

**Third Draft Revision of the EFCA Statement of Faith
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I. Introductory Remarks

The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) is revising its Statement of Faith. This is the first revision since the merger of the Norwegian/Danish and Swedish associations in 1950. At this writing, we are considering the third draft of the revision. On the surface it looks very different from our original statement, however theologically it is very similar with significant improvements and a few areas of concern. I will only briefly address improvements in this paper but I will spell out several concerns. You may or may not share these concerns as there is also a difference of opinion among the members of the EFCA Ministerial Association.

A few years ago the EFCA Board of Directors asked the Spiritual Heritage Committee to review a possible “refreshment” of the statement of faith. After months of preparation the first draft a significant revision was presented to the EFCA Ministerial Association Meeting in January of 2006. After gaining much input in rather rigorous discussion, a second draft was drawn up modifying the first draft. This was presented to most of the district conferences during the spring of 2006, including our NCDA conference. Yours truly has spoken to a couple of these gatherings, expressing my concerns. On April 27 of last year a “high priority” e-mail came from EFCA President Hamel’s desk informing the Ministerial Association members that the EFCA Board of Directors had decided, upon recommendation from the Spiritual Heritage Committee, that “the revised Statement of Faith is not yet ready to be presented to the Conference (June ‘06) for a first reading.” By March of 2007 a third draft revision was sent out and this is the document considered here. My understanding is that a fourth draft may be presented to the EFCA Board of Directors in late April of 2007 for their consideration. (At the time of this writing, the document in question has not yet been published.) It is intended that the third or fourth revision will be presented to the National Conference in late June of this year (Eden Prairie, MN). Possible amendments and conference discussion will be allowed first, in June of 2008.

The current statement of faith of our denomination (EFCA), and that of our district (NCDA), is stated below with the exception of the first paragraph which is only in our local church constitution. This preface binds Trinity to whatever statement of faith these two organizations have. In other words, by our own constitution, if the EFCA and the NCDA change their statement of faith, we will also need to revise our constitution accordingly. (Not all EFCA churches have this statement in their constitutions.) We may choose to strike this restriction since the Transitional Rules state that current EFCA churches will have the option of retaining the 1950 Statement of Faith – apparently indefinitely. I, as an EFCA pastor, however, will not have that option personally. I will be required to sign the new statement. Suffice it to say, this is the most significant denominational and theological issue to face the churches of the EFCA since the 1950 merger.

I will state upfront that while I take issue at several points, none of those points, taken individually, or as a whole, are of the nature that would move me to entertain disaffiliation with the EFCA. The theological disagreements, while real, are not pivotal in my mind.

II. Our Current Statement of Faith

CONFESSION OF FAITH - The confession of faith of this organization shall be the same as that of the North Central District Association and the Evangelical Free Church of America which reads as follows:

1. We believe the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God, without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of men, and the Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life.
2. We believe in one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
3. We believe that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, having been conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. Further, He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He is now our High Priest and Advocate.
4. We believe that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ, and during this age to convict men of sin, regenerate the believing sinner, indwell, guide, instruct, and empower the believer for godly living and service.
5. We believe that man was created in the image of God but fell into sin and is, therefore, lost and only through regeneration by the Holy Spirit can salvation and spiritual life be obtained.
6. We believe that the shed blood of Jesus Christ and His resurrection provide the only ground for justification and salvation for all who believe, and only such as receive Jesus Christ are born of the Holy Spirit and thus become children of God.
7. We believe that water baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances to be observed by the Church during this present age. They are, however, not to be regarded as a means of salvation.
8. We believe that the true Church is composed of all such persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are united together in the Body of Christ of which He is Head.
9. We believe that those who are, thus, members of the true Church shall be eligible for membership in the local church.
10. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and the Head of the Church and that every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs.
11. We believe in the personal, premillennial and imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and that this "Blessed Hope" has a vital bearing on the personal life and service of the believer.
12. We believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead; of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord; of the unbeliever to judgment and everlasting conscious punishment.

III. Proposed Third Draft Revision of the EFCA Statement of Faith:

The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches united in a common commitment to God's *evangel* -- the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to give us eternal life. To God's glory, the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Our essential theological convictions are vitally connected to this gospel.

God's gospel originates in and expresses the wondrous perfections of the eternal, triune God.

1. We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

God's gospel is authoritatively announced in the Scriptures.

2. We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires and trusted in all that it promises.

God's gospel alone addresses our deepest need.

3. We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinful by nature and by choice, alienated from God and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.

God's gospel is revealed supremely through the Person of Jesus Christ.

4. We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus – Israel's promised Messiah – was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.

God's gospel is accomplished through the work of Christ.

5. We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.

God's gospel is applied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

6. We believe that the Holy Spirit, in all that He does, glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. He convicts the world of its guilt. He regenerates sinners, baptizes them into union with Christ and adopts them into God's family. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.

God's gospel is now embodied in the new community called the church.

7. We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. When celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances strengthen the believer, but they are not a means of justification.

God's gospel compels us to Christ-like living and witness to the world.

8. We believe that God's justifying grace also has sanctifying power to conform us to the image of Christ. Commanded by Christ to love God supremely and others sacrificially, we are to live out our faith with compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed. With God's Word, the Spirit's power and fervent prayer in Christ's name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil. In obedience to Christ's final commission we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the Gospel in word and deed.

God's gospel will be brought to fulfillment by the Lord Himself at the end of this age.

9. We believe in the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ with His holy angels when He will bring His kingdom to fulfillment and exercise His role as Judge of all. This coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, requires constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

God's gospel calls for a response that has eternal consequences.

10. We believe that God commands everyone to believe the gospel, turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

IV. A Few Complimentary Words for the Third Draft Revision:

- **Conservative.** It is encouraging to see that we can suggest a revision that cannot be charged with liberal drift.
- **Full-orbed.** The revised draft is a complete statement covering all important doctrinal issues including the rather obvious omission of social concern from the previous statement. (Statement #8) Further, the statements are each expanded upon in ways that more fully define the issues.
- **Unifying motif.** It is pleasant to have a document that unites around a common motif: i.e., the gospel. The gain is obvious: it shows unity of doctrine.

V. Four Concerns I have with the Third Draft Revision:

- **The overall length of the document.** What is gained in being more "full-orbed" is lost in practicality. It is nearly twice the length of the current statement and therefore twice as likely to be set-aside by a population riddled with ADD and ADHD. Further, the summary statements at the beginning of each statement are not adequate to state the evangelical positions. Therefore I would be reluctant to communicate only those summaries. The whole document is required and it cannot be put on a standard sheet of paper without using a type size requiring a magnifying glass to read.
- **The statement on the Scriptures is moved from being the first statement to being the second statement.**
 - The statement is strengthened, for which I am grateful.
 - I would prefer, however, that the statement on the Scriptures lead the others. After all, how do we understand "God" or any other doctrine, if not through the revealed word of God? The leaders of our denomination believed this strongly enough to place this statement first in the 1950s. I do not favor what might appear as a "demotion" of the importance and authority of the Scriptures.

- **The revised statement appears to weaken the tenet that salvation comes through believing in Jesus.**
 - Our current statement affirms that it is only the believer who is saved.
 - “regenerate the believing sinner”, #4.
 - “salvation for all who believe”, #6.
 - “of the believer to everlasting blessedness and joy with the Lord”, #12.
 - The draft revision weakens this emphasis upon believing in Jesus.
 - “to redeem a people for Himself”, #1 (Instead of believers)
 - “only through God’s saving work”, #3
 - “regenerates sinners”, #6 (Instead of “believing sinners”)

I would concur that salvation is only by God’s grace from start to finish, and I have no complaint about a greater emphasis upon God’s activity and grace. I only wish that this could be accomplished without a corresponding de-emphasis upon man’s cooperation with God by repenting of sin and believing in Jesus. This cooperation need not be seen as meritorious, but rather as “non-resistance” to the work of God’s grace. I push back against the deterministic direction this move represents, suggesting that God has only given grace to certain ones (the elect) and to none others, and that only these few who receive God’s grace are able to repent and believe.

This shift appears designed to accommodate more “reform-minded” folks in our midst. Historically, The Evangelical Free Church has had a mix of moderate Calvinists and Arminians. Today we find ourselves with significant numbers of “Five-Point Calvinists”. Our own seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, in Chicago, has become associated with resurgence in reformed theology. These folks believe that God extends his saving grace only to a few and only these are reborn. Once regenerated, then that person believes. To their way of thinking, first you are regenerated (i.e., saved), then you believe. In fact, the belief itself is a gift from God more than something one does. With that in mind, they prefer to speak of “faith” as a noun, instead of the verb “believe”.

Their concern appears to be that some of us make “believing in Jesus” a “work” that the individual does to merit salvation. No doubt some, (Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians) have gone down that path. This is not the case, however, of historic Arminians, like me. Salvation is all of God’s grace, “sola gratia” from start to finish. I do believe, however, that Scripture teaches and demonstrates that is extended to all people (John 1:9; 3:16) and that this grace is resistible. Therefore man’s part in salvation is “cooperative non-resistance” to the grace of God. This prevenient grace, grace which goes before, prepares the “soil” of the unbeliever, enabling him to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the concern remains that the act of believing may come to be viewed as meritorious.

Consistent with this concern the Third Draft Revision makes changes that weaken the tenet that salvation comes through believing in Jesus. The verb “believe” is, all but once, used in contexts where the person doing the believing has already been regenerated. Therefore the objects of the believing are academic, truth statements rather than the person of Jesus Christ. The one, partial exception is in statement #10.

- “God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel”

I do not deny that the Scriptures call us to believe “the gospel” (Mk. 1:15), believe Jesus’ words (John 5:47) and believe “the message of the gospel” (Acts 15:7). I only wonder at the reluctance to say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”? (Acts 16:31; cf. John 3:16; 4:48; 6:29; 7:5; 14:1; 17:20; Rom. 4:24; 10:14, etc.)

- **My second concern is that the revised statement weakens the tenet that Jesus may come at any moment.**
 - Our current confession affirms this belief in statement #11: “We believe in the personal, premillennial and imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and that this “Blessed Hope” has a vital bearing on the personal life and service of the believer.”
 - The Third Draft Revision statement, #9, affirms instead “the personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ”, “at a time known only to God” so that it “requires constant expectancy”.

Most reformed theologians do not hold a premillennial view of eschatology (end times). They do not typically believe in a literal, 1000 year reign of Christ on earth during which the O.T. promises to Israel will be delivered to Israel as a nation. Most reformed theologians hold to amillennialism (no literal millennium) along with some form of replacement theology in which they see the church as inheriting the O.T. promises to Israel. The church is the new people of God. Based upon this, then, the Church will go through any “great tribulation” period at the end of the age. While the Church inherits Israel’s blessings, it also must go through this seven-year tribulation period (the last seven of 490 years in Daniel 9:24; 12:1) that the angel told Daniel was “for your people” (i.e. the Israelites). Since many of the events of the tribulation period are named in Matthew 24 – 25 and in The Revelation, it has always been difficult for those we believe in a post-tribulation rapture position, or perhaps even a mid tribulation rapture position, to hold to an “imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (statement #11 above).

In 1977, the EFCA open the door for variant definitions of the word “imminent” to the extent that one professor at our seminary when asked the question, “Could Jesus come back and get us today?” He answered, “No.” (Dr. Doug Moo) In spite of this denial, he was still granted tenure by the National Conference in 1985. The Proposed Third Draft Revision of our Statement of Faith will be a further step in this same direction and I, for one, am not in favor of any change which will lessen the sense that Christ could return at any moment. The phrase, “requires constant expectancy” is not sufficient to guard against this slippage. How can “constant expectancy” be maintained when one does not really believe that Jesus could come today? After many communion services I note that Paul said, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor. 10:26) I then reassert that Jesus is coming soon and that folks should not be ashamed of their “heavenward glances”. Jesus is coming and it could be today! The revised statement clearly weakens this belief and will only further diminish the motivation for holiness and witness that has characterized the Evangelical Free Church of America since it was formed in 1950.

All pastors and staff licensed and/or ordained in the EFCA have signed a statement affirming the premillennial position. Still, most of the evangelical world, and especially the academic theological world, is amillennial. Therefore, this move strikes me as similar to the time when Israel cried out to be ruled by a king like everyone else. Removal of the phrase “premillennial and imminent”, will make it possible for pastors to sign our statement who do not believe that the coming of Jesus is “premillennial and imminent.” They could be openly amillennial, denying the imminent return of our Lord –and still be licensed and ordained into the EFCA. I have spoken against this and will, if necessary, vote against such a change.

V. Summary

The Third Draft Revision, like our current Statement of Faith, is an evangelical statement that has much to commend it. The proposed changes would shore up and improve sections such as the doctrines of Scripture and Christian responsibility in the world. There is also nothing in the statement which would prevent me from preaching and teaching the word of God with a clear conscience. It would, however, in time, lean our denomination in a more reformed theological direction and, also away from a sense of imminency as pertains to the return of our Lord, which is, after all, our “blessed hope”. This later piece in particular would be sufficient enough for me to vote against the document, or better still, offer an amendment such as the following,

“I move that, in statement #9, the words “bodily and glorious” be replaced with “premillennial and imminent”.

I may also offer the following amendment,

“I move that, in statement #6, line 2, we re-insert the word ‘believing’ between ‘regenerates’ and ‘sinners’.”

Third, I would be inclined to offer this additional amendment,

“I move to make statement #2 on the Scriptures, our first statement.”

Finally, I do not wish to appear ungrateful for the careful work of the committee on the doctrinal revision. I do believe that this is important work and that doctrinal statements should be refreshed from time to time. (This should be done if for no other reason than to remind ourselves that such statements are not equal with the Scriptures themselves.) Nevertheless, every revision will affect the future of the organization which subscribes to it. The changes proposed in the Third Revised Draft will have the predictable effect of moving the EFCA away from premillennialism and with it, I am afraid, away from a belief in the imminent return of Jesus. That is why I and many others do care deeply about these proposed changes. I am only trying to live out the words of the Apostle Paul when he told Timothy, “Watch you life and doctrine closely.” (1 Tim. 4:16)

Thanks for listening.

Pastor Don Reigstad