The Distinction between Fundamental and Non-fundamental Articles of Doctrine

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“Jesus loves me, this I know: and this is all I want to know.”

Someone, somewhere, took the classic opening lines of the Christian hymn, “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” revised them, and turned them into a witty aphorism. The point of the statement becomes a declaration similar to Paul’s in 1 Corinthians, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). The underlying idea is that the Christian says, “I know about Jesus, my Savior, and what He has done for me. As long as I know that, I know what I need to know, and that’s everything I need or want to know.” The above quoted words are, in a sense, a confession of faith.

Is this pithy paraphrase of the classic Christian hymn a valid statement? Should this be a motto that is endorsed from pulpits and in classrooms? Or is there a danger in making this an official statement of principle? Does it put in danger the proclamation of the whole counsel of God, belittle other doctrines of Scripture, and risk reducing the message of Scripture? While it is true that Jesus is the only source of our salvation, the Rock in whom man trusts, the Christian cannot ignore the rest of Scripture. For, as Paul wrote, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful” (2 Tim. 3:16). And Jesus commanded that the apostles teach “them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20a).

There is no debate that the center of our faith is Jesus Christ. For Luke writes in Acts that there is no other name under heaven that can save a person (Acts 4:12). John tells us that God sent Jesus into the world for the express purpose of saving us from our sins (John 3:16). All of the Old Testament is a preparation and foreshadowing of the coming of Christ, the Messiah who would crush the devil's head (Gen. 3:15), who would take the government of the world upon his shoulders (Isaiah 9:6). The foundation of our faith, according to Paul, “is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11), and no one can add anything to that.

However, there are those who would say that that is where things end. Christians are all one in Christ and that is enough. There is no need to quibble and argue over the other doctrines of Scripture that have nothing to do with the foundation of faith, that is, the fundamentals. This is the theology of the ecumenical movement. Peruse almost any document of the ecumenicals and you will note that they desire unity in the common confession of Christ, and that this is enough. The Lutheran Church battles this tendency. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS), when it sought to practice fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in the first half of the twentieth century, had to somehow reconcile the clear confessions of Scripture noted above (2 Tim. 3:16, Matt. 28:20a; cf. also Romans 16:17), with the ALC’s belief that there is “an allowable and

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1 I recall first hearing this in a morning chapel devotion giving by Prof. Daniel Deutschlander at Martin Luther College. I was reminded of it when he repeated it in an article in Preach the Word (Vol. 7, No. 2, November/December 2003), entitled, “Preaching Old Testament Texts.”

wholesome latitude of theological opinion.” Earlier, the ALC had confessed, “We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines.”

The question then is how to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines? And, if there can be a distinction made, is it legitimate to make the distinction? Finally, if the distinction can be made, what is the practical use of it, especially in the doctrine and practice of fellowship?

The question centers on a dogmatic distinction regarding the articles of faith. Recognizing that some doctrines are closer to the foundation of salvation than others, theologians have divided all the doctrines of Scripture into fundamental and non-fundamental articles. Fundamental articles are defined as “those divisions of Christian doctrine that one must know and accept” for salvation. Non-fundamental articles “are those Scripture truths which are not the foundation or object of faith in so far as it obtains forgiveness of sins.”

Fundamental articles are further sub-divided into primary and secondary articles. Primary articles cannot be unknown or denied. They are the foundation of faith. The first and foremost of all those articles is the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, what Francis Pieper terms the articolum omnium fundamentalissimum. Nicolaus Hunnius, the seventeenth century dogmatician who essentially created this dogmatic arrangement, defines the foundation of faith in terms of the vicarious atonement. “The foundation of faith is the grace of God created through Christ, who makes satisfaction for sins.” Those doctrines that underlie this foundation, that support it, are also considered primary fundamental doctrines. For example, the person and work of Christ, the doctrine of sin and its punishment, the Trinity, the Word of God as a means of grace, the verbal inspiration of the Word, and eternal life, are all examples of primary fundamental articles.

Secondary articles are those which can be unknown, but not denied. One could still have saving faith being ignorant of a secondary fundamental article. One could not, however, deny a secondary fundamental article. The sacraments are listed under this category. For while the sacraments of Baptism and Lord’s Supper are indeed means of grace (Titus 3:5; Matt. 26:26-28), they are not absolutely necessary for salvation (Mark 16:16, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”). For, as Mueller writes in his Christian Dogmatics,

The entire forgiveness which Christ has secured for sinners by His death on the cross is offered and conveyed to the believer in the Gospel, so that if he trusts in the Gospel promise, he possesses by faith all the merits of Christ, together with spiritual life and eternal salvation.

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4 Robert Preus. The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism. St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972. II:147. Preus notes why this distinction had to be made. “The laymen, plagued and confused by innumerable doctrinal controversies in those days, had an urgent practical concern to know what was necessary to believe to be saved” (143). The distinctions are also in place, he writes, in order to demonstrate the errors of others (143,144).


6 Pieper I:81.


Non-fundamental articles are those articles that do not create faith, nor do they necessarily sustain faith. Rather, they are beneficial to the Christian in his walk of faith and “indeed perfect the intellect but do not stir up the will to hope and to trust,” as Hunnius put it.\(^\text{10}\) Included in this category would be the doctrines concerning the angels, the Antichrist, church and ministry, the role of man and woman, to name but four. These doctrines are important because they are the Word of God, they are revealed by Him to man; but they are not necessary in the sense that they create faith.

These are the distinctions that the dogmaticians of the Lutheran church have made. Are they legitimate? If all of God’s Word is God’s Word, and if it is all useful as Paul wrote to Timothy, then how can there possibly be a division of doctrines? How can it be right to say that one is fundamental and one is not fundamental?\(^\text{11}\)

It can be said because Scripture says it. Remember Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “I resolved to know nothing…except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Recall also Paul’s confession of faith, made later in 1 Corinthians, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:3,4). In Galatians Paul emphasizes over and over again that it is faith in Jesus Christ that saves man from his sins and nothing else (2:16-21). Christ is the cornerstone on which all of faith is built (Psalm 118:22). The apostle John wrote in his first epistle “the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1:7). This is the essence of saving faith and Christ is the object of it. Chemnitz writes, “We do not exclude the other parts of the heavenly doctrine when we say that the proper object of justifying faith is the promise of grace. But the sum, the end, the goal, and the boundary of all Scripture is Christ in His office of Mediator, Luke 24:27; Rom. 10:4; John 5:39,46; Ps. 40:7; Heb. 10:7.”\(^\text{12}\) The testimony of Scripture is that Christ is the object of faith, the one and only reason for the salvation of mankind. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:18a).

The other primary articles build on this foundation. Jesus has to be both God and man to be our Savior and for his work (life, death, and bodily resurrection) to be effective (Heb. 8:1-6; 9:11-12, 24-28; 10:11-14).\(^\text{13}\) Jesus, as God, is a person of the Trinity, and thus it is necessary to know that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). It is necessary to understand why Jesus had to come into the world, that is, sin (Rom. 5:12). It is necessary to know that the wages of that sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Conversely, it is necessary to know that if man is sinful and has earned death, that God is a merciful Father who sends His Son into the world to do what man cannot (2 Cor. 5:21). And one can only know that God is merciful through His Word. Therefore, an understanding and acceptance that the Word of God is a means of grace, inspired by God himself (Rom. 10:17; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), is necessary. All these make up the foundation of faith. The ignorance or denial of any one of these doctrines would shipwreck faith and lead to eternal damnation. Paul proclaims in 1 Corinthians 15 the danger of denying a fundamental doctrine like

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\(^{10}\) Hunnius 80:202.

\(^{11}\) Preus hints at the danger of this distinction. “Unfortunately the distinction between primary fundamental, secondary fundamental, and nonfundamental articles of faith – which was necessary but also somewhat arbitrarily worked out – tended, regrettably and unintentionally, to obscure the unity of the articles of faith and to conjure up the specter of some complex machine rather than a grand and inspiring symphony or choir” (147).


\(^{13}\) Sometimes there is confusion as the role that each part of Jesus’ nature played in salvation. Perhaps Hunnius’ definition would be helpful: “We must acknowledge the human, to be sure, because God, who is immortal, could not have completed the work of redemption by suffering and dying; but the divine [was necessary] that the infinite weight of His merit might be added to His death….It is clearly necessary to know Jesus Christ as the God-Man” (121:294).
the resurrection. If the resurrection is not a fact, “our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Cor. 15:14). In 2 Timothy Paul records that this in fact happened as Hymenaeus and Philetus destroyed their faith by perverting the doctrine of the resurrection (2:17,18). Hunnius writes:

He who completely denies either one or more of these articles or renders them useless for generating faith either by damaging them or in some other way directly or indirectly destroys, tears up or mangles them, that person we argue with every right has undermined the foundation of faith.14

This is true also of the secondary fundamental articles. A denial (that is, knowing what Scripture says and rejecting it) of any part of Baptism or the Lord’s Supper logically leads to denials of primary fundamentals (except in the case of a felicitous inconsistency), as they undermine the authority of Scripture and doubt the very words of Jesus and His apostles.15

In regards to non-fundamental doctrines, one may remain in ignorance, or even be incorrect, so long as one is not doing so against one’s conscience. Pieper notes that when two doctrines are compared, such as the Antichrist and Christ, the difference will be made clear.

The doctrine concerning Christ is the foundation of this faith, for saving faith has as its object Christ in His vicarious satisfaction; it is faith in Christ….The doctrine concerning the Antichrist, however, is not fundamental to the Christian faith. Scripture nowhere says that men obtain forgiveness of sins and are saved by knowing who the Antichrist is.16

This ignorance will not necessarily harm one’s saving faith. But the non-fundamental doctrines do serve a purpose. 2 Timothy 3:16 and Matthew 28:20a have already been cited as proof that all the teachings of Scripture are important and useful. In addition, a logical deduction based on adherence to the primary doctrine of verbal inspiration will lead one to accept everything in the Word of God as God’s Word and therefore as of the most vital importance. Preus writes, “Anything taught in God’s Word, even those things that cannot be called articles of faith, such as the history of Samson or David or the divine institution of circumcision, is to be accepted.”17 For the non-fundamentals “serve saving faith” and “[f]aith certainly profits by the articuli non-fundamentales.”18

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14 Hunnius 164:392.
15 Pieper I:87,88; Hunnius fudges on the denial of doctrines and how that affects faith. In regard to the Sacraments he writes, “Although one may incur a serious moral sin…although he may offend God and deprive himself of faith itself especially because he does not admit the clear arrangement of God, make the truthfulness of the One who instated them ambiguous, deprive people of an effective means by which God works their salvation; nevertheless, because he is taking nothing away from confidence in the divine promise, setting no obstacle to my promising myself the grace of God through Christ, denial of the prophetic office does not cause the destruction of the foundation of faith” (189:449). Hunnius also speaks this way regarding the Fall and the fact that we are born sinful (192:453,454). He says that denials may not undermine the foundation of faith but these denials are “dangerous to faith” (143:353). Perhaps he is referring to denials based on incorrect understandings of Scripture and not the denial against conscience, which he says can destroy the foundation of faith (141,142). On this point, it is difficult to understand what Hunnius means. One desires to offer him the benefit of the doubt, but he says some hard things. Perhaps he is arguing to the absolutely logical conclusions.
16 Pieper I:80.
17 Preus II:150.
18 Pieper I:80,92. Mueller puts it this way, “Non-fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture are such as do not constitute the foundation of faith, inasmuch as they do not offer and convey to sinners forgiveness of sins and thus make them children of God through faith in Christ. They do not form the foundation of saving faith, but rather
The distinction between the fundamental and non-fundamental articles is a legitimate one, but there are three cautions to be taken up. While making this distinction Christians dare not ignore or deny any doctrine because it is “non-fundamental.” As noted above, all of God’s Word is inspired and is useful (2 Timothy 3:16; Rom. 15:4, “For everything that was written was written to teach us…”) and Jesus himself commanded the proclamation of the whole counsel of God (Matt. 28:20a). Paul prides himself in having proclaimed the “whole will of God” to the people of Ephesus (Acts 20:27). It is clear from his epistles that he did not hesitate to instruct his flock in the non-fundamental doctrines right alongside the fundamental articles. One is also reminded of Moses’ injunction in Deuteronomy 4:2, “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.” Ponder also Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 5:18, “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” Walther writes that the “requisite of an orthodox teacher” is that “he must present all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture.”

The second caution regarding the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines is that Christians dare not deviate from Scripture on the non-fundamental articles. There is not, contrary to what the ALC says, “a wholesome latitude” regarding doctrine. Non-fundamental doctrines are not adiaphora, they are not mitteldinge. To say that they are would be to argue against the clarity of Scripture, which is clearly taught (Psalm 119:97-105). To call non-fundamentals adiaphora ignores the Word of God that has presented those doctrines to mankind for his benefit not “in a vein of theoretical speculation, but with a practical reference to our salvation.” Scripture is clear that man does not get the right to decide which doctrines to keep and which to discard (2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4). To deviate from these doctrines would mute the Lord’s warnings regarding false doctrine (2 Tim. 2:17; Rom. 16:17; Gal. 5:9; Matt. 7:15ff).

The final caution regarding the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles has to do with that warning regarding false doctrine. Because all of Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for training and instruction (2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4), and because public ministers are to proclaim the “whole will of God” (Acts 20:27), anything that is contrary to God’s Word must be pointed out and rejected. In Galatians 5:9 Paul warns that just a little bit of false doctrine will soon penetrate the whole body of doctrine, thus leading to the shipwreck of faith. The Formula of Concord confesses that “All pious Christians, of high degree and low, must guard against these [various false doctrines discussed in the article] if they dearly love their soul’s eternal welfare and salvation.”

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19 C.F.W. Walther. The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. 30. Walther also noted that a born-again child of God will desire to know the doctrines of God. “However, the moment a person becomes a Christian, there arises in him a keen desire for the doctrine of Christ. Even the most uncultured peasant who is still unconverted is suddenly roused in the moment of his conversion and begins to reflect on God and heaven, salvation and damnation, etc. He becomes occupied with the highest problems of human life” (op cit. 13).

20 Pieper I:80.
21 Dog Notes 61.
22 FC XII (Epitome), quoted from Tappert edition of Book of Concord (500:30). Regarding the three areas of caution, Pieper notes that “Scripture nowhere gives any man the license to deviate in any point from God’s Word.”
What is the practical import of this distinction? In preaching and teaching the pastor will clearly proclaim the whole counsel of God. He will preach first and foremost Christ crucified and justification by faith alone and properly administer the sacraments. But, in addition, he will proclaim also the rest of the teachings of Scripture, regarding the Old Testament law, angels, Antichrist, church and ministry. He will proclaim these not as minor doctrines that are adiaphora, but as the inspired Word of God, which is useful for training and edification. This complete study of God’s Word will make it possible for the Christian to “judge every teacher of religion, as well as every teaching that comes our way, so that we will be able to avoid that which is contrary to God’s Word.”

It is important also to remember this distinction as one discusses the faith of those outside of external fellowship. For, even though a fellowship in externals may not be present because of doctrinal differences, it is sure that there are some, often many, that are being saved, as their faith clings to the true object of faith. They are members of the invisible church, the Holy Christian Church, which is made up of “the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit.”

This distinction also plays a role in the doctrine and practice of fellowship. Today’s world wishes to discard every doctrine but the fundamentals for the sake of unity. The basic consensus is to be found in “the common confession of Jesus Christ as the basis of Holy Scripture and the interpretation of the early Christian creeds.” Modern liberal Lutherans state that the satis est of the Augsburg Confession refers only to the fundamental articles, the so-called centers of faith, and that this is “the most adequate test for determining church unity…if such proclamation is present, all manner of other details can be overlooked; and such details dare not be made into a cause of disunion.” Other Lutherans will speak of some differences as “legitimate possibilities within a total conception of the church.”

The various ecumenical councils of the 20th century would agree with such pronouncements and have made nearly identical ones. They are convinced that consensus in the fundamental core of faith – Jesus Christ – is enough for outward unity and, in fact, demands it. Diversity is encouraged and seen as positive as it “contributes to fullness.” These theologians and churchmen seek to

(I:89). To do so “is designated an offense” in Romans 16:17 (I:89). In addition, to do it in one doctrine is as good as doing it in every doctrine, for Scripture is one, holy Word of God (I:89,90). Finally, doctrinal sins have “the tendency to spread” (I:91). “Unchecked, it will corrupt the entire body of doctrine” (I:91).

27 Kasper 24. Harding Meyer, in his essay “Fundamental Consensus and Church Fellowship: A Lutheran Perspective” (found in the same volume) writes “that even differences in the area of church Confession and church doctrine…do not hinder church fellowship provided there is consensus ‘in the right proclamation of the gospel,’ in the ‘heart of the message of salvation’” (113). Meyer continues that such consensus “embraces the essential, central, fundamental aspects and elements of Christian faith…is the necessary and sufficient basis for church fellowship” (119). Romans 16:17 is completely ignored in such a viewpoint, and is, in fact, considered irrelevant.
28 The Constitution of the Church of South India (1947), a doctrinally diverse body, wrote that “this unity of the Spirit must find expression in the faith and order of the Church, in its worship, in its organization and in its whole life.” Document found in Kinnamon 86 (cf. note 2).
29 From the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation which met in 1984 (Kinnamon 122). They go on, “In recognizing these diversities as expressions of the one apostolic faith and the one catholic church, traditions
dispense with the whole will of God and draw out the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles to an unscriptural conclusion. For them, non-fundamental means “adiaphora” and “non-divisive.”

The response of serious confessional Lutherans is “Sola Scriptura!” These ecumenical approaches to fellowship deny the truth of Scripture’s teaching. In Romans 16:17 Paul tells the Christian to mark and avoid false teachers. In Titus 3:10 Paul tells the young pastor Titus to warn a divisive person two times, then have nothing to do with him. In 2 John 10 the Christian is clearly told not to have anything to do with anyone teaching anything that is not in accord with God’s Word. H.M Tjernagel sums it up well. “Union without unity, without unanimity in doctrine and practice, is unscriptural and therefore impossible to us.”

The doctrine and practice of the Wisconsin Synod has been consistent, especially as the WELS struggled with the problems of fellowship and the doctrine of Scripture in the Missouri Synod. The demand for absolute unanimity in doctrine and practice is known as the unit concept of fellowship.

Thus, the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of doctrine plays an important role in faith life. Jesus lived and died for sins, and that is all that one needs to know for salvation. It is enough. But it must never dare be claimed that the rest of the doctrines of Scripture can be ignored, discarded, changed, or denied – for to deny one is to deny all and can put the whole of faith into danger of shipwreck.

“Jesus loves me, this I know; now teach me everything else Lord!”

**Bibliography:**


*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS.* Commission on Inter-Church Relations (WELS), 1997. 25-37.


are changed, antagonisms overcome, and mutual condemnations lifted. The diversities are reconciled and transformed into a legitimate and indispensable multiformality within the one body of Christ” (122). The Porvoo Common Statement (1992) says that consensus “does not require each tradition to accept every doctrinal formulation characteristic of our distinctive traditions” (Kinnamon 156).

30 H.M. Tjernagel. “Unity, Union, and Unionism.” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly,* Vol. 43:2,3 (June/September 2003). The article was originally written in 1936-1938 in response to the ULCA and ALC requests to merge into one Lutheran church body.

31 For a description of the WELS doctrine and practice of fellowship confer the following resources: *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS* (Commission on Inter-Church Relations, 1997), 25-37; Brug *op. cit.;* and *Essays on Church Fellowship* (ed. Curtis Jahn), Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. An excellent history of the events that caused the split between Wisconsin and Missouri is the just published *A Tale of Two Synods* by Prof. Mark Braun (NPH, 2003).


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 *All Scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV).*