

Conference for Missionaries-1986 - Part 2

by William MacDonald

William MacDonald emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between fundamental and secondary matters in the Christian faith to maintain unity and love among believers.

Duration: 38:57

Scripture: Matthew 23:23

Topics: "Conference", "Unity in the Church", "Importance of Fundamentals"

Description

William MacDonald emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between fundamental and secondary matters in the Christian faith, urging believers to focus on the weightier matters of the law such as judgment, mercy, and faith. He expresses concern over the divisions caused by disagreements on non-fundamental issues, encouraging unity in essentials and liberty in non-essentials. MacDonald highlights the need for strong spiritual leadership to maintain peace within the church and to prevent discord over secondary matters. He calls for a return to the Word of God and a commitment to love and understanding among believers, especially in a world that desperately needs the gospel. His heartfelt plea is for Christians to prioritize the mission of spreading the gospel over quarreling about trivial issues.

Transcript

Before we turn to the word tonight, I'd like to make a word of explanation. I'm going to read two verses of Scripture. They're very harsh verses.

I want to explain right away they will not be applied to you. God forbid that I should ever take words which the Savior spoke to the Pharisees and hypocrites and apply them to God's people. But what I want to do is just extract a phrase from the verse, so please relax and turn to Matthew 23.

Matthew 23. I'd just like to read two verses there, and I'll let you guess what the phrase that I'm going to extract. Matthew 23.

23 and 24. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith. These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Ye blind guides which strain at a net, and swallow at a camel." The expression I have in mind tonight is the expression, the weightier matters of the law. Does that mean that some portions of the word of God are

weightier than others? Yes, that's exactly what it means. Cream lies on the surface.

If the first sense makes sense, don't look for any other sense. There are certain doctrines of the word of God that are of fundamental importance. They are absolutely primary, and there can be no difference of opinion as far as these great truths are concerned.

But there are other matters which are not fundamental. They're of what we call secondary importance, and when it comes to these matters, there's always going to be a difference of opinion. Fundamental and secondary matters.

There must be liberty on these secondary matters to disagree without creating strife or division, and so I think that formula is just as true today as when it was first uttered in fundamental unity. In secondary matters, liberty. In all things, love.

And if we follow that formula, there will be peace in our midst. Whenever believers follow these simple guidelines, they keep the unity of the spirit, and the work of the Lord prospers. On the other hand, when believers go to these secondary matters and treat them as if they were fundamental, they foment discord and division and strife, and these things cut off the blessing of the Lord.

Now, you say, why are you talking about that tonight? Because my heart is broken, that's why. Because my heart is broken when I see Christians quibbling about secondary matters in a world that's perishing for want of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I think it comes from the fact that we don't distinguish between what's fundamental and what is not fundamental.

Let's think about some of the fundamentals. The inspiration of the scriptures. I believe that this precious book I hold in my hands is the inspired word of God.

I believe it's inerrant. I believe it's verbally inspired, that the very words originally written were given by the Holy Spirit of God. It is the word of God from Genesis to Revelation.

I cannot fellowship with someone who says, we know that the Bible contains error. Jesus said that the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds. We know that the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, therefore the Bible contains error.

Professor in one of our evangelical seminars, dear friend, if that was error, Jesus was wrong, and if Jesus was wrong, he isn't God. That's how serious it is. I cannot fellowship with the idea of one of our leading evangelical scholars who speaks of the disdain with which he looks on people who have a Maginot Line mentality with regard to the authority of the scriptures.

These men ought to get out of the ministry and go back and take a secular job. The inspiration of the scriptures. If you take away the inspiration of the scriptures, we have nothing left.

The Trinity, a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. We have one God existing in three persons eternally, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We will not budge an inch on that truth, great truth of the word of God, the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My, how that's under attack today, the Deity of Christ. How wonderful to go to the word of God and read, The Word was God, and of whom Christ came who is God over all, blessed forever. In him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and unto the Son he God saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.

The scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom, the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope we would give our lives for that truth, because it is fundamental. The Incarnation, the Lord Jesus, is not only God, he's perfect man.

Let me add quickly, I am not perfect man. People try to equate Jesus with me. I am fallen humanity.

Jesus is perfect man. I can be tempted from within as well as from without. Jesus couldn't.

He could be tempted from without, but not from within. The perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ, his substitutionary death on Calvary's cross, his burial, his resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of God are fundamental. These things have been held by the historic church down through the centuries.

People complain about the divisions of Christianity, but when I think of these fundamentals, I rejoice in the unity of the Christian faith. The gospel of salvation by grace, through faith, and apart from works or law keeping are fundamentals of the faith. And then the second coming of Christ.

Mind you, Christians do not agree on the details of the second coming of Christ, but the fact of his coming is a basic doctrine of the faith. These great fundamentals of the faith are not negotiable. I remember reading that lovely article by Tozer.

He said some things are not negotiable, and these are some of them. These are absolutely fundamental. We are to earnestly contend for these.

They're clearly taught in the scriptures. They've been held by the evangelical orthodox church down through the century, and conflicting views have been labeled heresy without any question. I think it's significant that believers have been willing to die for these truths, and we cannot have fellowship with those who deny them.

But some issues are not fundamental in the word of God. There are other things which are lesser matters on which great and godly people disagree, and it is these topics that often cause heated disputes among God's people. I'd like to list to you some of these areas which are secondary.

First of all, there are matters on which the word of God speaks, but on which Christians hold differing interpretations. I believe on these matters that I'm going to list there's only one right interpretation, but not everybody sees it that way. And a person can be a godly Christian without agreeing with me on this.

For instance, these include divorce and remarriage. Okay, the wheels are going in your mind already. The outline of prophecy, women's ministry, and head covering, the gifts of the spirit, the so-called five points of Calvinism.

Now, I believe that the word of God has a clear voice on all of these subjects, and it would be very comfortable for me to feel that I have the right interpretation. But I have to be honest as I stand here tonight and tell you that there are better Christians than I who don't agree with me. We're going to look at these one by one.

That's the first area of secondary matters, things on which the Bible does speak. I believe they're important, and I believe that in the wisdom of God there's only one interpretation, and a hundred years from tonight I'll tell you what it is. But we have this very distressing situation that there is not agreement among Christian people on them, and these people are soul winners.

These people are worshipers. Praise God. The second area is the second area on which the New Testament does not legislate, does not speak clearly, but people feel that they embody certain basic principles.

Let me give you some illustrations. Wine versus grape juice at the Lord's Table, at the Lord's Supper. One cup versus individual cups.

Or the use of musical instruments. But why would I speak clearly on these things? People have very definite views about them. They're secondary.

I don't think anybody here would be willing to give his life for any of these, would they? I wouldn't. Then there are other things that are largely a matter of usage. This is the third category.

There are some things that are largely a matter of usage or tradition. If I could use an example, the use of thee and thou versus you in addressing God. Let's come to that.

One issue just must be decided on its own merits. That's the whole question of Bible versions. Many of you in the mission field don't face that problem, as it is here in the United States with the proliferation of Bible versions.

And then the Bible has a category which we call matters of moral indifference. There are things that are neither right nor wrong in themselves. Paul deals with this in Romans chapter 14, foods, drinks, observance of days.

We call the matters of moral indifference they're not right or wrong in themselves. So, we have those things. We have the fundamentals.

We have secondary matters in which the Bible does speak, but Christians don't agree on them. We have matters that the Bible doesn't speak specifically about, but they embody principles that some people feel are important. We have matters of usage or tradition.

We have the matter of Bible versions that must be decided on its own merit, and then we have matters of moral indifference. Now, let's look at these subjects and see how an assembly can handle them without conflict or division. Something that's very close to my heart.

Most of us here tonight would have very strong convictions on these issues. It would be impossible to have a room full of taught Christians like this without having convictions. That's good.

And yet, as I said, we have to face the fact that there are Christlike souls who don't agree with us on these matters, and when outstanding men and women of God disagree with these, it really behooves us not to be too dogmatic. Cromwell said, I beseech you by the tender mercies of Christ that you conceive it possible that you might be mistaken. Now, that wouldn't apply to the fundamentals of the faith.

It wouldn't. People used to try to argue with dear Dr. Ironside on some secondary matter, and he would say, well, brother, when we get to heaven, one of us is going to be wrong, and perhaps it'll be me. The fire went out because he didn't add fuel to it.

When we get to heaven, one of us is going to be wrong, perhaps it will be me. Divorce and remarriage. Let's take them up now.

Divorce and remarriage. I don't think I'm going to settle it tonight. Some people say no divorce, period.

That's an interpretation. Good people. Others say divorce, but no remarriage.

Others say divorce when there has been unfaithfulness, and the innocent party is free to remarry. Some say divorce for desertion. There's no end to the views, and I do not believe that there will ever be unanimity here on earth concerning the matter of divorce and remarriage.

Where does that leave it? I believe that sooner or later, every assembly must adopt a position in the fear of God that the elders must get down before the Lord and trash the thing out from the Word of God, and adopt a position and say this is the policy of this assembly, and adhere to that position. Individuals may hold other views, but they must not push those views. Minority views must not be pushed publicly or privately.

If the peace of the assembly is to be preserved. And let me just add that even after the elders do adopt a position, after the assembly adopts a position, every case is still going to have to be considered individually. They're getting so complicated that I don't think it's possible to set down stated rules that will cover every case, and once again the elders are going to have to face these things and consider them individually in the light of the Word of God.

Second, the outline of prophecy. I have very strong views on this subject, very strong. I'm not going to tell you what they are.

You all know. Some believers are pre-millennial, some are post-millennial, some are amillennial. Even among the pre-millennialists, there are different views.

There was pre-tribulation rapture, mid-tribulation rapture, and post-tribulation rapture, and a person can hold any of those views and still be a good Christian. And I think it's proper that everyone knows what he believes and rejoices in it. But it's also proper that we remember that there are sincere, godly believers who hold other views.

These honest views should not hinder us from breaking bread together, but once again I feel the assembly should have a position, should maintain that position, and no minority view should be pushed publicly or privately. When some individual insists that everybody agrees with his view, with his minority view, it's bound to be trouble. This is where the trouble is coming in.

And incidentally, this is why we must have strong spiritual leadership in the assembly. Nature abhors a vacuum, and in spiritual matters it's true too. And when there's a vacuum of strong spiritual leadership, there's trouble and confusion.

On the other hand, when people know that there is strong spiritual leadership, they're not as apt to try to disrupt the work of God by pushing their minority view. Women's head covering. On the one hand, there are those who say today that Paul's teachings were just a reflection of the culture of his day.

Others who say, I should say not. Those things are the commandments of the Lord, and when Paul presses them, he goes back to creation, not to the culture of his day, but to creation, to the order of creation, and the purpose of creation, and he says it was because of the angel. And both sides hold their views very strongly.

Then, if also questions arise whether the head covering is just for the meetings of the church, and if so, what is the meeting of the church? And what constitutes the proper covering? I say if the elders of a local fellowship do not adopt a position on this that's bound to be confusion, they owe it to the saints to teach the word of God, to declare what the scriptures teach, and any who cannot subscribe to this ideally should be content to remain silent and not create trouble. Women's ministry. When may a woman sing or speak in a meeting of the church? The answers given today are too numerous to list, but the leadership should have a sincere desire to come as close as possible to the word of God, and those prayerful conclusions become the policy of the assembly.

The sign gift, the charismatic movement, holds the potential for trouble. I think tongues, healing, and the prophetic gift, the gift of prophecy, seem to be the gifts around which most of the controversy swirls. And even among the charismatics, the differing views are too numerous to mention.

They're legions. What does it boil down to? It boils down to this. We can and must love true Christians who disagree with us, but we must not allow the issue to cause division, and therefore an assembly must decide what the bible really teaches on this issue.

The elders have a right and a responsibility to deal firmly with any who seek to push an alternate view, publicly or privately. Another issue that's caused a great deal of difficulty is what we call five-point Calvinism. What is that? Well, total depravity of man, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints.

Usually, when people believe this, they believe it with a vengeance, and they can find it in every word of the script, on every page of the bible. People who disagree say, Christ didn't die just for the elect, he died for all, and there are other points of disagreement as well. And the interesting thing is that spiritually-minded, godly people are found on both sides of the issue.

The fireworks begin when somebody begins to push his view which is not welcome, or when he harks on one subject as if it were the only subject that was in the bible, and when silent he tends to leave the assembly and draw others off with him. The path of wisdom is to enjoy one's own convictions, and not to force them as if they represented the whole truth. Now, I haven't told you how I believe in any of those things, have I? My neck is already very tender.

But I do have strong views on them, I really do, and I feel I should be able to preach to defend them from the word of God. It makes me think of dear Dr. Ironside again, when people would argue with him. A woman came up to him once after he had preached on the eternal security of the believer, and she said, well, I certainly don't agree with what you said tonight.

And he said, what don't you agree with, madam? This business of want-saved-always-saved. She said, I'll never accept that. Well, he said, let me quote a verse of scripture to you, madam.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father which gave them me is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. She said, I don't believe it the way you believe it.

Well, he said, let me quote it to you again. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal She said, don't quote that to me. She said, I don't believe it the way you

believe it.

He said, madam, just let me quote it. My sheep, she said, don't quote that to me. I don't believe it the way you believe it.

He said, I haven't told you yet how I believe it. That was it. he wasn't fighting against him, he was fighting against the Word of God.

Subjects on which the Bible does not legislate specifically, topics that are not dealt with in a decisive way in the New Testament, although in some cases there may be guiding principles wine versus grape juice at the Lord's Supper. I think we ought to face the fact that when the Lord's Supper was introduced, there's no question that the Lord Jesus used fermented wine and unleavened bread. That would have been on the table for the Passover.

The Passover was just completed, and now the Lord's Supper, but that's what would have been there. Fermented wine, unleavened bread. Grape juice didn't come in until the time of pasteurism.

The minute you squeeze grapes, you get the juice out, and the fermentation process begins. By the time the Lord's Supper is underway, the fermentation process has already begun. But wine stumbles believers who have a problem with alcohol, and if wine stumbles a believer, I shouldn't drink wine as long as I live.

And there are many places in the world today, as you know, where wine is not available. But it's not the bread and the wine that are important, it's what they speak of to us. We must get beyond them to the Lord himself.

One cup versus individual cups. Two sides to the matter. In a sense, one cup does indicate the unity of the body of Christ, but as an assembly grows, it's not uncommon to have two, three, four cups.

And really, as soon as you have two, that symbolism is broken, and yet if your assembly has 400 people in it, one cup is really not sufficient, is it? How do you resolve that? Well, it's really not a matter of fundamental importance. I think it just gives us a wonderful opportunity to show love and consideration to those who disagree with us. The use of musical instruments.

As far as I know, instrumental accompaniment has never been considered a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. I think we could very well paraphrase Paul's words in Galatians 6, for in Christ Jesus neither doth an organ avail anything nor the absence of an organ but a new creation, or a faith that worketh by love. That's what's important.

Those things are really not important. Then the third category of secondary matters was matters of tradition or usage. For instance, the time of the meeting.

Why would people ever cause controversy of the... I think if they broke bread at four in the morning, I'd go. Wouldn't you? It's not that important, and sometimes changes have to be made. The gospel meeting in the evening, it was great for one time, but it's not great for today because people just won't come.

The best time for reaching the unsaved in one locality may not be the best in another. Traditional times are not sacred. We have to be ready to make changes when they are indicated.

Thou versus you. Many older Christians prefer to address God as thou and thee. Many younger Christians prefer to address God as you, not with any lack of reverence, but with a sense of intimacy.

It seems to me that any assembly should be big enough for both. It should be big enough for both. I like to see an assembly where there's a non-threatening atmosphere as far as young people are concerned.

Some years ago, in one of the assemblies on the west coast, a dear young fellow got saved, and he knew nothing but the bare facts of the gospel, and he showed up one night for the Lord's Supper in bare feet. One of the sisters, one of the older sisters, felt it her duty to corral him afterwards and tell him off in a few well-chosen words. One of the elders saw what was going on, and he went over, he put his arm around the young fellow, and he said, never mind, I think they're beautiful.

And the kid said, well, they're original. Would you be surprised if I told you that if you went to that assembly next Sunday night, they meet and break bread down in the basement, and it's wall-to-wall young people, I dare say 200 or 250 young people, wall-to-wall, praising the Lord. Well, I don't have to tell you that that fellow doesn't still come in bare feet.

Come hold them in his right mind. That's nice, isn't it? A non-threatening atmosphere for young people. Now, there's a personal preference that must be decided on their own Bible versions.

Just think of the heat that's been generated over Bible versions in recent years. Some believers think that the truth of God is really at stake, and others point out that the differences between these reputable versions are minor, and that the great truths of the gospel can be found in all of the versions. And as much as we might love any particular English version, we can't claim it's the only right one, because what about the foreign versions of the Bible? What do we do with that? So, my attitude is individual Christians should be allowed to have their favorite version, but not to press it on someone else, not to insist that that is the only right one.

And then, of course, there are matters that are absolutely non-essential. I don't call these other things non-essential, but there are matters in Scripture that are non-essential. These are matters of moral indifference.

They're things that are not right or wrong in themselves. And these are the matters that Paul writes about. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Romans 14.5. He would never say that about a fundamental, would he? Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. All things are lawful for me. Really? In the context, yes, really.

All things are lawful for me. Areas and activities that are not otherwise forbidden by the word of God, such as food and drink. He says in Romans 14.20, all things indeed are pure, and in Titus 1.15, to the pure all things are pure.

It can't mean all things absolutely, but all things that are not right or wrong in themselves. He says, I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there's nothing unclean of itself. The subject is food.

In the Old Testament, there were certain foods that were unclean, but you come to Mark 7, and Jesus says, it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, it would come out of his heart. This he said, making all foods clean. And so it should be clear to us that in these passages, Paul is dealing with non-essentials, with matters of moral indifference, and yet it's often over these inconsequential matters that serious splits occur.

We must learn to distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral. So, these are some of the areas that are not fundamentals of the faith. They're matters of secondary importance.

People can still be good Christians without seeing eye to eye on them. Some cases, they really represent honest differences of opinion among God's people. And in these secondary matters, there has to be a certain amount of give and take.

I almost hesitate to use the word compromise, but there are areas that we've been talking about where you have to. Elders have to compromise concerning matters of moral indifference. Deacons have to learn to compromise, just as they did in the early days of the church when the deacons were first appointed.

They must compromise, but not on the truths of the word of God. It's people who always have to have their own way in peripheral matters that cause the trouble and scatter the sheep. We haven't discussed all the secondary matters.

Some of you probably will come up and list others, and I'll be grateful to you for doing it, but these are some of the ones that cause friction from time to time. I bring this up because the principles are the same, even if there are different subjects. And I think it emphasizes the importance of a strong teaching ministry in the assembly.

I think these subjects should be brought out. The truth of the word of God should be declared. Christians should know what they believe and why they believe it, and be able to defend their position from the scriptures.

God's people should be provided with sufficient information to enable them to form intelligent conclusions. Once an assembly has adopted a position, believers should be willing to go along with a policy even if they don't fully agree. If they can't do it, then I think their liberty is to leave and find a fellowship where they would.

I don't think that's the ideal, but they're at liberty to do that. Find a fellowship, but remembering it's almost impossible to find a fellowship where they'd agree with everything. About three years ago, the Lord raised up a new little assembly out in California.

Seven brothers, church planting team, got together, and they laid down certain ground rules before they ever started, and that was one of the ground rules. In fundamental matters, we're going to be united. We will not tolerate the slightest difference of opinion.

They drew up a statement of faith to that effect. They said, in secondary matters, we're going to be guided by the consensus of the group. We will not have a minority dictating the policy, and so they did.

They adopted a position. Actually, they drew up two position papers. One was on divorce and remarriage, the other was on women's ministry.

That's all in writing. Twice in the subsequent years, individuals who were actually two different men tried to counteract those policies. They were reminded of the position of the assembly, told that their views would not be tolerated, and it kept peace in the assembly.

They're still in the assembly, but they're happy in the assembly. In fundamental, unity. In secondary matters, liberty.

In all things, love. The weightier matters of the law. Some are weightier than others.

I'd be grateful for any input that any of you might like to give me afterwards, and if you want to know my individual view, I'd be glad to give it, too, on any of these subjects. Shall we pray? Father, we look out over the church tonight, and we see the church quarreling over matters of secondary importance. We see people caught up in matters that are really not fundamental, and some of them are even trivial.

We see a world perishing about us. We pray that you'll come in a mighty revival in our midst. We pray, Lord, that you'll raise up strong spiritual leadership for our local fellowships, that there will be a return to the word of God, that there will be strong policies, guidance for God's people, guidance for the sheep, so that there be no confusion.

Give us peace, Lord, in our day. We ask in Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen.

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