

Title: “Part 2: Christian Essentials and Non-essentials”

Key verse: Ephesians 4:1-3 (NASB) – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Good morning, everyone. Three months ago, on the day we celebrated the anniversary of the founding of Osaka International Church, I presented a sermon with this title: “In Essentials, Unity – In Non-essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity.” This is a slogan used by many Christians and I am quite fond of it. The meaning of this slogan is that among those of us who call ourselves Christian, there are certain Essential fundamental doctrines which we must be united on. And the second element of this slogan indicates that there are some other doctrines and practices which are less essential, and which sincere, Bible-believing Christians may have differences of opinion on among themselves, so that means that we need to give each other some liberty to have a different viewpoint. And then, in the third part of this slogan, you see that it says that in everything we do and in everything we say, we must display charity – love.

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

This slogan represents one of my core beliefs, that there are essential doctrines we must be united on, but we should also be accepting of each other even when we sometimes disagree on other matters. Here at OIC, we have Christians from various denominations, so on our anniversary day last October, I decided to share my thoughts with you on this topic, since I thought it would be an appropriate message for an inter-denominational church. However, when I shared this with you at that time, I did not get to say everything that I had wanted to, and afterwards when I talked about this with some of my brothers in the church, they indicated that they would like to hear more about some of the topics I had wanted to discuss. And so today I would like to return to this theme and expand on some of the things I shared with you last time. This is Part 2 of my anniversary message, and it is coming to you shortly before I celebrate my own birthday next week. You’ll hear some of my personal testimony today.

The first element of this slogan is this: “In Essentials, Unity.” Among those who call themselves Christians, there are certain Essential doctrines which we must be united on: that God is the Creator of all ... that He exists in a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ... that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man ... and that Jesus came into the world to pay the penalty for our sin and restore our relationship with our Creator. Last October, I outlined for you these essential doctrines, using the framework of two ancient creeds of the church, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, which beautifully state those essential doctrines. Since we are a Protestant church in the evangelical tradition, I also mentioned some basic doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, since these are also key to our understanding of the essential doctrines. If you did not hear that sermon I did on October 24th last year, I would encourage you to look it up on our web site and download the script.

However, I did not have time to outline another series of essentials. I outlined for you **the essential doctrines**, the essential teachings of the Christian faith. But this is not the whole story. There is also **essential Christian behavior**. We who call ourselves Christian are to live out our lives in a manner that reflects Jesus Christ our Lord ... to live out our lives in a way that gives honor to Him. The word “Christian” means “little Christ,” and we are to reflect His character in our own lives.

Colossians 1:10 (NASB) – “So that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Live a life that is pleasing to Him.

*Bear fruit as you work for Him.
Increase in your knowledge of God.*

Ephesians 4:1 (NASB) – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.”

Again: walk in a manner worthy of your calling as a Christian.

We claim to be Christ’s disciples. So we must walk worthy of our Lord, reflecting His character.

What is the most fundamental message of the gospel?

Let’s look at the words of John the Baptist, the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus.

Matthew 3:1-2 (NASB) – “Now, in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying ²‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Mark 1:4-5 (NASB) – “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.”

Here we see elements of the fundamental Christian message:

Repentance. That means changing your mind and turning away from your sin.

Confession of your sins.

You will receive *forgiveness* of your sins.

John the Baptist *prepared the way* for Jesus Christ by preaching repentance ... because, he said, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” *The kingdom of heaven has come near*, and the way we prepare for God’s kingdom is to turn away from our sins.

And then to be baptized. This is a symbol that illustrates that we have cast off our old life and are embracing a new life.

After Jesus was raised from the dead, He gave instructions to His disciples in both Matthew chapter 28 and Luke chapter 24. Let’s look at Luke 24:46-47 (NASB) – “And He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again 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.’”

There’s the fundamental gospel message: repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We must turn away from our sins.

Let me caution you about something. Let me say something to anyone and everyone within the Christian community: if we have not forsaken our sins, then we can hardly be said to be living according to Christian standards. I’m not saying we have to be living a perfect life of no sin – that’s impossible. But we need to be continuing to turn away from sin in our daily lives. That’s an essential part of the Christian lifestyle.

1st John 1:8-9 (ESV) – “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Sin still is a part of our lives even after we become Christians. But we must not let it have a home in our lives anymore. We must confess our sins ... and Jesus is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us.

Romans 6:1-2 (ESV) – “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

This verse says that we have died to sin. *Died to sin*. Therefore, how can we continue to still live in sin? I have made two observations that really surprise me whenever I see them. One is that I sometimes see professing Christians compromising with sin, continuing to follow sinful practices. The other thing that surprises me is how often I see in the New Testament epistles verses like the one I see here in Romans 6. Throughout the epistles I see so many exhortations written TO CHRISTIANS to forsake this or that sin. Didn't we repent and forsake sin when we became Christians at the beginning? Well, yes, most of us did. But sin is easy to fall back into. Sinful habits are easy to fall back into. And too often, we have not given enough instruction to our new Christians about how or why we must continue to fight sin and throw it out of our lives.

Romans 6:12-13 (ESV) – “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”

Do not let sin reign in your body ... Jesus is your king, not sin and not Satan.
Do not keep on presenting the “members” of your body as instruments of unrighteousness and continue sinful practices. Do not present the members of your body as instruments of sin. The members of your body – your mouth, your eyes, your hands, or any other part of your body – these should not be devoted to sin anymore in your life. These members – all of them – can and should be presented to God as instruments of righteousness.

Well, I think I have said enough about this fundamental Christian behavior: we must forsake sin.

Let me go on to other aspects of basic Christian behavior. Let's look at basic church life.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB) – “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Stimulate one another to love and good deeds. Christians should be people who are loving others and we should always be encouraging our brothers and sisters to be such kind of loving persons. And engaging in good deeds toward other people.

Plus, we should not forsake assembling together at church. It is important to gather together and encourage each other. The “Preamble” of the OIC Constitution states this: “Whereas a group of English-speaking Protestant Christians resident in the Osaka area, believing it to be the will of God that the followers of Jesus Christ associate themselves in fellowship for mutual encouragement, for public worship and for active service, did band themselves together and organize the Osaka International Church, with its first public worship on the first day of April 1985.”

We believe it to be the will of God that we gather together for fellowship, mutual encouragement, for public worship, and for active service.

Acts 2:42 (NASB) – “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

We gather together to study and to devotedly follow the apostles' teaching, which we read here in the New Testament.

And we also devote ourselves to fellowship, and to breaking bread (which means sharing a meal, and it hints at the communion service), and we devote ourselves to prayer.

Let me pause here to repeat something I heard last week. After I had already begun composing my sermon for today, I was listening to Pastor Alistair's message and I noticed that he touched on some themes that were in the first part of my own sermon. In particular, he gave OIC a challenge for this year of 2022, and I would like to repeat that challenge.

He said: "Make knowing and obeying God's Word the most important activity in our lives."

Knowing God's Word.

And obeying God's Word.

We must study God's Word, the Bible.

And we must also obey what it says. Start with some of the basics that I have shared with you today: forsake sin; live a life pleasing and honoring to God; be sure to gather together regularly for fellowship and mutual encouragement and worship; love and serve others.

What I have said thus far is only a taste of what could be said on this topic of essential Christian behavior. And I plan on sharing some deeper material with you in some other sermons in the coming months. However, I would like to move on to the second half of my sermon today.

Remember the slogan which forms my outline:

In Essentials, Unity.

In Non-essentials, Liberty

There are certain doctrines and practices on which sincere, Bible-believing Christians disagree. I described some of this in my Essentials and Non-essentials sermon last October, and then I talked some more about it in private with some Christian brothers during fellowship time after the service. They indicated that they would like to hear more about this, especially the topic of Christian baptism. There are different practices among the different denominations on baptism. Why is that? What is essential and what is non-essential in how Christians do baptism? Here at OIC, we have a variety of Christians from a variety of backgrounds. In fact, when OIC was founded, there were both Baptists and Presbyterians involved. Our constitution was written by a Presbyterian, though most of our pastors have been Baptist. One of our pastors was Methodist.

Among the various Christian denominations, baptism is practiced in different ways. Some denominations practice infant baptism – they believe it is acceptable to baptize the infants of Christian parents and formally bring those little ones into the community of the Christian church right away. Other denominations say No, that should not be done ... only persons who have made their own conscious decision to put their faith in Christ should be baptized.

And then there is the question of the mode of baptism. May it be done by sprinkling or by pouring water, or must it be by total immersion of the body under water? Different denominations have different answers to that question.

Here at OIC, our constitution and our statement of faith do not take a stand on those differing issues. Our practice of administering baptism has usually been by immersion, but I do remember our Methodist pastor doing baptism by sprinkling. Our constitution states that church membership at OIC is "available to all baptized believers in Jesus Christ who endorse the Statement of Faith." We have accepted for membership Christians who were baptized when they were infants. However, as far as I can recall, I don't think an infant baptism has ever been done here at OIC.

Let us take a look at baptism in Scripture. This is certainly a key, essential part of Christianity. It is commanded by Jesus and practiced by John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles.

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV) – "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’.”

Go and make disciples of all nations.

Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And teach the new disciples to obey everything that Christ has commanded.

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter gave his first great sermon, and at the end he got a question, which he answered. Acts 2:37-38 (NIV) – “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’³⁸ Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’.”

Here is what was required of them:

Repent of their sins.

Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Why be baptized? What does it signify? Is it a requirement for salvation?

No, it is not a requirement for salvation. Only faith in Christ is a requirement for salvation. But having believed Peter’s message and being convicted of their sin, they asked Peter what they should do now, and the answer was: to turn away from sin and to be baptized.

We say that baptism is a symbol of a new life in Christ. The believer has been united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Romans 6:3-5 (ESV) – “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

Colossians 2:12-13 (ESV) – “Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.”

We are identified with Christ in His death and resurrection ... we are made alive together with Christ ... we are forgiven ... and all this “through faith in the powerful working of God.”

Let me spend a few minutes telling you my testimony of discovery and contemplation on these issues. In my younger days, I was taught that baptism is a symbol of our new life in Christ, a symbol that we have turned away from our sins and put our faith in Christ. The practice of immersion – going under the water and then coming up out of the water – symbolizes our own death to our old life and our resurrection to a new life. This is for persons who have made their own conscious decision to put their faith in Christ.

Well, when I was in high school, I once visited my friend’s Presbyterian church. And on that Sunday, the church had a baptism ceremony and baptized an infant. I knew that many churches have this practice, but that day was the first time I had seen it myself. And I found it both puzzling and upsetting. I felt like I wanted to stand up and scold the people for baptizing an infant and ask them: how can they baptize someone who hasn’t made their own profession of faith in Christ? But then I realized that of course they have reasons for this practice. I don’t know what their reasons are, but they surely have reasons for believing that this is legitimate and Biblical.

Several years later, I was in university in Los Angeles and attending John MacArthur's church. That church strictly adheres to "believers-only baptism," that only people who have made their own profession of faith in Christ can be baptized. In the years after graduating from university, I took some theological courses offered in evening classes at that church. In some of those lessons, we sometimes discussed baptism. I learned that in the churches practicing infant baptism, they see baptism as a sign of discipleship, and that the parents of these children have pledged to raise their kids in the Christian faith. They are little disciples, so why shouldn't they be baptized?

I also learned that in such churches, baptism is seen as a sign of God's covenant promises to His people, the Christian church, in a parallel manner where in the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign of God's covenant promises to the people of Israel. If this be true, then it would be right to baptize the infants of church members since you would want to include your children in the Christian community where they can enjoy the benefits of this covenant relationship with God. Such baptism does not confer salvation or guarantee that the child will grow up to be a Christian believer, but during their formative years, they are enjoying the benefits of being in the Christian community and are receiving instruction. They are little disciples. Such are the beliefs of those who would defend infant baptism.

During my college years, I was quite idealistic and I was in awe of the excellent Bible teaching of John MacArthur. He really dug down deep in every text he explored and he told us the historical background and the details of the Greek words in the text. He illuminated the Word of God so well and so thoroughly. He came to precise conclusions as to the meaning of the passages he was exploring. I came to feel that if we could all just go back to the original Greek and Hebrew text – and also understand the historical background – then we could erase our theological and denominational differences. I was really idealistic. That's just not going to happen. In fact, I began to notice something. I noticed that other fine Biblical teachers who knew the Greek text came to different conclusions on various theological issues, including on baptism. And, much to my astonishment, I saw that God was using and blessing the ministries of these fine Christian teachers who often disagreed with each other on certain doctrines and practices. Presbyterians and Baptists and Charismatics and Methodists and Pentecostals and Calvinists and anti-Calvinists – God was using and blessing Christians from all these groups. Of course, none of them are perfect – each have some strengths and weaknesses. But, by and large, I was frankly amazed that God would use Christians whose theology was different than what I had been taught. God is gracious and He blesses faithfulness without expecting perfection. Christ gave us the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations," but He knew full well that His human instruments to accomplish this task were not always going to do everything right. But He gave us His Holy Spirit to empower us for ministry and give us gifts for ministry, and He desires that each one of us play our part in the Body of Christ. As long as we stay close to God and His Spirit and we follow His Word, He will work through us despite our imperfections and the disagreements we have with each other.

I have told you about the Christian study center in England where I studied twice, once in the autumn of 1986 and again in the autumn of 1991. I love that place. They believe that the Bible speaks to every area of life and so you can go there to study any subject from a Biblical perspective – they have many materials there for you to study. I had a variety of topics that I wanted to study, and I'll tell you about two of them. One was Calvinism. The other was infant baptism. In the end, I could not embrace either of them. But I learned a lot, and I appreciate my time there.

While studying there, I was introduced to this fascinating book. It's entitled "The Water that Divides – the Baptism Debate." It was written by two pastors, one who practices infant baptism and one who practices believers-only baptism. This book is very well balanced, and very informative. Especially on historical practice. One of the most interesting things I learned was how through most of church history, Christian parents have wanted to baptized their infants. You might disagree with

the practice, but this has been the desire of Christians for most of church history. Even when the Protestant Reformation began with its emphasis on the centrality of the Bible's teachings, the main Protestant groups such as the Lutherans and Calvinists maintained and defended the practice of infant baptism.

Although I remained Baptist, I acknowledge two things about infant baptism. The first is that for most of church history, Christians have wanted to baptize their infants, bringing them fully into the life of the church. This was being practiced by the year 200 and continues today. The second thing is that those who hold this position have a coherent Biblical argument in favor of it. I might not agree with all the elements in their argument, but in their eyes they believe they have it right.

As I searched the Scriptures looking into all of this, I found that the epistles do not give us any particular instructions on who may or may not be baptized. What we have is the narratives in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Here, the command is for people to repent and be baptized. We may assume this is for people who are able to comprehend and respond to the call. This is why many Christians would limit baptism to only those who make their own profession of faith.

But look at Acts 2:38-39 (NIV) – “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.’” It is interesting that children are specifically mentioned as having access to this promise. For many Christians, this opens the door to the possibility of Christian parents having their infants baptized in order to bring them into the Christian community and enjoy those promises.

Let's take another look at the Great Commission. Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV) – “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”

The various branches of the Christian church have made it a priority to be making disciples, baptizing them, and instructing them. They have done so in differing ways, and we have some striking differences among us. But I wish to be accepting of my brothers and sisters across denominational lines, as long as we hold to the essential points of Christian doctrine and practice.

Essential doctrines – which I outlined for you in my previous message.

Essential Christian behavior – which I began outlining in the first part of today's message.

There are other issues which are important, but which could be classified as Non-essential. Let us give some liberty to our Christian brothers and sisters when we do not agree on these other issues.

And let us always be guided by the law of love.

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

Romans 13:8 (NKJV) – “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

I will close with what the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:1-3 (NASB) – “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”