

## "IN ESSENTIALS UNITY, IN NON-ESSENTIALS LIBERTY, IN ALL THINGS CHARITY" –

St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

*Dr. Isak Burger*

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This statement is ascribed to the early church-father St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) although it might have originated only late in the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, it gives expression to an important principle.

There are certain truths that most Christians agree on, truths that affect our salvation and that are non-negotiable. I do not want to give an extensive confession of faith, but here are some non-negotiables:

- God is the Creator; in Him everything originates.
- The authority of the Bible as the trustworthy revelation of God.
- The core message from the Bible is Jesus Christ and that He came to earth to free us from sin, enabling a relationship with God.
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in a virgin.
- Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, our Redeemer.
- He suffered and died on the cross, was buried, but rose from the dead on the third day and returned to His Father.
- He sent us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.
- There is a second coming.

More non-negotiable Bible truths can be added to this, which Christian believers wholeheartedly agree on across all ages and from virtually all church traditions. However, there was a trend over the centuries – and even more so in our days - that non-essential issues, i.e. things that will not make a difference to our salvation and things about which there is a difference of opinion are so accentuated by some, that it causes confusion to ordinary believers and often tear apart and divide the body of Christ.

Here are a few examples:

- **Christmas** - Every Christmas there are arguments about Christmas lights, Christmas trees, Santa and especially about the date of Christmas. While there are different arguments, counterarguments and alternative opinions about most of these things, is it not more important that we rather celebrate the one great truth, namely that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, and that we are not sure exactly what day of the year He was born? If some believers then do not agree in celebrating His birth on the traditional December 25th, let it be so without judging others who do.
- **Easter** - Every year there are arguments about the day on which Jesus was crucified. Some argue that it happened on the Wednesday, others on Thursday while most believe that it happened on the traditional Good Friday. Everyone feels that they have a valid argument or text. Those with a different opinion are however often dismissed as ignorant, erroneous or false. Isn't it more important that we acknowledge and agree that Jesus really died for our sins and was truly raised from the dead?
- **Creation** - Some believe that the earth is only 6,000 years old and that creation took place over 6 literal days. Others try to reconcile science and the biblical account. Some believe the two are irreconcilable. Others believe that if there is a difference, it is either because our knowledge and understanding of the specific scriptures is incomplete, or that science has not yet reached the final truth. Is it not of primary importance that we rather confess that God is the Beginning, Creator and Origin of everything, and that we do not fully understand the mystery and details of how, when and how long creation took?

• **The Sabbath** - It is remarkable how many times Jesus (according to the religious leaders of His time) violated the Sabbath. However, His defense was: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mk. 2:27) People are constantly engaged in arguments about keeping the Sabbath and what the actual day of the Lord is on which we should meet. Paul did not want to split hairs on this and I think we would do well to take note of his guidelines in Rom. 14: 5: "One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind."

• **The Second Coming** - There have always been - and currently are - different teachings on all kinds of less-essential details of the Second Coming. We must accept that there are different perspectives and interpretive possibilities to interpret these "secondary" aspects of the Second Coming. Surely it is not wrong to have a personal interest in the eschatology and come to your own opinion and conclusion regarding the various Bible texts and their interpretation. With some of these I can agree and with others I disagree. The problem with some of these "know it all-experts" is an attitude of superiority, arrogance and insult towards those with a different opinion. This while there are many different scriptures, in particular regarding aspects of the Second Coming that allow for different interpretations and understandings thereof. Again, should we not rather confess that we do not have the full understanding and perfect knowledge of the last days, but simply believe wholeheartedly and confess that Jesus is coming back for those who belong to Him?

In the caption of this passage, I quoted the words of the early Church Father, Augustine: "In essentials unity; in non-essential liberty, in all things charity."

I want to appeal to my fellow believers and colleagues. Let us not get caught up in every new teaching. A good measure of humility is appropriate - let us realize and recognize that our view of the "non-essentials" may not be the one-and-only untouchable opinion.

I want to ask every fellow believer: Do not be side-tracked by every teaching - this is, in fact, a characteristic of the "last days". Hold tight to Jude 1:3: "The faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." – in other words, those essential, core truths without which you cannot be saved. Guard against being divided into camps by individuals pursuing their own agenda.

Rather, let us focus on the basic Bible truths, of which Paul specifically points out the following in 1 Cor. 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Remember - " In essentials unity; in non-essential liberty, in all things charity!"

**END**