

## Leading by Faith

### Session #9: Embracing Christian Liberty

**Welcome** – Welcome back!

- We are in the start of the 3<sup>rd</sup> period of this hockey game called Leading by Faith.
- We missed last session due to Snowmagedon.

We sent out a link to you with the notes, and I know you all read them thoroughly, and had parties celebrating what you were learning! 😊

- Cultivating a Shepherd's Heart with Jesus, the Apostles in general, and Paul & Peter.
- We are going to start with discussion about what you are doing well and what you could work on.

To help you, with some review about Jesus:

- Jesus: Good shepherds follow Jesus, know and are known by people, care & sacrifice for people, minister God's Word, lead people, and bring in new people.
- Apostles: Good shepherds resolve conflict & empower others to lead.
- Apostle Paul: value faithfulness, protect people from false teaching, maintain financial integrity, depend on God's grace, and love people.
- Apostle Peter: prioritize new & young Christians, guide God's people, nourish God's people, serve because they love Jesus the most, examples of humility, know the enemies of humility, and serve for God's rewards.

**Discussion – Which one have you been doing well at? And which one do you want to improve at? Why?**

6:15 PM – Our topic tonight is embracing Christian liberty. I think this topic is vital for:

- your own well-being,
- your relationship with others in general,
- your good participation in church, and
- your leadership for sure.

The most frequently used principles on this topic come from a quote, often falsely attributed to Augustine, but more accurately traced to Rupertus Meldenius, a 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century German Lutheran theologian. It reads:

***In essentials, unity;  
in non-essentials, liberty;  
in all things, charity.***

**Rupertus Meldenius**

That phrase is a good way to sum up how we do relationship in our church.

- It is like the operating principle for the way we treat one another.
- I take it to mean that in essential doctrine, essential church practices, essential Christian lifestyle choices and essential approach to society, we must have unity.

Without unity in those, we won't do life together well.

- In some cases, we can't even really have fellowship at all.
- We need unity in the essentials. That's first.

Second, in non-essential doctrine, church practice, Christian lifestyle choices, and approach to social involvement, we must honor one another's liberty.

- By non-essential, I don't mean that they are unimportant topics or that your view on them is unimportant.
- I simply mean that we can have different views and still be united.
- God doesn't prescribe just one view. He gives us liberty; that is, freedom to believe differently.

Within that freedom then, if we don't respect each other's consciences, we won't do life together well.

- We will alienate each other.
- So, we must be careful not to put non-essentials into the essential category.
- Christian liberty is important for our fellowship. That's the second part of that quote. Lastly...

In all things, charity. By charity, Meldenius did not mean giving to the poor.

- Charity is the ancient word for grace. He meant treat one another with unmerited favor.
- Begin all your interactions thinking that this other person is fantastic.
- Love them. Don't make them earn your support.

Grant them your empathy and sympathy and concern prior to interacting with them.

- Approach people to encourage and build them up.
- That's the attitude whether things discussed are in the essential or non-essential categories. Exude charity.

That's the big picture overview of this topic.

- Let's drill down a bit to see where these ideas are in the Bible and how they apply to our life.
- I will spend most of our time on four categories – doctrine, church practices, Christian lifestyle choices, and social involvement.
- And at the end, I will rattle off some principles that I think will help you personally navigate your own Christian liberty.

So, first, four categories of essential and non-essential, first one is:

- 1. Doctrine** – By doctrine, I mean the formal statement of faith for our church. Doctrine can mean more than that obviously, but for the purposes of this topic in our church, I limit it to that. We must be united in that set of doctrine.

We don't need to be united in the *intensity* that we hold specific points of the statement of faith. Some folks may be super passionate about one, or just plain theological nerdy types like us pastors, loving doctrine.

Whereas others can be less so. Like, they see multiple options for that doctrine and if they had to choose one, they would choose the one in our statement of faith. They just aren't as intense about the subject.

It is not essential to be united in intensity.

- We simply need to be united in conclusion.
- The oldest Scripture verse that people like to refer to about this topic is Deuteronomy 29:29. Easy to remember. It states:

**<sup>29</sup>The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.**

**Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV)**

Many understand this verse to mean that God clearly reveals some doctrine in the Bible, but there are some things human beings just cannot understand. Only God knows.

- Either it's not really spelled out in the Scriptures, or in our study of the Scriptures where the topic is mentioned, people come to different conclusions.
- So there is some disagreement or confusion.

So, in our case as a church, we have a Statement of Faith. It lists conclusions that we have come to by studying the Scripture. We view them as the revealed things that belong to us. What the Bible teaches. And we pass them on to the next generation.

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To be a member, you must adhere to those same conclusions.

- You must believe them to be true...what the Bible teaches.
- You don't have to have the same intensity of belief as everyone else, but you must have belief.

Before I give you some examples of doctrinal essentials and non-essentials, it is important to say that,

- I am not suggesting people who don't strictly adhere to our statement of faith aren't Christians and you shouldn't have fellowship with them.
- No, rather I am saying they aren't to be members of this church because if they believe differently about these things, it will cause theological conflict at some point.

And theological conflict always eventually produces relationship conflict and division.

- We want to avoid that.
- So, folks who don't believe our statement of faith would do well to find a church to join with a statement of faith that they do believe in.

Another comment before some examples.

- It is important not to add additional essential doctrines to our statement of faith.
- Participating in this church without any belief in some of its tenets is unhelpful, but so is adding other doctrine on top of it as a litmus test for fellowship. That can be divisive too.

Here are some examples, then, of essentials and non-essentials. Let's try three doctrines of each to be thorough.

The Trinity is an essential doctrine.

- If you reject it, that's heresy. You have a fundamentally different view of God than we do.
- Thus, we cannot be united in our faith and our fellowship. That's one example.

The verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible is essential.

- If you reject that doctrine, you make yourself or someone else out to be the authority for truth.
- If the Bible has errors, a human is the one to determine where those errors are. Humans then are the authority.
- If that is your view, we cannot be united in our faith and our fellowship.
- You have a fundamentally different view of the source of truth about God and reality itself. A 2<sup>nd</sup> example. 3<sup>rd</sup>...

The sinful nature of humanity is essential.

- If you think people aren't sinners who sin but rather are good beings who sometimes make sinful choices, we can't be united in our faith and fellowship.
- We have a fundamentally different view of each other. That will produce conflict.

So, those are three examples of essential doctrines. Here are three that are non-essential.

The timing and nature of the millennium is non-essential.

- Remember, I'm not saying it is unimportant. It is simply in the non-essential category.
- You have the freedom to believe differently amongst yourselves.

You can be a premillennialist. You can think that the millennium comes after Jesus Christ returns.

- You can be an amillennialist, believing that we are living in the millennium now and Christ's return ends it.
- You can be a postmillennialist. It is perfectly acceptable in our church to believe that the kingdom of God will grow and advance on the earth with Christ returning as the consummation of that march.
- The millennium is non-essential.

The timing of regeneration is too.

- You can believe that being born again happens after faith or before faith.
- That the Spirit comes to dwell in you and then you believe OR that you believe and then the Spirit comes upon you.

The age of the universe is also a non-essential.

- So, you can believe differently about the date in the past that it happened.
- The timing of creation isn't a necessary unifying belief to us.

What is important to us is that we respect one another's liberty in these regards.

- Whatever we believe on these non-essentials is okay.
- Christian, you have freedom of conscience.

When you do find out that we don't have the same conclusions in non-essentials, it is really important that we interact in a gracious way.

- Be careful not to put others down who believe differently or to hold that against them in any way whatsoever.
- In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things charity.
- Christian liberty is very important for our relationship.

That's some Biblical basis and examples of applying that principle to doctrine. Second area to cover is...

**2. Church Practices** – All of life can be viewed as worship of course. That's Romans 12. But here I am more narrowly focusing on the practices of the local church. How we worship and do church together.

There are essentials and non-essentials.

- The same word about intensity being different and people who practice differently doesn't mean they aren't Christians applies to church practice and to the next two categories.
- I don't need to keep repeating that.

There are plenty of Scriptures to support this idea of church practice essentials and non-essentials.

- One is Romans 14:5-6 regarding the day for local church worship.
- Though the early church regularly gathered on Sunday morning for what we call a church service and then regathered on Sunday evening for the Love Feast, like a fellowship meal with communion, the Apostle Paul made it clear that the day for public church worship was not set as a command from God. Paul wrote:

**<sup>5</sup>One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.**

**Romans 14:5-6 (ESV)**

In this verse then, we see a glimpse into this idea that there are worship practice essentials and worship practice non-essentials.

- There are practices that we should agree on and there are practices on which we can disagree agreeably and still be totally committed to each other.
- Here are three examples of essential church practices. I set out more than three for us in my sermon series a Biblical Blueprint for Worship but here are three.

Congregational singing.

- It was so odd to me when people suggested during some of this Covid period that churches could meet for worship so long as they didn't sing.
- My thought was, "Well, that's not really a worship service then, is it?" You have to have singing.
- Romans 15, Jesus died so that you would sing. It's an essential.

The public reading of Scripture. That's essential.

- When the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to be devoted to the public reading of Scripture, he didn't mean go to the town square, open up the Bible and read it. He meant make sure that the public worship services of the church include Scripture reading.
- Now, if someone doesn't think the Bible should be read in church, Living Faith is not the church for them. Agreeing on that practice as essential is important for our fellowship. As is the...

The preaching of the Word. We have sermons in church.

Period.

- If there is not Bible or there is no sermon, we are wondering what's going and we are thinking, "this wasn't a worship service," was it?
- It is essential to us. Non-negotiable. We must have someone preach.

That's three examples of essential church practices. We must agree on these to be united in fellowship.

- Here are three non-essential Christian practices for us at Living Faith.
- We have Christian liberty about these. Freedom to have a different practice. First,

Sunday as the Lord's Day or the Sabbath.

- I already read Romans 14 on this particular topic. The Apostle Paul himself made it clear that this view is a non-essential.
- You can view Sunday as a holy day set apart for God, the day you worship. Or you can not. You have Christian freedom.
- It is okay for us to have worship services on Monday, Thursday or Saturday. We can have them every day of the week if we want. Another example...

While serving communion is an essential, the frequency of it and the timing of communion for children would non-essentials.

- We do once per month. We could increase it or decrease it. It's preference.
- We mention timing with kids when we serve it. Parents should decide when kids take communion. We don't have a first communion ritual or sacrament. Last example...

Church governance.

- The Bible does not prescribe a form of church governance. It only prescribes the character qualifications of church leaders.
- So, the Anglicans are not sinning in their episcopate, the Lutherans are not sinning in their synods, the Presbyterians are not sinning in their presbyteries, the Baptists are not sinning in their independence, and we are not sinning when we amend our bylaws.

It is okay if you think one model is better or prefer one over the others.

- The key to our unity isn't your personal preference or mine, in which we have freedom, but rather that we will simply submit to the form of governance set forth in the bylaws of Living Faith.
- Our views of church governance are non-essential in that way. It is a matter of Christian liberty.

Now, if you think that a specific form of church governance is prescribed in the Bible (it's the only form acceptable),

- and it is not the form that Living Faith employs, then, this church probably isn't for you.
- That will be a burden to your conscience, and it will likely lead to some conflict at some point.

So, we are reviewing examples in four categories of the phrase...in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity to deepen our understanding of Christian liberty.

Doctrine first. Church practices second. Before we get to the next, let's have some discussion. I gave three examples of essentials and non-essentials.

**Discussion – What do you think is an essential or non-essential doctrine or practice that I didn't mention? And why?**

6:45 PM – It's important to learn to have conversations on these topics that aren't emotionally charged.

- Hopefully, you were able to do that.
- Okay, next two topics.

**3. Christian Lifestyle Choices** – I think there are essentials and non-essentials for our fellowship in how you live your life.

There are choices you must make for us to be united and other choices that you have liberty in.

- With those latter choices, our fellowship will not be dependent on them. It shouldn't matter what you choose to do.
- The Bible says something pretty sobering and clear on this topic in 1 Corinthians 5:11:

**<sup>11</sup>But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one.**

**1 Corinthians 5:11 (ESV)**

So, the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians that refraining from certain lifestyle choices was an *essential* part of their fellowship.

- If there were people in the fellowship who said they were Christians but were committed to a pagan lifestyle, they were to be put out of the church.
- Later, he wrote, expel the evil person from among you. You can't have unity with them.

And to be clear, this isn't a case of someone falling into sin and repenting. That happens to all of us.

- We have all probably been guilty of sinning as Christians in one of the ways listed in 1 Corinthians 5:11. Everyone messes up.
- That's not what the verse is referring to.

Rather, it is about duplicitous people who have a fake faith as evidenced by a commitment to an *unrepentant* lifestyle.

- They are Christian in name only, with just their own words to back up the claim. In their heart of hearts, they are not committed to Christ.
- Now, what are some of those essential Christian lifestyle choices at Living Faith, choices you must be committed to doing for us to be united? Here are three in my mind. First,

Refrain from 1 Cor 5:11 practices.

- Again, I am not saying don't ever be tempted towards those things, or don't ever fail.
- Rather, you can't be committed to those lifestyles.

If you are committed to sexual immorality as a way of life, you are just gonna sleep around all the time with people, we can't be united.

- If you insist on getting drunk every day, we can't maintain fellowship.
- Fighting against these sins as individuals is part of our commitment to God and to each other. It is essential. That's one. Second...

Prayer – Talking with God.

- There is no essential frequency regarding prayer, right. Some pray more than others.
- But if you never, ever pray, how can we be united. If you don't ever commune with the Lord, how can we be in communion together?
- Prayer to some degree, with some occurrence, is a necessary part of our fellowship. That's second. Third is...

Attending church services.

- You may think that should fall under the church practice category, but by church practice, I meant how we do church.
- Attendance is different. It is a personal Christian lifestyle choice. We can't very well be united in our commitment to one another if we aren't attending church together.
- Again, as with prayer, frequency isn't the issue so much as attending to some degree.

And there are good reasons to miss church, physical limitations even for some people, but the norm is that no one should forsake the gathering of God's people.

- It is essential. Those are three examples.
- How about some non-essential Christian lifestyle choices. These are the ones in which we have freedom to disagree. First, consider the...

Use of Alcohol in Moderation.

- We know that Christians are warned against being drunkards, but what about drinking socially, or even regularly with dinner.
- Well, that is an area of Christian liberty. It will depend on your conscience.

I was a drunkard. So, my conscience binds me from any use of alcohol.

- But most people aren't mastered by it in the way that I was. And they can use it as helpful relaxing experience.
- We have freedom in this way and respecting one another's conscience is important to good relationship. Unity. That's one...how about 2<sup>nd</sup>,

Use of Secular Media.

- Again, anything can turn into an idol if you overuse it, right? Even good things.
- And using some media, like pornography, clearly is sinful,.

But how about just the run of the mill music, books, TV shows, movies, YouTube videos, sporting events, news, etc. That seems to be a non-essential category.

- You don't have to only listen to K-Love. I enjoy jamming out in the car once in a while to some good old rock n' roll.
- You aren't limited to movies produced by PureFlix, the Christian movie company. I like a good action film. There's a level of vulgarity that can bother me and I won't watch it, but in general, I find relaxation in a movie now and again.

Refraining from secular media isn't an essential to our fellowship.

- We can have differences and we shouldn't let those differences separate us.
- There is Christian liberty in that regard. That's second. Last example is...

Body Care.

- What you eat. How often you work out. Your hair style. Tattoos. Piercing the ears.
- Again, there is a point of excess with anything that the Bible warns about in life, but in general, how we care for our bodies is a matter of liberty. Individual conscience or preference.

For me personally, I work out a few times per week. I really like to eat meat. I use a #2 clippers every few weeks. I will never get a tattoo or pierce my ear.

You may have different views on all those topics and more related to your body. We choose.

- And to maintain good unity among us, it is best not make these topics an issue.
- They aren't essential. So, we respect one another.

Christian liberty is an important aspect to Christian community.

- Those are three categories (doctrine, church practice, lifestyle) with some Biblical basis and examples of essentials and non-essentials to get us thinking about this topic and how we can live out well.
- The last category is...

**4. Social Involvement** – So, what you choose to do in society. How engaged you get or don't get. There are some essentials for you as Christians for us to be united together and then there are areas that are not essential. They are important, but not necessary to agree on to be one.

Probably the most helpful Bible verse on this topic is John 18:36. It is a word from our Lord Jesus in response to Pontius Pilate's questions.

**<sup>36</sup>Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."**

**John 18:36 (ESV)**

That verse provides the biggest picture perspective about some essentials and non-essentials for us.

- Here are three social involvement essentials in my view.
- Things you must adhere to so that we can be united together. Example #1...

Reject theocracy.

- Jesus made it crystal clear that he wasn't setting up a Kingdom in the political sense where the church would be combined with secular authorities in order to rule.
- If someone holds to a theocratic approach to social involvement, Living Faith isn't the church for them.

Theonomy is awfully close to that.

- Theocracy is for the church organizationally to rule. Theonomy is to install God's law, usually the OT, as the law of the land.
- While it seems to be a good thing to try to vote for people and policies that reflect the image of Jesus as much as possible, that's not theonomy, and definitely not theocracy which we should reject. That's one example. 2<sup>nd</sup>:

Prayer for leaders.

- 1 Timothy 2:1-4 commands God's people to pray for those in authority.
- So, again, with the Christian lifestyle choices, I am not suggesting that you have to pray every day for every person in authority in the government. Just that you would have heart to pray and would do it at some point.

Being united around that as an essential is important for our fellowship. That's 2<sup>nd</sup>. Third is...

Submission to governing authorities – Romans 13 is crystal clear that our norm is to submit to the civic laws of the land.

- There are occasions for civil disobedience when the law of the land forces you to disobey God.
- But besides those exceptions, the tenor of our life is submission.

That view is essential to our fellowship.

- We can't be united if you are a civic rebel. The Bible instructs us to live quiet and peaceful lives here.
- Those are three examples of essential social involvement. Here are three non-essentials, first:

Voting.

- You don't have to vote. If you choose not to vote, you are not being irresponsible before God and you are not sinning against God. Thou shall vote is not in the Bible.
- So, you can vote. And you can refrain from voting. And who you vote for in whatever office you are voting is your choice. It is a matter of Christian liberty.

And it is vitally important to our unity as a church that we understand voting is an example of a non-essential.

- We do not have to have the same views on this topic for us to be strongly united.
- We can agree to disagree. Freedom of conscience. 2<sup>nd</sup>:

Social causes.

- Feeding the poor. Helping the homeless. Working with orphans and widows. Assisting crisis pregnancy situations. Marching for peace in a violent neighborhood. You name it.
- There's a lot you can be involved in. And people get involved as individuals, in groups and formally with churches.

Again, what you do and how you do it is an area of Christian freedom.

- There's no one right cause that everyone must be involved in.
- There's not one right way to be involved in each cause. There are a lot of options.

Be careful about your view of when someone else chooses not to get involved in a cause that you are passionate about.

- Admirable to be passionate.
- Don't let passion betray wisdom and conclude that everyone else should be compelled in the same way that God has compelled you.

In Chicago, we liked to help a widow and a couple orphans personally, with a lot of their financial and life needs.

- That was my preference.
- I'm not interested in others knowing about what I do in that regard or doing it as a group or with an organization.

That's the cause I was most passionate about and how I chose to be involved.

- I don't expect you to share my passion on it. God's given you different things to do.
- It is important to remember that social causes are in the realm of Christian liberty, not Christian essentials. That's a second example. And lastly,

Cubs or the White Sox.

- I mean that is an obvious non-essential though I find that Cubs fans think it falls in the essential category to be a Cubs fan.
- Everyone just assumes you should like them and that experience on the North side in Wrigleyville.

Truth is you can be a Cubs fan, a Sox fan, or not even like baseball at all. Certainly, that is a non-essential.

- And though I am half kidding here.
- This third example is in the same category as the first two.

So, if you have no problem agreeing that it's a no brainer Cubs vs Sox is non-essential, I'd like to increase that sense you have for that example with the other two.

- Release your grip, if you have one, on the first two being essential.
- We need to be able to disagree, agreeably, such that it does not affect our commitment to one another. Christian liberty is vitally important.

**Discussion – What do you think is an essential or non-essential lifestyle or social involvement that I didn't mention? And why?**

7:15 PM – As my time is running out, just a few exhortations about the use of your liberty:

- Don't do something if the Bible clearly prohibits it.
- Don't do something if your conscience is clearly burdened by it.
- Be careful about doing something that you are free to do when it violates another person's conscience who you are with at the time or when you notice doing it has a negative impact on your own soul.

Those are my thoughts about Christian liberty. Please embrace it! You have to in order to be a leader.

Last two assignments, and new one.

- Recruit a leader to sign up for this course in the Fall. We are woeful right now guys! Only 19 signed up. We need 100. 😊
- Text, call, visit someone that you are shepherding.
- Have an agree to disagree conversation.
- Let's pray.