

What are the Essentials of the Gospel?

"Essentials" implies necessity – something that cannot be left out if the gospel is to be properly understood. Charles Haddon Spurgeon seemed to have mastered the “essentials of the gospel” in his preaching and ministry. Though numerous areas of biblical thought were open to debate, upon the essentials or “fixed principles,” as he called them, there could be no debate. I have found his outline to be helpful in sharpening my thinking on the essentials of the Christian gospel.

1. We must begin with God, and the certainty “that there is a God, . . . He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the Master of providence, and the Lord of grace”. Can we just assume that all people believe in the God of Creation? One of the first issues to address when discussing the gospel is that God is our Creator – the God of Holy Scripture. Unless Genesis 1:1 is true, then we will have problems convincing anyone that there is a problem with sin and a need for redemption.

2. “We are equally certain that the book which is called “the Bible” is his word, and is inspired,” Spurgeon asserts, “...so that, provided we have the exact text, we regard the words themselves as infallible.” He added, “We believe that everything stated in the book that comes to us from God is to be accepted by us as his sure testimony, and nothing less than that... I would as soon dream of blaspheming my Maker as of questioning the infallibility of his word”. Unless we stand upon an authoritative Scripture then we have no authority to declare the way to God.

3. Next he insists on belief in the Trinitarian view of God. “We are also sure concerning the doctrine of the blessed Trinity. We cannot explain how the Father, Son, and Spirit can be each one distinct and perfect in himself, and yet that these three are one, so that there is but one God; yet we do verily believe it, and mean to preach it”. In light of the many cult groups and aberrant religions of our day, you will find much discussion on the nature of God as Trinity. Can we fathom the depths of this truth so that we can perfectly explain it? A finite being cannot explain the Infinite. We take stabs at it, and rightly so, but primarily we must glory in His “Trinity in Unity”.

4. Spurgeon considered the atonement of Christ to be essential to the Faith, stating, “There will be no uncertain sound from us as to the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He clarified what he meant. “The proper substitution of Christ, the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, on the behalf of his people, that they might live through him, — this we must publish till we die”. “Of first importance,” the Apostle Paul wrote, is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (I Cor 15:3-4). Christ’s substitutionary death to propitiate God’s wrath (Rom 3:21-26), his definite burial in actual physical death, and the triumph of the bodily resurrection remain forever as the believer’s sure hope.

5. The necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, birthing sinners into the family of God, and then indwelling believers must also be insisted upon. He is not to be viewed as a force or universal power but as a member of the Godhead with personality, whose influence and work is necessary in sanctifying and preserving the believer [41-42].

6. “The absolute necessity of the new birth is also a certainty,” Spurgeon wrote. “We shall never poison our people with the notion that a moral reformation will suffice, but we will over and over again say to them, ‘Ye must be born again.’” This was the primary message of George Whitefield a century earlier as he preached on both sides of the Atlantic in the midst of the First Great Awakening. It must be our message as well. Spurgeon adds, “We dare not flatter our hearers, but we must continue to tell them that they are born sinners and must be born saints, or they will never see the face of God with acceptance”. Such a message is not antiquated but essential in helping people to understand the desperate condition of their souls and the necessity of God’s grace.

7. Then there is “the tremendous evil of sin.” I fear that this is a weak point in Christian discussions in our day. It is not that we don’t make a quick assertion, “You know that we are all sinners,” but that we fail to see sin for what it is – an offense to God, an act of assault upon the glory of God. Too often evangelicals neglect to describe the effects of sin upon our nature, and the bent of sin in our minds and hearts. Many superficial conversions can be traced back to failure in explaining the great texts of Romans 1-3, Ephesians 2, 4, and others that set forth the desperate condition of the human soul. Until a person comes to grips with his hopeless condition and the terror of divine judgment, then the call for repentance and faith in Christ alone will have little effect upon him. Spurgeon made much use of the Law, explaining that the Law (Decalogue) was the needle that pulled the scarlet thread of redemption through the fabric of one’s life.

8. “Neither will we ever give an uncertain sound as to the glorious truth that salvation is all of grace,” Spurgeon declared. “If ever we ourselves are saved, we know that sovereign grace alone has done it, and we feel it must be the same with others”. Grace has no “I” in it. It is the declaration that salvation is all of God and none of us. We receive as a gift what God in Christ has done for us. It is by His doing that we are in Christ (I Cor 1:30). Even the faith to believe and turn from our sins comes through grace and not by the moral mustering of our souls. And so Spurgeon chimes, “We will publish, “Grace! Grace! Grace!” with all our might, living and dying”.

9. Justification by faith alone is the final truth that he puts in his “essentials” list. “We shall be very decided, also, as to justification by faith; for salvation is “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” “Life in a look at the Crucified One” will be our message. Trust in the Redeemer will be that saving grace which we will pray the Lord to implant in all our hearers’ hearts”. This message shook all of Europe in the 16th century Reformation, and it continues to shake all that come to terms with the sufficiency of Christ in satisfying God’s justice on behalf of sinners.

Phil Newton