

Title: “In Essentials, Unity – In Non-essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity”

Key verse: 1st Corinthians 15:3-4 — “For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (NASB)

Good morning, everyone. And: Happy Anniversary! Today Osaka International Church celebrates our 47th anniversary. Let me spend a few minutes to tell you a little bit about my history at this church and why it is special to me. I first visited OIC during its 18th year, in the summer of 1992. I soon fell in love with this fellowship. Here was a place where I found a group of evangelical Christians from a fascinating variety of backgrounds all joining together to worship our Lord and encourage each other in our walk with Him. When I first arrived here, I had spent one year in a rather remote place in Japan and I was feeling quite starved for fellowship. Here at OIC, I found brothers and sisters I could have fellowship with, and the newly installed pastor at that time was a gifted Bible teacher. Because we came from a variety of backgrounds, of course we had some different understandings on some issues of Christian doctrine and practice, but we are united in the fundamentals of the faith, the Evangelical beliefs in the authority of the Scriptures, of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Trinity, and the death and resurrection of Christ.

During each OIC anniversary in the 1990’s, I enjoyed listening to the story of how this church was founded. A group of Japanese pastors and Christian businessmen wanted to start an English-speaking church in Osaka, because there was no such church back then in the 1970’s. They recruited an American missionary named Jack Marshall to be the pastor of the church. They believed English-speaking Christians in the Osaka area needed a place of fellowship and mutual encouragement. That described me, and I was so happy to find OIC and join the fellowship. Here I found a group of Christians both broad-minded and thoroughly evangelical in doctrine. So, today, I wish to speak about the fundamentals of the Christian faith, within the framework of a popular Christian slogan. I have taken this slogan as the title of my message today:

“In Essentials, Unity – In Non-essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity”

On the essential, foundational doctrines of the Christian faith, we must be united. In a moment, I will outline those foundational doctrines. Then, there are some other doctrines and practices which are important, but on which genuine Christians have had some disagreements on the details. In such cases, we need to give each other some leeway, some of amount of liberty, acknowledging that we won’t all agree on everything, but we still accept each other as fellow Christians. And the final element: “In all things, charity (love).” We must still love one another, even while discussing our differences.

Part 1: “In Essentials, Unity.”

Let us begin with a look at the absolute essential doctrines that we are to be united on.

Ephesians 4, verses 3 to 6 (NASB) say – “Being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”
Verse 3 again: Being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Verses 11 to 13 – “And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ 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.”

Verse 13 again: Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God.

This is the goal of Christian instruction: that we each know the Son of God ... and that we all be united in faith.

Sadly, though, the Christian church has not shown itself to be very united. We look very divided over many issues of doctrine and practice. Yet, despite that, I do often see cooperation and acceptance across denominational lines. We have some core beliefs that are the bedrock of the Christian faith and message, core beliefs that are shared by all Bible-believing Christians from a variety of denominational backgrounds. In today's message, I would like to outline these core beliefs as expressed in a few key documents produced by the Christian church during the past 2,000 years of church history. Today I would like to look at two important creeds of the ancient church, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, plus look at the emphasis which the Protestant Reformation put on the doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and also look at a typical Evangelical statement of faith, such as what we adhere to at OIC.

Before we look at the ancient creeds, let's look at a creedal statement made by the Apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians 15:3-4 (NASB) – “For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Paul is passing on what he had learned ... first of all, the foundational doctrine that “Christ died for our sins.” This is the key message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do you remember the scene during the Last Supper, when Jesus said these words in Matthew 26:26-28 (NASB) – “Now while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.”²⁷ And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you;²⁸ for this is My blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins”.”

The Old Testament system of sacrifices had been a picture of the future sacrifice of Christ for our sins. And so, on the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus is pointing out to His disciples the main purpose for which he came to earth. See verse 28 again: *For this is My blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. His sacrificial death is for the forgiveness of our sins.*

1st John 2:2 (NASB) – “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

That word “propitiation” is a big word, and it's a bit complicated to describe. The marginal note in my Bible defines *propitiation* as the “means of reconciliation with God by atoning for sins.” My ESV Study Bible says, “Sin brings divine wrath ... As the perfect sacrifice for sin, Jesus turns away God's wrath.” *Jesus turns away God's wrath.*

This is the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement,” that Christ died as a substitution for us human beings. This is a topic that deserves one or more sermons devoted just to this one doctrine, but today I can only highlight it briefly in my overview of essential doctrines.

Let's look again at 1st Corinthians 15, the latter part of verse 3 – “... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Verse 4 also ends “... according to the Scriptures.”

Let's take a look at what Jesus told His disciples just after His resurrection in Luke 24:44-48 (NASB) – “Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all the things that are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the

Psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,⁴⁶ and He said to them, “So it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.”

Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures: (1) the Law of Moses, (2) the Prophets, and (3) the Psalms – these are the three parts of the Old Testament. Jesus showed them the many places throughout the Old Testament where it was prophesied that the Messiah would come and suffer and die and be resurrected on the third day. The Scriptures are the bedrock authority for Christians, the place we learn of God and His plan for mankind and the way of salvation and the future life. You can find this affirmed in many Statements of Faith in the evangelical tradition, such as our own ...

The OIC Statement of Faith, Paragraph 1 – “We believe the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men, and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life. II Timothy 3:16.”

This reflects one of the cornerstones of the Protestant Reformation, the principle expressed in Latin as “Sola Scriptura,” meaning “by Scripture alone.” The Scriptures are our final authority and they form the foundation of what we know about God and His plan of salvation.

Well, since I have mentioned the Protestant Reformation, let me spend a few minutes here. Our church is a part of the Protestant and evangelical tradition. The second principle of the Protestant Reformation is expressed in Latin with the phrase “Sola fide,” meaning “by faith alone.” We are saved by faith alone, without works. Martin Luther discovered this as he studied the Epistle to the Romans.

In Romans 1:17 (NIV), Luther discovered this wonderful truth – “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” Here, the Apostle Paul quotes from the Old Testament, from the prophet Habakkuk: “*The righteous person will live by his faith*” (Hab. 2:4c).

“...A righteousness that is by faith from first to last...” It is by faith. From first to last. From beginning to end. Faith is central. Not works ... not religious duties ... not good deeds.

Let’s look at what the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:11 (ESV) – “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” It is not by the works of the Law that we are saved, but by faith.

“Sola fide,” by faith alone.

The third principle of the Protestant Reformation is “Sola gratia,” by grace alone.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) – “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.” It is by God’s grace, through faith, that we are saved.

Let’s return to the creedal statement made by the Apostle Paul in 1st Corinthians 15, verse 3 – “For I handed down to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...”

Verse 4 – “and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Do you remember Jesus's words when some of the religious leaders asked Him to give them a sign so that they would be able to believe in Him? He said in Matthew 12:38-40 (ESV) – "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." ³⁹ But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Christ died ... and He was buried ... and then after three days He rose from the dead. Every Easter, we hear this wonderful story repeated. After His crucifixion and burial, after the Sabbath was over, the women came to the tomb. Luke 24:1-8 (ESV) – "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." ⁸ And they remembered his words."

Why is it so important that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead? Because it means that He has conquered death, and it is a promise that He can and will redeem our bodies from death as well.

1st Corinthians 15:20-26 (ESV) – "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Verse 26 again: *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.* This is wonderful news. Christ was crucified as the atonement for our sins. Then He was raised the third day in accordance with the prophecies made. He defeated death and He will raise us up at the end of time.

Here is a famous Eastern Orthodox icon of the Resurrection. Here we see the resurrected Christ standing on broken tombs, illustrating His defeat of death. He is standing on the gates of Hades, which He has broken down, showing that He has conquered death. Notice that those two broken gates form a cross, because the cross was the instrument Christ used to defeat death. And He is pulling Adam and Eve out of the grave. They are the original man and woman whose choice to eat the forbidden fruit plunged humankind into sin and death. But now death has been defeated and believers receive the promise of eternal life.

Next, I wish to take a look at an ancient creed called the Apostles' Creed. This expresses the most fundamental, the most essential doctrines of the Christian faith. This was a creed that converts to Christianity were expected to adhere to and to recite at their baptism.



The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

(Book of Common Prayer, 1979)

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

Genesis 1:1 (NASB) – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

“I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.”

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

“He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.”

This story is told in Luke chapter 1. This is an essential of the Christian faith, that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin. This is affirmed in the OIC Statement of Faith as well.

“He suffered under Pontius Pilate...”

The Roman governor's name is mentioned in all four Gospels and the Book of Acts. The execution of Christ under Pontius Pilate is also mentioned by the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals*, 15.44).

The crucifixion of Christ is a real event that took place in space and time.

“He ... was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven ...” In Luke 24 and Acts chapter 1, it is stated that after Jesus' resurrection and appearance to the disciples, He ascended into heaven.

“...and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.” Hebrews 10:12 (ESV) says – “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” The Final Judgment of the living and the dead is described in several places, such as in Revelation 20.

The Apostles' Creed ends with these words: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.” The “catholic Church” here is not the Roman Catholic Church, but is simply a reference to the worldwide body of Christian believers. We look forward to the resurrection of our bodies and to everlasting life with our Creator.

Here is encapsulated the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. These are the basic doctrines which we adhere to as Christians.

In the fourth century, another creed was drawn up, probably an expansion of another baptismal creed that had been in use in the eastern church. This expanded creed was made necessary by a challenge from a preacher named Arius, who questioned if Jesus Christ was fully divine. His most famous statement was this: “There was a time when the Son of God was not.” Arius claimed that the Son of God had a beginning point, that He was created. Therefore, Jesus Christ was not equally divine with the Father. This preaching caused a lot of trouble, and so in the year 325, an ecumenical council was called to discuss this issue. The council was held in the city of Nicaea, and from that

council we have what is called the Nicene Creed. It affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ.

Later, another council was called in the year 381, held in Constantinople. At this council, the full divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit was affirmed. The last portion of the Nicene Creed was expanded to include a description of the third person of the Trinity. On the PowerPoint screen, I have the Nicene Creed displayed, sometimes also called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed.

The Nicene Creed (or Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(Book of Common Prayer, 1979)

I won't read the whole creed for you. But you can see that the terminology for each member of the Trinity has been expanded from how it appeared in the Apostles' Creed. Notice how Jesus Christ is described as "... the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the cornerstones of Christian belief. The full divinity and personhood of each member of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – is crucial to a complete understanding of the Biblical teaching on our God and on the way of salvation.

At this point, let me tell you a bit of my own spiritual journey. I've told you before about the wonderful foundation I received at the Sunday School of the Lutheran Church. When we moved to San Diego, at first we couldn't find a good church, but eventually ended up in a Pentecostal Church, since that was the denominational background of my mother. That church was nice at first, but after a few years had passed and there were two changes of pastor, the atmosphere of the church began to change ... and it turned me off. Meanwhile, those were my teenage years, when you begin to question everything. I hadn't really made my own decision to follow Christ, and I was aware of that. Then my twin brother and I left home to attend college at UCLA. My brother was a faithful Christian, and he promptly joined a Christian group there. He was introduced to John MacArthur's church and eventually I visited there as well. It was a fantastic place, and I was impressed by MacArthur's detailed, verse-by-verse exposition of the Bible. He taught us that we must be careful to always look at the context of each passage we study, to know the meaning of each word (especially: that it's good to know the original Greek or Hebrew word), and to see how the passage fits in to the rest of Scripture.

Well, during my second year of university, I was attending a different church closer to the college campus, and it was there that I "walked forward" in an invitation and accepted Christ as my Savior. That was on Palm Sunday in 1979, my spiritual birthday. I had already read the Bible through one time, and I eagerly began reading it again. Then, during my summer vacation, while I was back home in San Diego, two guys came knocking on my door. They were evangelists who were eager to tell me about the Bible. When they pulled out two books to give to me, I recognized the books as

being publications of the Watchtower Society ... the Jehovah's Witnesses. I took the books and I read them. The books pointed out that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. Well, perhaps John MacArthur had taught me too well, because at that time, I had an attitude of sticking just to the words of the Bible, and so I was inclined to throw away anything that I thought was "traditional" and not truly Biblical. If the Trinity is not in the Bible, then maybe I should discard that doctrine.

Perhaps that was a dangerous time for me. But I knew the tools that were at my disposal to investigate the claims I was reading in those Watchtower Society books. One claim had to do with the Greek word for "God" in the Gospel of John, chapter one, verse one. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the verse doesn't say Jesus is "God" with a capital "G" but is "a god," with a small "g." Just as Arius back in the 4th century claimed that Jesus, the Son of God, had a beginning point and was not equally divine as God the Father is, so the Jehovah's Witnesses today deny the full divinity of Christ. Well, I looked at the Greek New Testament in John 1:1 and I could see the point these people were trying to make, that it might be read as "a god," not fully equal in divinity to God the Father. However, if you take their manner of interpretation of John 1:1 and apply it to the rest of the Gospel of John, it quickly begins to make no sense at all. You cannot consistently apply their interpretive principle to the rest of the Gospel of John. I concluded that their interpretation of John 1:1 is wrong. That was Lesson #1 for me.

Lesson #2 had to do with the word "Lord." I looked at the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the original Hebrew, where the words "Adonai" and "Yahweh" (YHWH) appear, the Septuagint often uses the Greek word "Kurios," which means "Lord." And when the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament and apply the quote to Jesus, very often this Greek word "Kurios" is used – sometimes the original Hebrew is Yahweh. So, Jesus is equated with Yahweh God ... Jesus is God, He is divine, fully divine. So, after a few weeks of investigation, I could throw away the Jehovah's Witnesses' false notions that the Trinity is unbiblical. No, in fact the idea of the Trinity is indeed Biblical, even if that word doesn't appear in the Bible. If you take the whole of Scripture and see everything written about Jesus Christ, you will see that He is equal in divinity with God the Father. The same can be said of the Holy Spirit.

The big lesson I took from all this is that I need to trust my forebears in the faith who struggled with all these theological issues long before I was born. In the early centuries of church history, the ancient church fathers discussed these issues and came to their conclusions, and these have been passed down to us ... in a similar manner that the Apostle Paul said in 1st Corinthians 15 that he was passing on the doctrines that he had received. I have become very fond of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as solid pronouncements of the absolute foundational doctrines of the Christian gospel. My previous attitude of being "Bible only" was too narrow and naïve. We have to put some trust in our forebears who have passed on to us their conception of the essentials of the Christian faith.

Herein lie the essential doctrines. These are the doctrines which you must adhere to if you wish to be called Christian. These are the fundamental doctrines which are shared by Baptists and Presbyterians, by Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Brethren, Holiness, Calvary Chapel, and other denominations. Although there are differences among us, we generally recognize each other as Christian. There are other groups that we exclude, because they do not adhere to these essentials, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Unitarians.

I am coming to the end of Part 1 of today's sermon. But before I do, let me look at one more idea: "Doctrine and Practice." Not only are there essential doctrines that we must be united on, but we also have certain essentials in the way we live our lives. We have been saved from our sins, and that means we must always strive to forsake any sinful actions or attitudes that we have. In both the Old

and New Testaments, we are exhorted to repent of our sins, turn to God, and follow Him. We won't so do perfectly, but we should desire to do so and feel distressed when we fail.

Well, that topic deserves one whole sermon by itself, but it is time for me to move on.

Today's message takes its outline from this Christian slogan I quoted before:
"In Essentials, Unity – In Non-essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity (love)"

Next, Part 2: "In Non-essentials, Liberty."

Well, I originally planned to spend two-thirds of my sermon on Part 1 and one-third on Part 2, but as you can see, I have used practically all of my time outlining the most essential doctrines of our faith. Now, it seems that I will have only about 10% of my time to devote to Part 2.

The essence of this phrase "In Non-essentials, Liberty" is that there are some doctrines and practices which are certainly a part of the Scriptures and are important, even crucial, but disagreement exists on the details of how these should be explicated and implemented. On such issues, while we might discuss and persuade somebody that the idea he was holding was wrong and he changes his mind on the issue, in very many cases, long-held beliefs are difficult to let go of. And we ought to be mindful of the possibility that it might be us who is in error. On such disagreements, we may have to just accept that our Christian brother or sister has a different opinion and leave it at that. We have to be gracious to each other.

I was planning to share several examples with you of doctrinal differences I have seen among my evangelical brethren, but I see that I am running out of time. Maybe that's good, because I suppose these examples are all controversial, so maybe I shouldn't spend too much time on them.

Let me start with one example, one that is maybe the least controversial in our current environment. Back in my younger days, we still had a lot of discussions on Legalism. In a lot of churches, they have a lot of rules on behavior, rules which they believe are supported by Scripture. Here are some of these rules: no smoking, no drinking alcohol, no dancing, no working on Sunday, no going to the cinema, no make-up allowed for the ladies, and the females should wear a dress to church. Yes, actually, my mother always wore a dress to church. There were several more legalistic rules, but I have forgotten them. I came of age in the 1970's, and at that time a lot of preachers were beginning to question if such rules were really Biblical or not. John MacArthur was one of those, and I remember him preaching against legalism sometimes. In fact, I admired his Bible-centered preaching and his fearlessness in preaching against practices which were not supported in Scripture. He sometimes spoke against the Roman Catholic practice of venerating the Virgin Mary. And he equally spoke against some of his own fundamentalist brethren who preached various legalisms and other unscriptural interpretations of the Bible.

Let's take a look at Romans chapter 14. There are some principles here about what to do when you and a fellow Christian have a disagreement about what is and is not allowable for a Christian to do, or what may or may not be an obligation for a Christian to do. In that chapter, the Apostle Paul is addressing the issue of some Christians who refrained from eating meat, since the meat being sold in the marketplace may have been offered to an idol in a pagan ritual beforehand. Should a Christian eat such meat? Does it really matter? Some Christians refused to eat meat, while others decided it was no problem at all to eat it. Also, some Christians from a Jewish background continued to observe the Sabbath and other holy days, and they sometimes criticized fellow believers for not doing the same.

Romans 14:1-6 (NASB) – “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. ² One person has faith that he may eat all things, but the one who is weak eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One person values one day over another, another values every day the same. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and the one who eats, does so with regard to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and the one who does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God.”

This passage is fascinating to me. I used to be irritated at legalistic Christians who make extra rules that may or may not have a true basis somewhere in Scripture. But I came to realize that these people often have honest hearts and they believe that they are honoring God by following a narrow path. Verse 6 again – “The one who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and the one who eats, does so with regard to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and the one who does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God.” He does these things for the Lord, and I should not look down on him because I think that his practices aren’t actually required by Scripture. Likewise, he should not judge me if I decide to do things which he thinks ought not to be done. Verse 4 – “Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” Let’s not be judgmental toward our fellow Christians on matters not explicitly stated in Scripture. Let’s also gently try to correct our brothers or sisters and lead them to a more mature understanding of Scripture.

Well, when I originally decided to deliver a sermon on this subject, I was intending to include several examples of doctrinal differences we have across denominational lines. Examples such as differences of opinion on baptism (some denominations practice the baptism of infants). Or differences of opinion on the charismatic gifts of 1st Corinthians 12 – are all of the gifts, including tongues, still in operation today? And differences of opinion on the millennial kingdom of Christ. I wanted to talk in some detail on these examples, but I do not have time today. However, let me tell you something that I learned when I was in my 20’s.

I used to think that if we all could examine the original Greek of the New Testament passages that cover those doctrines, then we could come to an agreement on them and erase our denominational differences. But that was a naïve idea. I discovered that on both sides of the baptism issue, there were people who knew the Greek very well, and yet they had come to different conclusions – and they have well-argued Biblical reasons for their conclusions. It was the same with the charismatic gifts. And what was even more astonishing to me was that I saw God working in the lives and ministries of Christians on opposite sides of various debates. What really matters to God is our faithfulness to Him and our faithful adherence to the absolute essentials of the Christian faith.

Let’s return to the Christian slogan which I made the title of today’s message:
“In Essentials, Unity – In Non-essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity”

I outlined for you the fundamentals of the faith which we must be united on. Then I gave you some examples of doctrinal differences that exist among the different denominations. Sometimes, you might be able to persuade a Christian brother or sister that their understanding of a particular doctrine is incorrect and you can bring them over to agree with your stance on that doctrine. But other times, we must live with differences among us. I have seen that God works across denominational lines – surely we can, too. Let’s accept our Christian brothers and sisters who disagree with us.

Of course, we can't take this principle too far. When it comes to heresy (false doctrine), we must deal with it and get rid of it. And when somebody who claims to be a Christian is living an ungodly life, we must rebuke him and call him to repentance. But on doctrinal differences between Bible-believing Christians, let us show some liberty and grace to our fellow Christians.

Part 3: "In All Things, Charity."

In all our dealings with our fellow Christians, let us be charitable ... let us show love.

Let's return to Romans chapter 14 and look at verses 13-15 – "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this: not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to the one who thinks something is unclean, to that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking in accordance with love. Do not destroy with your choice of food that person for whom Christ died."

This passage is speaking about practice, rather than doctrine, so I have to be careful if I wish to apply the principles of Romans 14 to differences of opinion on doctrine. Nevertheless, what I see here in these verses is the possibility that we may hurt or damage a fellow Christian by a judgmental attitude or by our insistence that they understand Scriptural injunctions that same way we do. We are not walking in love when we do that.

1st Corinthians 13:1-7 (ESV) – "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Romans 13:10 (NASB) – "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law."

1st Peter 4:8 (NASB) – "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

I will close today's message with one of my favorite verses, 1st Timothy 1:5 (NASB) – "But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

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