

## Essentials and Non-Essentials in the Evangelical Free Church

by Bill Taylor (September 2011 Blog [www.efcc.ca](http://www.efcc.ca))

Last month I shared my thoughts on the “10 Top Gains” I feel we made by adopting the Ten Article Statement of Faith (SOF) at EFCC Conference 2008. The Ten Article SOF is the EFCC’s statement of essential theological truth – that is – we ask our pastors and churches to affirm the SOF as the common doctrinal basis for the EFCC family. This raises the whole issue of our EFCC motto, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials charity, in all things Jesus Christ”. This month, allow me to talk a little about the Free Church approach to the whole topic of essential and non-essential truth.

When we talk about this, we are really saying that some truth is so central to our faith that we must ask all our pastors and churches to affirm it in order to belong to and minister in our family. On the other hand, other truths are not as central to the faith and Christians of equal piety, learning and commitment to the authority of Scripture have long disagreed about them, and so we ask our pastors and churches not to exclude people from fellowship over these issues. Examples of such issues in Free Church history would include variances of opinion regarding speaking in tongues, predestination, eternal security, mode and timing of baptism, and timing of Christ’s return.

This approach has allowed people from various backgrounds to fellowship and minister in Free Churches in unity even when they disagree over some of these non-essential issues. The EFCC has recognized that our unity is primarily in the person of Jesus Christ, not merely in an intellectual adherence to doctrinal statements – as important as doctrinal statements are. Hence, we take seriously Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21 where He asks the Father to make His children one, and Paul’s declarations that we are one in Christ. Galatians 3:28-29, Ephesians 2 and I Corinthians 1-3 all develop this idea of our unity in Jesus Christ. However, we also recognize that there are certain essential beliefs about Jesus Christ and the gospel that are necessary to affirm in order for us to be one in Christ. The apostle Paul summarized these gospel and Christological essentials in passages such as I Corinthians 15:1-8; I Corinthians 8:6; II Timothy 2:5-6. The apostles also summarized these same gospel essentials in sermons recorded for us by Luke in Acts 2, 3, 10 and 13. One of the features of the EFCC Ten Article SOF is that it links what we consider to be essential truths for our unity in Christ to the gospel – via the gospel headers. As I mentioned last month, I believe that the gospel headers are a strong point of the new SOF, making it reminiscent of the historic creedal summaries of doctrine that unified Christians through the centuries, such as the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.

Some will deny that there are non-essentials at all. They believe that every issue is a truth issue over which Christians must agree or break fellowship. Arnold T Olson admirably summarizes the Free Church approach to this in his book, *The Significance of Silence*, arguing that prior to 1950 one arm of the Free Church movement did not even have a doctrinal statement, and that when the Norwegian/Danish and Swedes merged in 1950 they worked hard to be silent on issues that were not core gospel issues. This approach really has precedent in the New Testament where the early church was forced to decide which parts of the Old Testament law would need to be affirmed and adhered to by Gentiles in the church. See Acts 10-11 for Peter’s struggle with unclean food and Gentiles and Acts 15 where the Jerusalem Council had to decide how the gospel would relate to Old Testament laws. The apostles were also very aggressive in commanding members in the early church to avoid divisions and to hold to the law of love (II Timothy 2:14-16; Titus 3:9-11; Romans 15:17-20; John 13; I John 3, I Peter 4:7-11 to name a

few). Hence, the gospel and the person of Jesus Christ are at the core of the unity of the body. The phrase “In all things Jesus Christ” is indeed a key part of our ethos. As Olson reminds us, the early Free Church pioneers did not ask people, “what do you believe about...?”, but rather, “are you saved?” Thus, the EFCC has always been a “believers only, but all believers” movement.

This suspicion of basing unity merely on a cerebral assent to a systematic theology is well founded when one considers the very nature of the Bible. The early Free Church pioneers were suspicious of systematic theologies and church traditions and demanded to know “Where Stands it Written?” before they allowed anyone to impose a certain practice on them. For instance, they broke with the Lutheran church primarily because they could not find clear enough biblical support for the state church’s strict rule that the Lord’s Supper could only be served in a church by duly licensed clergy. When one reads the Bible, one quickly confirms what early Free Church leaders discovered: that the Bible is not a neat summary of systematic theology or rules that is uniformly easy to interpret. Rather it is a collection of different types of literature, by many authors, that God has woven together to reveal His gospel story and plan of redemption. There are core passages that are easy to arrive at a consensus regarding the author’s original intent. However, there are also many passages that are difficult to understand. Further, the Bible does not interpret itself. We, as subjects, come to the text, bringing our assumptions and prejudices and try to ascertain what the author was saying then, and what God is saying to us now. Granted, we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us and to help us understand what God is saying to us, but nowhere does God promise us that the Holy Spirit will ensure that all Christians across all times and cultures will arrive at the same interpretive conclusions. This is why we intuitively know that the apostle Paul is correct when he declares in I Corinthians 13 that we now see “as in a cloudy mirror” and that while we live on this earth, our knowledge is partial but someday when we see Jesus, it will be complete!

This does not mean that we shouldn’t try to be as objective in prayerfully interpreting the text as possible, but it does explain why we have centuries old debates over mode of baptism, Calvinism versus Arminianism etc. It also is cause for us to have a hermeneutical humility and to be charitable to those who disagree with us on some of those issues that are less clear biblically (what we call non-essentials). It also serves as a call for us to watch, as Paul phrased it to Timothy, how we handle the Word – to “carefully handle the Word of truth”. As evangelicals we are people of the Word, but it is quite easy for us to bring our baggage to the text and then abuse the text by selectively ignoring passages that contradict our point of view; by proof-texting while ignoring the larger context the verse is a part of; by stretching a text to make it say more than the author intended; by ignoring the historical or cultural situation a passage was written to address and so on. This of course, explains why two committed Christians can argue opposite conclusions with great passion by simply using different texts or by accusing each other of subjective bias in their use of the same texts or by simply declaring that the other person is “caving in to culture”.

So, in the EFCC we do not exclude people from fellowship who disagree with us over those issues we have identified as non-essentials. The question is, how do we choose which are which? Historically we have summarized our theological essentials in our SOF and our moral essentials in our Code of Conduct. And by process of elimination, if something is not in either of those documents, then it is a non-essential. But some folks in Free Churches find this bothersome because an issue/position that they consider essential is not found in either of these documents! In fact, we are not saying that

because we have declared an issue to be a non-essential issue by not including it in our SOF or Code of Conduct that we consider it to be unimportant. Indeed, what could be more important than the nature of free will, the sovereignty of God, the security of one's salvation, predestination and all the other issues that are tied up in the Calvinist/Arminian debate? So, when we talk about essentials versus non-essentials, we are not simply saying that non-essentials are minor issues that are unimportant. However, we are saying that while we encourage passionate debate among the members of our family on these issues, we call for charity and an inclusive spirit that allows us to agree to disagree and continue to live out our common identity and mission in Jesus Christ. The difficult question then arises, "how do we decide as a movement which issues are essential (and demand uniform affirmation in the family), and which are non-essential and demand charitable debate and gracious acceptance of those who disagree with us?"

While I believe that our leaders in the past have rightly identified the essentials that ought to be included in our SOF and Code of Conduct (and by extension those non-essentials to deliberately leave out), please allow me to propose four markers that might help us to further distinguish essentials from non-essentials in the future.

The first indicator revolves around history. Has there been historical agreement or disagreement over this issue in the broader church? Christians, equally committed to the authority of Scripture have arrived at differing conclusions on issues such as baptism, predestination, eternal security, free will, timing of the return of Christ, sign gifts etc. and have passionately defended those conclusions for centuries. Where there is such a history of disagreement, we ought to (as our forefathers did) deliberately leave this issue out of our SOF and Code of Conduct (declaring the issue to be a non-essential), allowing a diversity of opinion in the movement. However, we must be careful here on two accounts: first, we need to be clear regarding whose history we are talking about (i.e. we probably mean the history of the church in the "west" or Canada, forgetting that the church has a history in Asia, Africa and South America too!). Second, just because the "church" seemed to agree for hundreds of years on an issue doesn't mean we automatically should accept it as a settled essential or even as a divine truth – for example, for close to two millennia the majority of western church leaders taught that women were morally inferior to men, slavery was biblically justified and that interracial marriage was an abomination to the Lord. We would probably not agree with these interpretations today. So, an argument from history, while a good indicator, is not a sufficient cause to label something essential or non-essential.

Second, and this follows from the first, is there cultural unanimity or disagreement on an issue? For instance, do Asian or African Christians view the issue differently than Western Christians? We must recognize that the Bible was written in a culture, and each culture interprets the Word in its own way. As western Christians, we sometimes have a colonial default assumption that our culture is superior and that our positions on all biblical issues are the only legitimate hermeneutical conclusions. Yet different cultures look at a host of issues such as leadership, structure/church structure, suffering, the tribulation etc. and arrive at different conclusions from the same texts. When different cultures hold differing positions on an issue, we need to see this as a possible indicator that this is a non-essential that it is an issue to debate but to not break fellowship over.

Third, what is the biblical emphasis and exegetical certainty on an issue? Where the Bible does not say much, or seems unclear, we should probably look at considering this issue a non-essential, because a diversity of opinion will be inevitable. So, to use the

example above, how much does the New Testament tell us regarding church structure? Faced with seemingly contradictory passages, different genres of literature, we need to exercise enough hermeneutical humility to ask our leaders to move beyond mere selective proof-texting that supports their conclusion to responsibly handling all the relevant texts for each issue. An example of this is the need to decide if a passage is conveying descriptive truth versus prescriptive truth. For instance, in Genesis 3, is God saying that Eve should be ruled by Adam or that because of the fall, the new reality will be that male/female relationships will be sadly characterized by on-going power struggles for the rest of history? The conclusion one draws from this passage, whether it is merely descriptive or prescriptive of how family relationships ought to be, has a huge impact on how one interprets other passages. So, where an issue rests on passages with low exegetical certainty or where the issue has little biblical emphasis, we need to avoid making it an essential that all must agree on.

The fourth and I believe, most persuasive indicator that an issue is an essential or a non-essential, is its connection to the person of Christ and the Gospel. We are unapologetically Christo-centric and evangelical and at the end of the day, the apostles seemed to judge the theological centrality of an issue based on its relation to Christ and the gospel. So, Peter had to grapple with Old Testament laws and New Testament grace in Acts 10 as did the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Paul argued against heresies that substituted human wisdom for the centrality of Christ in Colossians 2 and declared that he became all things to all men that he “might save some” in I Corinthians 9. John reminds us in John 1 that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and Paul pushes cultural boundaries in Philemon to remind Philemon of our oneness in Christ. The central message of the early church was unapologetically Christ and Gospel-centered. Other issues seemed to pale in importance. We need to follow their lead – this is why I am so happy our core beliefs are now connected to the gospel in the new SOF.

So, at the end of the day, the EFCC summarizes its doctrinal essentials in the SOF and its moral essentials in its Code of Conduct. CS Lewis called the basic beliefs of all who are part of the family of God “Mere Christianity.” He asked his readers to not draw “fanciful inferences from my silence on certain disputed matters”, stating that it didn’t mean he was sitting on the fence or that he either thought the matter important or unimportant. Lewis declared that he wasn’t presenting an alternative to the creeds but bringing people into the hall – but people were not to wait in the hall but go into the rooms where there “are fires and chairs and meals”. The rooms of course, were the denominational traditions we all choose to find a home in eventually. But Lewis closes by asking us that once we have chosen our room/family to be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. “If they are wrong, they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house”. Some denominational “rooms” have lengthy lists of beliefs to be affirmed before one can move from the hall to the family room. The Free Church, however, has always attempted to minimize the number of extra beliefs one needs to affirm to gain entry to the Free Church family room, beyond what one needs to believe to get into the great hall. It is my hope that we can continue to be kind to those in other rooms (and the hall) and preserve the charitable spirit in our family that first asks, “Do you belong to Christ?” before asking “What do you believe about...?”