

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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July 29, 2005

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Radical Monotheism

Part One

The Most Fundamental Doctrine

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD.

A fundamental is an essential. It is a *sine qua non*. To say that A is fundamental to B is to assert that B could not exist as B except for A. Remove A, and you either destroy B altogether or else alter it into C. In either case, B ceases to exist as B.

In other words, a fundamental is a condition necessary to the existence or definition of a thing. Copper is fundamental to brass. The goal line is fundamental to football. The helix is fundamental to the screw. A fundamental may not be a sufficient condition for the existence of a thing (some helixes are not screws); it may not even seem like a particularly prominent element in that thing; but when the fundamental is removed, the thing itself ceases to exist or becomes something else.

Every system of thought incorporates its own fundamentals. Economic determinism is fundamental to Marxism. Popular government is fundamental to democracy. Separation of powers is fundamental to federalism. No republican believes in monarchy and no communist believes in the right of private property.

Religions, of course, are not merely intellectual systems. They emphasize patterns of conduct and inclinations of the heart. For this reason, they cannot ordinarily be reduced to doctrinal abstractions. They are more than systems of thought.

This does not imply, however, that no religions include systems of thought. Biblical religion in particular (the Judaism of the Old Testament and the Christianity of the New Testament) bases itself upon propositions that must be believed if the remainder of the religion is to have integrity. Even though biblical religion is more than a doctrinal system, it is never less.

To some extent, both practice and affection are definitive for true, biblical religion. They do not, however, exhaust true religion. True religion always includes an element of affirmation, a propositional content that must be believed. In the long run, some elements of practice, affection, and doctrine are indispensable for the religion of the Bible.

This means that biblical religion includes fundamentals of different kinds. Some of its fundamentals are practical: the apostle Paul alludes to this when he says that a man who does not provide for his own household is worse than an infidel and has denied the faith (1 Tim. 5:8). Some fundamentals of biblical religion are affective: the two greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as our self (Mark 12:29-31). Some of the fundamentals of true, biblical religion are also doctrinal. None of these categories of fundamentals can be disregarded without fatally damaging the religion of the Bible (for us, Christianity).

Many doctrines are necessary for the well-being or completion of biblical religion, but not all of those doctrines are fundamentals. Fundamentals are essential, not merely for the well-being of the faith, but for its being at all. Without these doctrines, Christianity cannot exist. Fundamental doctrines are those doctrines that are so closely connected with the gospel that a denial of the doctrine entails a denial of the gospel itself. Without the gospel there is no Christian faith; therefore, whatever entails a denial of the gospel entails the annihilation of Christianity.

All of the fundamentals, however, are not equally urgent. They can be categorized into levels of immediacy. Some fundamentals must be specifically known and believed before people can be saved. For example, no one can be saved who does not acknowledge his own sinfulness and helplessness before God, or who is not aware that Jesus died for his sins. Other fundamentals may not be known as distinct propositions, but they cannot safely or consistently be denied. Many people have never heard of the virgin birth before they are saved. Knowledge of the virgin birth is not essential to salvation, but the virgin birth itself is. No one who understands the implications of the virgin birth could deny it while believing the gospel, but many people are saved without having heard of it.

To repeat, not all fundamentals are equally urgent or immediate. While they are all near the center of the Christian faith, they are not all *equally* near the center. This leads to an important question. Of all the fundamental doctrines, which one is the most central?

The answer to this question is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, the *shema*. The *shema* is the most central affirmation of all biblical religion. No translation can bring out the double thrust of this assertion. For the most part our versions render it, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord." It could also be translated, "Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God—Yahweh alone." The assertion establishes two key truths: there is one and only one true and living God, and He is Yahweh.

The oneness of God is the teaching that set the religion of the Old Testament apart from all other contemporary religions. Israel was surrounded by polytheists. The Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, and Midianites all recognized multiple gods. The religion of Israel, however, starkly proclaimed the exclusive existence of a single God. All others were vanities, empty figments of human imagination.

Furthermore, Israel identified the one, true God as Yahweh. None of the other contenders could be recognized as a god at all. Baal was not the true God. Neither Chemosh nor Dagon was the true God. Yahweh was the God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the God Who spake from Sinai. Yahweh alone was the true God.

These were the defining truths of Israel's religion. There is one and only one true and living God, and His name is Yahweh. Remove these truths and the religion of Israel collapses into idolatry.

These truths were essential not only to Israel's worship, but also to Christianity. The great Trinitarian and Christological dogmas make no sense except against the backdrop of the *shema*. Those who do not acknowledge Yahweh alone as the true and living God will be spared the effort of trying to understand how Jesus could be Yahweh without being the Father. In this sense, Christianity is not so much a new religion as it is a development of the Yahwism of the Old Testament.

The notion that Yahweh is the only true and living God is a radical concept. It changes everything. It holds implications for belief, obedience, and affection.

The purpose of the next several essays is to explore those implications. Christians, in order to be truly Christian, must be radically monotheistic. During the following essays I intend to draw out the implications of radical monotheism and to show how most (all?) of us are still practicing polytheists.

The entire concept of radical monotheism, however, grows out of this simple affirmation. *Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God—Yahweh alone!* If we really believe this affirmation, we shall indeed become radical monotheists. ✖

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Sonnet to Christ Crucified

Anonymous ~ Spain (XVI Century)
Edward Caswall, tr.

My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love Thee not
May eternally die.

Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me
Upon the cross embrace;
For me didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace.

And griefs and torments numberless,
And sweat of agony;
E'en death itself; and all for man
Who was Thine enemy.

Then why, O blessèd Jesus Christ
Should I not love Thee well?
Not for the hope of winning heaven,
Nor of escaping hell.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Nor seeking a reward,
But as Thyself hast lovèd me,
O everlasting Lord!

E'en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing,
Solely because Thou art my God,
And my eternal King. ✠

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