentials liberty. There are two issues at stake as we develop our Doctrinal Education. First, we must uphold and guard the Gospel, the faith given by God, through the Apostles, and received by the Church (Jude 3; 2 Tim 1:13, 14; 2:2). The truth of Jesus Christ cannot be compromised, and we must be willing to die for these essential truths or break fellowship or bring discipline (e.g. 1 Tim. 1:20). Second, we must guard the unity of the Body of Christ (Phil. 1:27, 28; Eph. 4:1-6). To break fellowship must be treated like a captain abandoning his ship; to break fellowship over anything but the essentials of the Gospel is tantamount to breaking apart the Family of God for illegitimate reasons. Therefore, a Doctrinal Education is necessary to discern whether we are guarding the Gospel's essentials, or whether we are forsaking the unity of the Body over nonessentials. It is at this point that we find different Christian groups have drawn up different lists of essential doctrines, and, thereby, they have made schismatic and factional divisions in the body of Christ. This has occurred because they have not rightly distinguished between essential and nonessential doctrines. Max Lucado in his book, A Gentle Thunder, tells the humorous but truly tragic encounter between two Christians who have failed to discern between essential and nonessential doctrines.

Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible.

“Are you a believer?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he said excitedly.

I've learned you can't be too careful.

“Virgin birth?” I asked.

“I accept it.”

“Deity of Jesus?”

“No doubt.”

“Death of Christ on the cross?”

“He died for all people.”

Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian? Perhaps.

Nonetheless, I continued my checklist.

“Status of man.”

“Sinner in need of grace.”

“Definition of grace.”

“God doing for man what man can't do.”

“Return of Christ?”

“Imminent.”

“Bible?”

“Inspired.”

“The church?”

“The body of Christ.”

I started getting excited. “Conservative or liberal?”

He was getting interested too. “Conservative.”

My heart began to beat faster.

“Heritage?”

“Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention.”

That was mine!

“Branch?”

“Pre-millennial, post-trib, noncharismatic, King James, one-cup communion.”

My eyes misted. I had only one other question.

“Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?”

“Fiberglass,” he responded.

I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. “Heretic!” I said and walked away (139, 140).

The unity of the Church must be guarded even as we guard the Gospel. Critical to this responsibility is the ability to distinguish between the essential doctrines and the nonessential.

If we are not clear on these issues of doctrine, then further, we become vulnerable to two prevalent dangers. On one side is legalism and on the other side is libertinism. Legalism in essence is to make rules and laws where Christ has not (Col. 2:18-23). Libertinism is to take license to do that which the law of Christ forbids, to live as though there is no law of God, and to do so while claiming to be under the cloak of Christ’s grace (Rom. 6:1, 2; Gal. 5:13-26). The Biblical balance between these two is Christian Liberty (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 10:23; 1 Tim. 4:4, 5). Liberty is the freedom to do the will of God expressed in His Word and to live in the grace of the Lord Jesus knowing that we are accountable to Him to live in such a way that we please Him (cf. Patrick Morley, *The Rest of Your Life*, 111). Yet, Christian Liberty can only be practiced by those who are Doctrinally Educated! Dr. Lloyd-Jones offers this exhortation,

“Our object in all this, as I say, is to safeguard the gospel, to keep the evangel clear, to be concerned about the salvation of men and women and the spread of the Christian church. Let that be our only motive. Let us have a single eye to the glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us realize always that we are all of us saved in spite of ourselves, that none of us is perfect in understanding or in any other respect, that not to be in fellowship with those who are born again is to be guilty of schism, which is sinful, that we are therefore called upon, as the apostle exhorted the Philippians, to stand in rank together, whatever the cost,

whatever suffering may be involved, but always with this one idea that God may be over all, that God may be glorified, and that the name of Jesus Christ our Lord may be magnified among the peoples of the earth” (90).

One last insight, we must always distinguish between someone who lacks understanding of doctrine and one who denies doctrine. Again, Dr. Lloyd-Jones wrote, “You may have certain simple Christian people, not over-gifted with intelligence, who find it very difficult to understand some matters, but there are other men, able men, gifted men, highly intelligent men, who deliberately reject the same truths, which the first group finds difficult to accept and understand. Those two positions are very different. While we are patient, sympathetic, and lenient with the first, we must condemn and separate ourselves from the second” (86, 87; cf. Titus 3:10, 11). Often it takes years to become doctrinally educated. This and giftedness, as well as, ability will reflect one’s degree of doctrinal education, but these are never an excuse not to study to show ourselves approved and to reach the highest and most proficient degree we can! We must note that there is a clear difference between one striving to know and not yet knowing and one who in knowledge denies. It is in recognition of degrees and growth in understanding that we are a “professing church.” This means that we require each believer accepted into membership to profess his or her faith in Christ. They are not required to confess their adherence to the seven doctrines in our Statement of Faith. For example, a new believer might confess his or her agreement, but a new believer probably would not have much understanding of what he or she confessed. Our Statement of Faith declares what we believe as a Church and that all of our leaders confess their adherence to the Statement of Faith because this is what we teach (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:9). In contrast, a “confessing church” requires that there is a full agreement with its Confession or Statement of Faith before a believer can be accepted into membership. Being a professing church seems best to align ourselves with the picture of NT conversion and incorporation into the Body of Christ and to recognize there will be varying degrees and a progression of doctrinal understanding. “The unity of the faith” was part of the growth, the building up of the Church (Eph. 4:12,13) because of this we have established our Second Mark of Maturity□Doctrinal Education as a clear expected target for each and every one of our members.

### **The Path to Doctrinal Education**

A Doctrinal Education must begin with daily reading and meditating upon God’s Word. Further, a Doctrinal Education must move into the learning of basic Bible study skills and learning to find your own answers to your questions, thus you begin to feed yourself the meat of the Word. Further, a Doctrinal Education has a clear understanding of the essentials. A simple test of your knowledge in this area is whether you can explain the essentials to someone else? The Reformed Confessions and Catechisms are a prime place to begin. Still further, a Doctrinal Education will understand both of the two areas of nonessentials. A Doctrinal Education should have a balanced application: (1) it should help you think clearly about your Christian faith; it should renew your mind, make you wise, and give you the mind of Christ. (2) It should

be sincerely and faithfully practiced because it is by practice not simply knowledge that we become truly mature. Both of these, knowledge and practice, must happen. You will not know how or why to act until you are doctrinally aware, and until you are practicing what you have been taught you are a “babe” in Christ.

*“It is hard to live right if one’s faith in God is wrong”  
(Augustine, City of God, Bk. V, Chap. 10, 110)*