

Essence of Christianity

By [John Frame](#)

May 17, 2012

[This essay was submitted for inclusion in the New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), but was rejected by the editors. I don't question their judgment, but I still think there is some value in it.]

Essence is that quality by which something is defined, that quality which makes something what it is and distinguishes it from other things. Three-sidedness is an essential characteristic of a triangle. A figure may be short, long, large, small, even-sided or uneven-sided- no matter; with or without any of these qualities it may still be a triangle. But take away its three-sidedness, and suddenly it is no longer a triangle; it has become something else.

Now many have sought to discover the “essence” of Christianity—that which makes Christianity what it is, that without which it would be something else. Books have been written (as by Feuerbach and Harnack) entitled *The Essence of Christianity*. And many theologians, though writing books with other names, have sought, in effect if not in so many words, to identify the essence. The very variety of suggestions, however, casts initial doubt upon the project. What is the essence? Morality (Kant)? Religious feeling (Schleiermacher)? Philosophical dialectic (Hegel)? Wish-fulfillment (Feuerbach)? The fatherhood of God (Harnack)? Word of God (Barth)? Personal encounter (Brunner, Buber)? Acts of God (Wright)? The self-negation of being (Tillich)? Existential self-understanding (Bultmann)? Hope (Moltmann)? Liberation (Gutierrez)? Incarnation (Eastern orthodoxy)? Covenant (many Calvinists)? Five “fundamentals” (many American conservatives)? And what of holiness, justice, mercy, faith, love, grace, praise, spirit, peace, joy, body life? What of evangelism, worship? All of these have some claim to be called the “heart of the gospel” or the “center of Christianity.” Or why not say simply that “Christianity is Christ?”

Thus we are inundated with “theologies of” this and that, each claiming that its subject is the (heretofore neglected!) “central focus” of Christianity. How are we to respond? Well, these projects often do have positive value. It can be illuminating to choose a biblical concept or teaching and to try to see all the rest of scripture in the light of that teaching. We are finite beings and therefore cannot see the whole Bible at once. It is helpful to have a “focus,” a starting point; and many of these studies provide that. On the other hand, there are also dangers in this type of theology: (1) Theologies organized around one “central doctrine” often ignore, distort or even attack other biblical doctrines which they deem to be

“peripheral.” (2) They often give the impression that their particular focus is the *only* legitimate focus for theology, thus unfairly negating the value of other approaches. (3) Such proposals can foster an arrogant absurdity: that the most important elements of Christianity have been virtually forgotten for two thousand years, only to have been recovered by the ingenuity of modern scholarship.

The greatest theologians, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, did not seek to organize their systems around one particular “central doctrine.” Rather, they sought to expound a (unified) *complexity* of teaching- the whole scripture. The result was a many-sidedness, a breadth and depth, rarely seen in the modern “theologies of” this and that. Perhaps that sort of achievement takes genius. The rest of us theologians must perhaps be content to find a “central doctrine” and write about it. But if we do, it would be wise for us to remember that Christianity has *many* centers- or, rather, one (Christ) who can be described from a wide variety of “perspectives.” Each “central doctrine,” then, is a certain “angle” from which the whole teaching of Scripture can be viewed. With such a “perspectival” view of the matter, we can promote one “central doctrine” without demeaning others, without reducing the richness of the gospel of Christ.

Bibliography

Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity* (N.Y., Harper, 1957).

Frame, J., “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” in North, G., ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (Vallecito, Calif., Ross House, 1976), 295-330.

Harnack, A., *What is Christianity?* (London, Williams and Norgate, 1901).

Poythress, V., *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God* (Nutley, N. J., Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).