



**Book Title**  
*Essential Christianity*  
 Walter R. Martin

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The battle over doctrinal truth is alive and well, I'm sad to say. What once was deemed sacred in the Church has, over the course of time, been sacrificed on the altar of theological liberalism. And chief among the sacrificial lambs is the doctrine of Christian exclusivity. The cacophony of voices who teach that there are a myriad of "avenues" to heaven—irrespective of the Christ of Christianity—has grown deafening in recent years, even among some prominent evangelicals.

In a 1997 interview with "America's pastor," the revered evangelist Billy Graham offered his thoughts regarding the eternal destiny of non-Christians. His words were anything but orthodox: "Whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world," he said, "they may not even know the name of Jesus, but ... I think they're saved."<sup>1</sup>

Rob Bell, a seminary graduate and former mega-church pastor, echoed Graham's sentiments in his 2011 bestseller aptly titled *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In it, Bell infers that Christian exclusivity "is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message."<sup>2</sup> To that end, in his promotional video for the book, Bell put adherents of Christian exclusivity on notice when he rhetorically asked: "Gandhi's in hell? He is? And someone knows this for sure?"<sup>3</sup>

But it is not only the evangelical Church that stands susceptible to doctrinal revisionism. Even the Roman Catholic Church, with all its emphasis on tradition, is not immune. In a 2005 speech delivered to the Roman faithful, and later summarized for publication by the Catholic news agency *Zenit*, Pope Benedict XVI flat-out denied that Jesus is the only way to heaven: "Whoever seeks peace and the good of the community with a pure conscience, and keeps alive the desire for the transcendent, will be saved even if he lacks biblical faith, says Benedict XVI."<sup>4</sup>

It seems that in the minds of Bell, Graham, and the former pontiff of Rome, adhering to a standard set of essential beliefs is irrelevant to being a Christian—or, at the very least, it matters little when it comes to attaining eternal life. Instead, what really matters, they tell us, is that we accept a God who is inclusive (Bell), especially toward those who have a "pure conscience" (Benedict), and regardless of whether they "may not ... know the name of Jesus" (Graham).

The "essential doctrines" of the faith, as they are commonly called, have fallen victim to editorial discretion; hijacked by the crusaders of political correctness.

American Christianity has morphed into a one-size-fits-all religion, so it would seem, and is open to everything and everyone regardless of what they believe or in whom they place their faith.

Notwithstanding the exclusivity of Christ and the controversy it engenders, other questions remain: What must one believe in order to be a Christian? Does God concern Himself with the *mind* (what man thinks) or only the *heart* (what man feels)? Is there a doctrinal litmus test that must be adhered to in order to wear the badge of a true believer? And if so, what exactly are these doctrines and what makes them essential?

To these questions, the late Dr. Walter Martin (1928-1989)—founder of the Christian Research Institute and the leading trailblazer in countercult apologetics—offers cogent answers. In his book *Essential Christianity*, originally published in 1980, Dr. Martin deftly expounds upon twelve doctrines that he maintains are part and parcel with historic Christianity. To deny any of them, he argues, is to fall outside the pale of orthodoxy.

Beginning with the inspiration of the Bible and concluding with God's judgment at the end of the age, Martin weaves together a tapestry that covers the warp and woof of Christian dogma. Sandwiched in between these bookends are eight chapters on the Virgin Birth, the Deity of Christ, the Holy Trinity, the Resurrection of Christ, the Return of Christ, the Atonement of Christ, salvation by grace alone, and the miracle of spiritual gifts. Not content to stop there, the author also includes an Appendix with two supplemental chapters; one devoted to the error of Universal Salvation and the other to what he calls "The Unanswerable Argument" (a reference to the inward transformation of a sinner borne from spiritual conversion).

Well-written and conveniently concise, the author shows considerable respect for the doctrines surveyed. He offers classic proof texts from Scripture, together with well-reasoned arguments in philosophy, to support his thesis that the aforementioned doctrines demand a rightful place among the fundamentals.

What I admired most about *Essential Christianity* is its brevity and simplicity. Far from imposing, it captures in relatively few pages what many theologians labor to do in volumes. We might say that the author successfully manages to "*take the hay down from the loft*," as the saying goes, "*so that common cows can eat it*"—and in 133 pages no less! In other words, while *Essential Christianity* tackles lofty doctrinal matters, it doesn't require a lofty IQ to understand it. Martin meets his readers where they are at. He finds common ground with his audience by compressing into elementary terms the complex rhetoric of theology often associated with scholars and theologians. This is no easy task, to be sure.

There is, however, one point of criticism that should be noted. My major complaint about the book is its misleading title. In my opinion, this book (and its readers) would have been better served if it was titled differently—perhaps "Classical Christianity" (the traditional teachings of the Church) rather than "Essential Christianity" (the mandatory doctrines of belief).

To the point, it is one thing to stipulate that the Holy Trinity (Chapter 2) and the Deity of Christ (Chapter 3) are essential doctrines, to which all believers must confess. This Martin rightly does. But it's another thing to lump into this same category the topic of spiritual gifts (Chapter 8), which Martin wrongly does. To combine spiritual gifts with the title *Essential Christianity* is to grossly confuse the reader. It not only cuts against

the grain of Scripture but it misrepresents the author's true intent (Dr. Martin did *not* actually insist in his lifetime that belief in, or the exercise of, spiritual gifts were essential to a person's salvation). To the uninformed, the book title makes it look as though Martin is majoring in the minors or elevating the peripheral to the primary (when only the opposite is true).

The dubious book title aside, I wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Walter Martin's *Essential Christianity*. As a primer on the Christian faith, it helped to inform my belief system and bring me into a more mature faith as an adult. That is to say, it gave me a better understanding of *what* it is I should believe as a follower of Christ and *why* I should believe it. For that reason alone, it stands as a "must have" for any Christian who desires to get his feet wet in the pool of systematic theology.

Is it enough to "believe in Jesus" in some amorphous sense that divorces "faith" from any particular doctrine about God, or is doctrine—and the content of our faith—really important after all? Thankfully, the late Dr. Martin did not stand with Rob Bell, Billy Graham, or Pope Benedict on the matter. He stood on the authority of revealed truth. *Essential Christianity* argues from Scripture, and in light of Scripture, that we must be sound in the faith (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 4:2-3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1). God will hold each of us accountable for *what we believe* as well as *how we think* about revealed truth. If anything else, we learn from Dr. Walter Martin's book that doctrine matters. Indeed, it is essential.

—Ronald H. Gann

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MZWug3QAvs>

<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*; (HarperCollins, 2001); p. viii

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivwfgBNICf4>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/nonbelievers-too-can-be-saved-says-pope>