

On distinguishing of things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental

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Introduction

A part of the ancient Unity heritage is also the distinguishing of things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental. This distinguishing is however misunderstood sometimes, and moreover, it is often inappropriately confused with the quote attributed to Augustine: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” That is why we decided to study the reports from the ancient Unity itself and to prepare this short treatise. Our goal is not to miss the cornerstones laid out by our fathers in the ancient Unity as the basis of faith and understanding of life. Our goal is for this historical treasure to be perceived in the context of the entire history of our Unity.

This treatise does not aim to be complete, but to remark the basic facts relating to the given topic. In the first part, we briefly discuss a historical overview, in the second part, we present the approach of the ancient Unity.

1. Historical overview

The ancient Unity distinguished things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental. As Essential they termed those things from which the salvation of man arises, namely: On the part of God, the grace of God the Father, the merit of Jesus Christ, and the gifts (or work) of the Holy Spirit. And on the part of man, faith, love, and hope. As Ministerial things they regarded those means established by God to attain those Essentials, namely: the word of God, the keys, and the sacraments. As Incidental things they termed those various orders pertaining to the Ministerial things, which are in the power of the church.

The beginnings of differentiation of things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental were formulated by the ancient Brethren at the very beginning of the ancient Unity, namely – as Luke of Prague testifies – with Brother Gregory. The basic concept of this differentiation is taken over from the Hussite theologian Jacob of Mies (Jakoubek of Stříbro). The first – though not explicit – reference to this distinguishing may be found in the “Agreement of the Rychnov Mountains” from the year 1464¹, where faith, love and hope (i.e. things Essential) are mentioned in the first place. The three categories are explicitly mentioned in the document called “Tract of the old Brethren on the holy church” dated 1470², written most probably by Brother Gregory. As “fundamental salvable things”, faith, love and hope are listed. It is stated about the Ministerial things, which also encompass sacraments, that the church is to keep them in obedience to Christ. Incidental things are characterized as those under authority of the church, which may or may not be in place. Other documents of the time, mentioning things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental, include the letter “On bad and good priests” dated 1468-69³ and the letter to “Lords of Mýto” from the years 1471-72.⁴ Both these letters state that salvation depends on the Essential things, namely “unstained faith, infallible love and living hope”, and not on things Ministerial or Incidental.

The concept of things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental is thoroughly elaborated by Luke of Prague throughout the whole of his writings, among others in the treatise “On truth and true certainty of God’s salvation” from 1525⁵. He consistently places it into the context of God’s salvable actions with

¹ *Svolení na horách rychnovských*, in: Acta Unitatis Fratrum V. (National archives, Czech Republic.) Also known in English as “Unity Statutes of 1464”.

² *Traktát Bratří starých o církvi svaté*, in: Acta Unitatis Fratrum I. (National archives, Czech Republic.)

³ *O zlých a dobrých kněžích*, in: Acta Unitatis Fratrum I. (National archives, Czech Republic.)

⁴ *Pánuom Mejským*, in: Acta Unitatis Fratrum I. (National archives, Czech Republic.)

mankind. As Essential he names things on part of God, that is the grace of God, the merit of Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and things on part of Man, that is faith, love and hope, where the latter are also brought about by God. Ministerial things are given to help and to serve the Essential things, where the church serves with them. They are, especially, the preaching of the word of God, also the “power of the keys” (as the brethren term the right of the church to affirm forgiveness of sins to the repenting and God’s wrath to those not repenting), and sacraments. Incidental things are to be helpful to the Ministerial things. Luke paid attention to the inner association of the individual things. (Faith is primary, arising from the hearing of the word of God, followed by love and by hope, which stems from both hope and love.) He also emphasized the need not to confuse the individual Essential things for Ministerial and Ministerial for Incidental.

The things discussed are clearly recognizable in the structure of the Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren of 1535.⁶

In a mature form, the division of Essential, Ministerial and Incidental things is formulated in the Account of the Discipline (*Ratio disciplinae*), first issued by J. A. Comenius in 1632⁷. Here, the individual things and their purpose are clearly defined. The Essential things are those that bring forth salvation. The Ministerial things are those means established by God to attain those Essentials. The Incidental things are those which relate to the time, place and mode of exercising, and the persons exercising those Ministerial things (see the Appendix).

This Account of the Discipline played a key role in the renewal of the Moravian church in Herrnhut: N. L. Zinzendorf found it in the library of Zittau at the turn of July and August of 1727 and published its extract just after returning to Herrnhut, still in August 1727.⁸ Thus, the ancient Unity and the renewed Unity were connected by this idea.

2. Description of the teaching (or How the Brethren understood the matter)

In the description of the teaching, we go back to the Account of Discipline, supplemented further by Luke’s treatise “On truth and true certainty of God’s salvation”. In the description, we also use the formulation from the Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren from 1535 (see references above).

As a lead-in, be it stated that the distinguishing among things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental relates to the salvation of Man.

Those things are called **Essential**, from which the salvation of Man ensues and on which it depends. On the part of God, there are these three things: **the grace of God the Father** and his mercy over the fallen Man (so God sent his only Son to this world for our salvation, John 3:16); the **merit of Lord Jesus Christ**, the incarnate Son of God, who became a peace offering for our sins (1 John 2:2); **gifts (or work) of the Holy Spirit**, meaning the activity of the Holy Spirit, whereby man gets a part on the merit of Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 8:16), where this activity in Man leads to faith, love and hope. On part of Man, Essential things are just these three: **faith**, knowing and seizing God’s grace (Eph 2:8); **love**, which in the first place is about loving God, who loves us, leading us to complete devotion to Him and to doing His will (1 John 4:16); **hope**, that is firm belief that we shall remain in love and reach eternal life (Rom 8:24).

⁵ *Spis o pravdě a pravé jistotě Božího spasení.* (National Library of the Czech Republic.)

⁶ *Bratrské vyznání.* (First issued in 1535. Reprinted by J. Procházka, Lysá nad Labem, 1869.)

⁷ *Řád církevní Jednoty bratří českých.* (First issued in 1632. Reprinted by Comenia, Praha, 1897.)

⁸ See e.g. *John R. Weinlick: Count Zinzendorf*, chapter 9. (Reprinted by Interprovincial Board of Communication, Moravian Church, American Northern and Southern Provinces, 1989.)

The necessity of these all things for the salvation of Man arises, in the first place, from the fall of Man (Gen 3). Because of the fall, Man is born in sin, is inclined to doing evil and is worthy of eternal damnation. Man has no means to set himself free. It is God alone, who causes salvation. This salvation from the mercy of the Father and from the merit of Christ is done through the Holy Spirit, granting Man part on the work of Christ. Firstly, he causes sorrow over sin in Man, as well as remorseful heart and humility (Psalm 50), and consequently he causes faith, love and hope. These three things are essential for salvation: Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). Without love, even a faith so great that he could move mountains does not benefit one (1 Cor 13:2). To be without hope is as if to be without God in the world.

Firstly, man comes to faith, then to love, and from both, to hope. Man comes to faith through hearing of the Word of God (Rom 10:17). Word of God is the prominent Ministerial thing, which we shall focus on next.

The **Ministerial** things are called these things established by God to obtain the mentioned Essential things: The Grace of God, the merit of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit becomes known and experienced by Man through them. Faith, love and hope is built in human hearts through them. The Ministerial things are three: **Word of God, keys** and **sacraments**. They are named "Ministerial", as they are in ministry to the Essential things. They are entrusted to the church, which is in turn commissioned by God to do so, and in which our Lord Jesus Christ is spiritually present; thus, in fact, Jesus himself serves through the church with those Ministerial things. **Word of God** denotes the faithful preaching of the Gospel (Mark 16:15) and the whole truth of the Scripture. For salvation, it is more important than sacraments. Through the Word of God, the listener is to discover his own fallen state as well as God's mercy in Christ, as well as to reach salvation through repentance and faith. The preacher of the God's Word is in this matter responsible for adhering to the truth of the Scripture, as it is God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16) and thus reliable. **Keys** denote the power of Christ and his Spirit, entrusted by Him to His church and its congregations and servants (Matt 16:19), so that God's mercy is affirmed to the believing and repenting, whereas God's wrath is affirmed to the unbelievers and the unrepentant (John 20:23). The primary property of the keys is to "open and unbind", that is, to reassure believers on forgiveness of sins, to open the kingdom of Heaven to them and to strengthen and empower against temptation. **Sacraments** denote God-given external and visible signs used to testify about the invisible spiritual truths.

In general, it may be said about the Ministerial things that by Word of God, the Essential things are revealed, by keys they are affirmed and by sacraments they are sealed.

Incidental things are those various orders pertaining to the Ministerial things, which are in the power of the church. Here, the provisions on when, where, by whom and how the Ministerial things are to be beneficially done. It is here that we find announcements of prayers, fasting, memorial days, celebrations and collections.

Neither Ministerial, nor Incidental things have value on their own, but their purpose is to help the Essential things for faith to be the purest, love to be the most fervent and hope to be the firmest possible.

3. Conclusion

It is fact that differentiation of things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental is sometimes by abbreviation combined with the quote: *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love."* We would like to warn from any such abbreviated combination, as the word "Essential" is used in a different meaning, despite the seeming correspondence. The quote *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love"* is very good and true and is the basic dimension of relationships

and acts among Christians. In a weakened form, a similar approach may be seen in the principles of democracy. However, when Essential, Ministerial and Incidental things as understood by the ancient Unity are concerned, the individual things relate to the salvation of man. Ministerial things may definitely not be categorized as *non-essential*, where such a classification may arise from an inappropriate combination of the two statements quoted above. The Ministerial things are God-given, so that the Essential things are truly present with us and so that we are not Christians only by name. That is why it is impossible to change, modify or adapt them to the age and culture. By being given by God himself, Man has no power over them, but is subordinated to them, unlike Incidental things.

We are deeply convinced that the differentiation among things Essential, Ministerial and Incidental should be understood in a way corresponding to the approach of the ancient Unity.

Appendix – Extract from the “Account of the Ecclesiastical Discipline and Order in the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren” (also known as “Ratio Disciplinae”) first issued in 1632

As Essential they termed those things on which the foundation of Christianity is based and from which the salvation of man arises, namely:

On the part of God, the grace of God the Father (2 Cor. 13:13, Luke 1:78, John 3:16), the merit of Christ (Rom. 3:24-25, 1 John 2:2), and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22, Rom. 8:16);

And on our part, faith, love, and hope. By faith, understanding and close acknowledgment of the benefaction of God (Mark 16,16; Eph. 2,8) and a trustful appropriation of it to ourselves; by love, to love God in return as he loves us and to obey him in all things by ceasing to do evil and by following the good (John 13:35, 1 John 4:11.16, Isa. 1:16); by hope, an unshaken assurance of persevering in these graces – in faith and love – and thus of reaching the end of faith – life eternal (Rom. 8:24, Heb. 6:16).

As Ministerial things they regarded those means established by God to attain those Essentials by which the grace of God the Father, the merit of Christ, and the operation of the Holy Spirit become known to and are conferred upon us; that is, by which faith, love, and hope are kindled, cherished, and strengthened in us. These are three: the word of God (Ps. 19:12), the keys (John 20:23), and the sacraments (Rom. 4:12). For the word of God reveals those essentials to us; the keys assign them; the sacraments seal them.

Hence they teach that the ministry of the Church is necessary, not on its own account, but because of those essential things; and that there is no other object to be sought in or by the ministry than the advancement of purity of faith, ardour of love, and firmness of hope — hope that, in life and death and in the midst of all temptations, may cling unshakenly to the mercy of God (Heb. 13:6, Isa. 50:10).

As Incidental they called those things which relate to the time, place and mode of exercising, and the persons exercising those ministerial things; that is, the ceremonies and external rites of religion.

(...) For the Essential and Ministerial things we have in common with all true Christians (Rom. 10:12; Eph. 4:3-6); if they were but aware of their own privileges and had a distinct understanding of them. In the Incidentals we may diverse from others but yet we derived them from no other source than the

Divine direction variously indicated in the Scriptures and drawn from the examples of the first church, serving as a means to educate the conscience of men (Phil. 3:15-16).

(See the Account of Discipline, 1st chapter)