

Essentials of Christianity (pt 4)
3/14/2010

Introduction _____

Good morning to everyone! Today we're continuing our survey on the essentials of Christianity. What is necessary for people to believe about Christian doctrine in order to be considered orthodox? What is **essential to believe?**

On many occasions I've heard the bogus charge against Christianity that it seems all too confusing to know what to believe about God, Jesus, the Bible or salvation, because you have all these people who say they're Christians and yet there are all these denominations and everybody seems to have their own take on things and I just **don't know what to believe.**

God is not author of confusion, and people who make these type of claims are naive concerning the facts.

^{NAU} Proverbs 14:6 A scoffer seeks wisdom and finds none, But knowledge is easy to one who has understanding.

Like I said in **week one** of our study, contrary to many who like to take pot shots at the church universal, the church is not living in a state of flux over what it holds as essential.

Don't be thrown for a loop over some of the denominational distinctive's that we have in Christendom, as though that means there's no consensus about what the truth is.

The true church is in agreement over the essentials, though we may have in-house debates over some non-essentials. The Bible is very clear about what the essentials are.

One more thing before we move on to our next field of study. I want to add an exclamation point on to our brief study of **bibliology**. And trust me, it was very brief.

There is so much more that could have been said. But honestly, not much more needed to be said.

You may discover in your own walk that you need to dig a little deeper or a lot deeper, because a witnessing opportunity comes up and you may have to learn more than we covered to prepare yourself.

But we need to start with the premise:

NAU Romans 3:4 ...let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."

Let me finish by quoting from Grudem's systematic theology.

The Words of Scripture Are Self-Attesting.

The words of Scripture are "self-attesting." They cannot be "proved" to be God's words by appeal to any higher authority. For if an appeal to some higher authority (say, historical accuracy or logical consistency) were used to prove that the Bible is God's Word, then the Bible itself would not be our highest or absolute authority: it would be subordinate in authority to the thing to which we appealed to prove it to be God's Word. If we ultimately appeal to human reason, or to logic, or to historical accuracy, or to scientific truth, as the authority by which Scripture is shown to be God's words, then we have assumed the thing to which we appealed to be a higher authority than God's words and one that is more true or more reliable.¹

Turn to:

NAU Isaiah 55:6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near.

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

⁷ *Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon.*

⁸ *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD.*

⁹ *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;*

¹¹ *So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.*

Theology: The Doctrine of God

Let us now move on to our next category. **Theology: the doctrine of God.** What is there to know about God that is essential? What distinguishes the Christian view of God from other world religions and cults? What makes their view of God wrong and the Christian view **right**?

What a person believes about God most definitely will determine their eternal fate. What a person believes about the God of the Bible is **essential**.

The Bible tells us MUCH about what *is* essential to know *about* God. I suppose the most obvious place to begin is to establish that **God does exist**.

NET Hebrews 11:6 Now without faith it is impossible to please him, for the one who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Does that seem to simple a place to start? It's no simpler and no less important than where we began with **bibliology**. The same lie that the serpent poisoned Eve's mind with about the **Word of God**, is based on the same lie that causes the fool to say in His heart:

^{NAU} Psalm 14:1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God."

If there were no God, then let's eat and drink and party hearty for tomorrow we die.

But the fact is God **DOES** exist and His existence is **undeniable**, so let's talk about that.

In the field of apologetics (giving a defense of the faith), much time and space has been spent on trying to provide a cogent (powerfully persuasive) argument for the existence of God.

I've listened to numerous debates between Christian ministers and atheists/agnostics, debating over whether God exists. And many of the debates have been every helpful in presenting the fundamental differences between **atheism** and **theism**.

You'll commonly find these debates taking place at secular universities where, unfortunately, atheism runs rampant.

The way I see it, there are two main (or traditional) approaches that are typically used to argue for the existence of God. There is a **philosophical** approach and a **biblical** one.

Typically, the philosophical approach will include logical reasons why someone *should* believe God exists.

The four most common one are here. I'm not going to review these--they'll be in the notes.

1. The cosmological argument considers the fact that every known thing in the universe has a cause. Therefore, it reasons, the universe itself must also have a cause, and the cause of such a great universe can only be God.

2. The teleological argument is really a subcategory of the cosmological argument. It focuses on the evidence of harmony, order, and design in the universe, and argues that its design gives evidence of an intelligent purpose. Since the universe appears to be designed with a purpose, there must be an intelligent and purposeful God who created it to function this way.

3. The ontological argument begins with the idea of God, who is defined as a being "greater than which nothing can be imagined." It then argues that the characteristic of existence must belong to such a being, since it is greater to exist than not to exist.

4. The moral argument begins from man's sense of right and wrong, and of the need for justice to be done, and argues that there must be a God who is the source of right and wrong and who will someday mete out justice to all people.²

A brief example of a philosophical argument would be the **intelligent design argument**.

Logically, it makes sense that if one considers the wonders of creation: the stars, galaxies, the moon, etc,.. one would deduce that there had to be a Designer.

²Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994); Paul P Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, Chicago, 1989).

There's a whole lot more we could discuss about this approach, but that's it in a nutshell.

The philosophical arguments are valid in that they correctly evaluate the evidence and correctly reason to a true conclusion.

The actual facts referred to in these positions **are true**, and in that sense the proofs are **valid**, even though all people are not persuaded by them.

But in another sense, if "valid" means "able to compel agreement even from those who begin with false assumptions," then of course none of the proofs is valid because not one of them is able to compel agreement from everyone who considers them.

Yet this is because many unbelievers either begin with invalid assumptions or do not reason correctly from the evidence. It is not because the proofs are invalid in themselves. The value of these proofs, then, lies chiefly in overcoming some of the intellectual objections of unbelievers.

They cannot bring unbelievers to saving faith, for that comes about through belief in the testimony of Scripture. But they can help overcome objections from unbelievers, and, for believers, they can provide further intellectual evidence for something they have already been persuaded of from their own inner witness of God and from the testimony of Scripture.³

This leads us to the next section.

What are the evidences that the Bible presents? The answer can be given in two parts (not in order of importance), and these two parts have overlapping features.

Evidence for God's existence can be found in:

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

A. Humanity's Inner Sense of God

All persons everywhere have a deep, inner sense that God exists, that they are his creatures, and that he is their Creator.

Part of this stems from the other proofs that I'll mention in a moment.

Another part of this stems from the fact that man is created in the image of God. In our study of anthropology we'll talk more about that. As God's image bearer, man cannot evade his source of origin.

There is a common ground or point of contact between the believer and the non-believer. All persons have a knowledge of God.

Turn to Romans 1:18-20

^{NAU} Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Paul says that even Gentile unbelievers "knew God" but did not honor him as God or give thanks to him (Rom 1:21).

He says that wicked unbelievers have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom 1:25), implying that they actively or willfully rejected some truth about God's existence and character that they knew.

Paul says that "what can be known about God is plain to them," and adds that this is "because God has shown it to them" (Rom 1:19).⁴

This part in Romans 1 really says it all.

One writer said,

Mankind has an internal sense of deity, which, although it may be marred and distorted, it is nonetheless present and operating in human experience.⁵

Sin is what causes people to deny their knowledge of God. They suppress the truth in unrighteousness, while their consciences scream at them.

The second part of biblical proofs for God's existence clearly delineated in scripture is:

B. Evidence in Nature and Scripture

In addition to people's inner awareness of God that bears clear witness to the fact that God exists, clear evidence of his existence is to be seen in Scripture and in nature (a.k.a general and special revelation).

We covered this rather extensively in our study of Psalm 19 a couple months ago on our Wed-nite study. I'll refer you to that for a more detailed study.

For our purposes today, let me give a condensed version of that.

⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology Unabridged (1 Vol. Edition)* (Baker Book House, 1996).

General Revelation:

All creation gives abundant evidence of God's existence. Paul says that God's eternal nature and deity have been "clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:20). This broad reference to "the things that have been made" tells us that in some sense every created thing gives evidence of God's character.⁶

This takes us back to where we were earlier.

^{NAU} Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Turn to Psalm 19:1-6

^{NAU} Psalm 19:1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

² Day to day pours forth speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard.

⁴ Their line has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun,

⁵ Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

⁶ Its rising is from one end of the heavens, And its circuit to the other end of them; And there is nothing hidden from its heat.

Special Revelation-- Then there is special revelation.

⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

Special Revelation: Gods' manifestation of Himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to know they encountered God Himself.

The Bible's revelation of God is one of several features in the category of "special revelation." We know that God did reveal himself by means of direct speech, signs and wonders, miracles, dreams and visions, and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Many of these manifestations took place during the process of inscripturation. Inscripturation is when what was communicated in revelation was committed to writing (The Bible).

The Word of God contained in the scriptures is God's primary means of disclosing Himself to us. Even when a miracle or some other manifestation occurs, it is only used to confirm the written word.

The evidence that God exists is of course found throughout the Bible. In fact, the Bible everywhere assumes that God exists. The first verse of Genesis does not present evidence for the existence of God but begins immediately to tell us what he has done: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." If we are convinced that the Bible is true, then we know from the Bible not only that God exists but also very much about his nature and his acts.

Thus, for those who are correctly evaluating the evidence, everything in Scripture and everything in nature proves clearly that God exists and that he is the powerful and wise Creator that Scripture describes him to be.

Therefore, when we believe that God exists, we are basing our belief not on some blind hope apart from any evidence, but on an overwhelming amount of reliable evidence from God's words and

God's works. It is a characteristic of true faith that it is a confidence based on reliable evidence, and faith in the existence of God shares this characteristic.

Furthermore, these evidences can all be seen as valid proofs for the existence of God, even though some people reject them. This does not mean that the evidence is invalid in itself, only that those who reject the evidence are evaluating it wrongly.

^{KJV} Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Who determines whether there's enough evidence to believe in God? Do we tell God what evidence is needed to convince us of his existence or does He tell us?

Finally:

Finally, it must be remembered that in this sinful world God must enable us to be persuaded or we would never believe in him. We read that "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). Furthermore, Paul says that "since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). In this sinful world, human wisdom is inadequate for coming to know God. Thus, Paul's preaching came "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:5). We are dependent upon God to remove the blindness and irrationality caused by sin and to enable us to evaluate the evidence rightly, believe what Scripture says, and come to saving faith in Christ.⁷

⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan Publishing, 1994).

The Person Of God

Okay great! I believe there's a God. Now, what is essential to believe about this God that we believe exists?

We may believe in the existence of God (or a god); but maybe someone chooses to believe God is a cat or something else.

There are the atheistic theories about God NOT existing; what about all the views that believe there is a higher power?

Polytheism: a belief in many gods, or in a plurality of gods.

Pantheism: that everything is God and God is everything.
“God is all and all is God.”

Deists: there is no personal God to whom man can relate. An impersonal God created the world and afterward divorced Himself from the human race and left man alone in his created world.⁸

Mormon God: God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens. That is the great secret... [Y]ou have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you..."

Liberal belief: I believe in God as I understand him.

Here is where we'll pick it up.

⁸ Paul P Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, Chicago, 1989).