

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, September 10, 2023

"Moravian Essentials: An Introduction"

"Young at Heart" Message

When you entered the sanctuary today, most of you should have received a playing card with something written on it. Could those of you who received cards with The Bible on them hold your cards up? Does someone want to be brave enough to tell us why the Bible may or may not be essential?

Great, how about those who have The Church on them? Can someone share why the church may or may not be essential?

Thank you! How about The Sacraments?

Ordained Clergy?

Music/Hymns?

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but imagine that this sanctuary has been converted into a time machine and we've gone back in time to the 1500's. Those of you who have The Church on your cards, raise your cards up.

Sorry, the government is burning all church buildings that aren't government sanctioned.

Those who have The Bible written on your cards, please raise your cards up. So sorry, but it is nearly impossible to access The Bible in your native language, and those Bibles that do exist are illegal to keep outside of ordained clergy. You could be killed if a Bible is found in your possession.

How about Music/Hymns? Please raise your cards up. By governmental decree, anyone heard singing hymns in their homes will be arrested. House churches are not allowed.

How about the Sacraments? Raise your cards. Only ordained clergy are allowed to participate in the sacraments. You are only allowed to watch. Grace does not extend to you.

Those who have the ordained clergy cards, please hold those up. Ordained clergy outside of the Catholic Church are prohibited. Those who claim to be ordained and have not been sanctioned by the government church will be burned at the stake.

What does that leave us with, if we are not allowed access to any of these things that we consider important to our faith?

Who has the mystery cards? Is someone willing to read what they say on the face side of the card, if you can read my writing?

God as creator, Christ as redeemer, Holy Spirit as sustainer, and we respond with Faith, Love, and Hope.

Even if we cannot access any of the other things, we can still maintain our belief in God the Father as our creator, God the Son, Jesus Christ, as our redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit as our sustainer.

And, we can respond to those gifts from God with Faith, Love, and Hope. These things cannot be taken away from us, even if all of the other things can be. We can still be Christian without access to the Bible, the Church, the Sacraments, Ordained Clergy, or Hymns. For any church-related thing you can think of, if you did not have access to it and you could still be Christian, it is considered non-essential.

Non-essential of course does not mean unimportant! It merely means that if access to everything we consider part of our Christianity was taken from us, we could still be Christian if we accept the gifts of God as creator, Christ as redeemer, and Spirit as sustainer, and if we respond to these gifts in Faith, Love, and Hope.

Alright, let's get back into our time machine and head back to 2023, shall we?

The Message

Today we kick off a sermon series on the six things that Moravians consider essential for salvation. These six things are separated from things that are considered helpful for salvation and from things that are considered incidental.

The essentials were introduced as early as 1464 and were later more fully developed by Luke of Prague. Luke believed that much of the conflict and confusion in the history of Christianity was caused by the failure to distinguish what is essential from what is ministerial.

For Luke, the reality of salvation should not be confused with the realm of human institutions. The things that are essential for salvation include six things, and two different types of essentials.

The first type of essentials are actions of God that do not depend on human actions. We can call these actions of God “grace” because they are gifts of God.

These three actions include:

1. God (the Father) as Creator
2. God (the Son) as redeemer
3. God (the Holy Spirit) as blessing, sustainer, or sanctifier

The other type of essential includes the human responses to these essential gifts from God. These responses are:

1. Faith
2. Love
3. Hope

These form the necessary human response to God’s grace.

Faith must be completed in love. Faith, love, and hope are intertwined and cannot be separated. For clarification, faith is not quite the same as “belief.” Faith means that we trust God and place our lives in God’s hands. This is not always easy to do, of course, as we face hundreds of decisions a day, from what time to wake up in the morning, to what to have for breakfast.

We face simple decisions and complex decisions, and it can be hard to understand what it means to place our lives fully into God’s hands when we still have decisions we need to make every day.

Love, contrary to popular belief, is not merely an emotion.

Love is action. To love God is to seek to do God’s will. To love our neighbour is to do good for our neighbour and not do harm.

This one can be difficult to understand as well. How do I love my enemies? How do I love someone who is so evil as to do active harm to others?

I’ll share a brief example. When I owned my business, I had a neighbour who caused me some grief. He complained about the noise from dogs barking at my facility, and he came to a city council meeting once to try to get my request for a permit denied. He generally was not a great neighbour and I mostly tried to avoid him as much as I could.

But, we had a bad storm one night, and the next day some of the equipment outside of his building had blown all over our property and he needed some help cleaning things up. As much as I didn't care for him, I could not deny helping him recover his property from the storm.

Did I *feel* love toward him? No. How I felt about him personally did not change. But, the type of love we're talking about is not emotional love. It is love for neighbour that shows care and compassion when it's needed. It is love in action. It is a demonstration of love - love of God, love of self, and love of neighbour.

This can be hard to understand, but we will go into much more depth on this one when we reach the topic of Love in this series.

Finally, if we have faith in God and live according to the law of love, then we will have hope.

Hope is last in the list of essential things because hope looks to the future. We have hope that one day we will be with Christ in eternal joy. It is hope that allows us to face the future with courage.

I was in a Zoom bible study with some friends recently, and one of them was explaining John Wesley's quadrilateral which includes the Bible as the foundation of his theology. And I explained that in the Moravian church, the Bible is not necessarily the foundation, and this is a good thing because it has allowed the Moravian church to remain unified through some very challenging differences globally.

Because our foundations lie on the six essentials, even if we cannot agree about how to interpret the Bible, or a specific scripture, we can at least begin with a foundation of agreement about the essential things.

And this is the beauty of the Moravian theology. These six things are the only essentials to our faith. That is not to say that things like Holy Scripture, the Church as the Body of Christ, Ordained Clergy, the Sacraments, practices of church discipline, or theological doctrine are not important.

But all of these things are considered ministerial. They stand in service to the essentials, but are not in themselves directly related to salvation. Ministerials have a functional role. As I demonstrated when we got into our time machine earlier, if we did not have access to these things, we could still be Christian. So if we can still be Christian without them, then they cannot be essential.

But, under normal circumstances, these ministerial things are still very important to Christian life. They minister to the essential things.

There is one other category of things that Moravians deem incidentals. These are things like the Order of Worship, what hymnals or songs we sing or how we sing them.

It can include the way the pastor dresses, what we have in our sanctuary, whether we use pews or chairs, whether we have screens or no screens in the sanctuary, and the list goes on and on. Ironically, the things we tend to fight over the most in our individual churches are the incidental things. These things can easily become ingrained traditions at individual churches.

This is one reason why moving to a new church can be difficult for a pastor. Every church assumes that their traditions are the same as every other church, but these incidental things can be vastly different from church to church. People can become deeply attached to these things, which is why it is a good reminder to occasionally get back to the foundation of the essentials.

But, our belief in the phrase “In essentials, Unity; In non-essentials, Liberty; and in all things love” is part of the reason that Moravians are willing to work, worship, and fellowship with Christians in other churches despite our doctrinal differences.

If we see evidence of the essential things in those churches, it is easy to find common ground and because we believe “in all things love,” we can start with the essentials as our foundation and be curious and open in talking with others about their faith.

These essentials are also the reason we have been able to remain a global Unity through some very difficult differences in theological and political beliefs. Some of the things that the US, Canadian, and European provinces are moving toward are still illegal or highly suspect in some of the other global provinces.

But again, if we can work our way backwards until we get to common ground, it always comes back to the essentials. We may not be able to agree on how Scripture should be interpreted, but even if we can't agree on that, we can agree on the gifts of God as Creator, Christ as redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as sustainer, and we can agree that our response to these gifts needs to be faith, love, and hope.

As we leave this space today, may our heads be filled with knowledge of the essentials, and may our hearts be filled with faith, love, and hope. Next week, we will begin a deep dive into the first essential gift from God - God the Father as Creator. We also will be celebrating the Moravian Day of Service next Sunday.

As we dive into each of the essentials over the next several weeks, let us continue to welcome God into our hearts and open ourselves to learning and letting the Spirit lead. Amen!

Let us pray: Gracious God, today we offer a prayer of thanks for the Moravians of our past who recognized the needs and struggles of their members, and understood that grace and faith and Christianity can manifest in many different ways as the needs of the world change. God, we are grateful for your loving action and the gift of God the Father as Creator, Christ the Son as redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as Sanctifier.

God, today we understand that not all Christians throughout history have had safe access to things like Scripture, clergy, the sacraments, or church buildings, and yet they were still able to be faithful Christians because they were still able to respond to your loving action with faith, love, and hope.

God thank you for your continued love and care. Thank you for your grace and mercy, and thank you for sending your Son to redeem us and the Holy Spirit to bless us on our faith journeys and our paths to salvation.

All of this we pray in your name. Amen.