

Revised
Statement of Faith
For the Evangelical Free
Church of America
A Position Paper

by Donald D. Reigstad



EFCA

MULTIPLYING HEALTHY CHURCHES
AMONG ALL PEOPLE

*Watch your life
and doctrine closely.*

1 Timothy 4:16a

A Proposed Revision of our Statement of Faith (SOF) Trinity Evangelical Free Church

Pastor Don Reigstad

To change our Statement of Faith may sound scary to you, but it shouldn't. There's only one statement that should never change and that is the Word of God. Statements of faith are man-made. Granted, we ask God's guidance as we write and we always feel as though we have it when we finally publish a statement. Still, they are not the same as Scripture and should not be treated as such.

I understand that history does not appear to be on the side of making changes to statements of faith. Many changes to these statements over the years have been due to a liberalizing tendency among theologians. This has moved statements of faith further away from the Bible and closer to the "doctrines" of modern culture. Still, why can such statements not be strengthened by a revision as well as weakened? The alternative to changing statements of faith is that they become "dead documents," referenced only if you are joining a church.

After a lengthy process, our denomination, the Evangelical Free Church of America, adopted a revised Statement of Faith at its annual conference in 2008. Since then, our North Central District Association, along with the other districts in the EFCA, has also adopted the revised statement. (One District, the Intermountain West District [Utah, South & Central Idaho and Western Wyoming], at their annual conference, spring of 2010, voted to reject the revised statement. At the final writing of this paper, the National Board of Directors has not yet issued a ruling.) Existing churches are, surprisingly, not required to change their statements of faith, still we are asked to "seriously consider the desirability of adopting the revised Statement of Faith out of a spirit of commitment to the EFCA and to each other." All new churches will be required to adopt the revised statement and all pastors, licensed or ordained in the EFCA, are required to pledge agreement to the revised Statement of Faith.

I, as an ordained pastor with the EFCA, have recently signed an affirmation of agreement with the revised Statement of Faith. I have

also urged our General Council that we bring this issue to you, the membership, as a recommended change to our Constitution. Either way, we will need to amend our Constitution since it currently reads that our Statement of Faith, “shall be the same as that of the North Central District Association and the Evangelical Free Church of America.” (Article III)

In this document, I will summarize similarities and significant differences, and I will also offer my opinions. I will follow the current statement for your orientation. I will put the new/revised statement in italic print. You will find a full copy of the Proposed Revised Statement of Faith in the back of this paper.

1. **Old:** 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.

***New:** We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both 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.*

- a. The revised statement strengthens this current statement in its content.
 - i. It emphasizes the “*verbally inspired Word of God*” (Also, “*the words of human authors*”). Without this emphasis it is possible to think that only the thoughts are inspired and the Bible becomes a much more subjective book.
 - ii. “The Divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life” becomes “*the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged.*” This broadens the authority beyond “Christian” faith and life. Consistent with much of the revised SOF, it is wordy. I would have preferred a simpler “for all faith and life.”

- iii. Added: *“Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires and trusted in all that it promises.”* This is strengthening and makes explicit what is currently implied.
 - b. The statement on the Scriptures might be seen to be weakened, as it is moved from being the first statement to become the second statement in the overall arrangement of the revised document. This, however, was not the intent of the revisers, nor does it follow that the statement must be weakened by this relocation. It is quite common with statements of faith to begin with God. Still, the original authors of our current SOF had good reason for beginning with a statement on the Scriptures and I would have preferred that their order would have been retained. After all, how is any other topic in the SOF understood apart from the Scriptures?
2. **Old:** We believe in one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

New: *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.*

- a. This statement is basically repeated with a few more descriptive words like *“holy,” “loving unity,”* and *“equally divine.”*
- b. New: *“Having limitless knowledge”* is in direct response to the growing popularity of “open theism” (Eg. Greg Boyd, a former atheist who surrendered his life to Christ in 1974. Professor of theology for 16 years at Bethel University and is currently the senior pastor of Woodland Hills Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.) Open Theism says that God knows all that is possible to know, including future possibilities, but since the future has not yet happened, it is not an object of knowledge.” This, the revisers felt, “limited” what God knows.

- c. Added: *“Sovereign power”* is in direct response to the age old dichotomy presented in the statement, “Either God must be all-loving or all-powerful; he cannot be both or he would not allow suffering.” Once again, the revised SOF addresses an important issue of contemporary faith.
 - d. Added: *“God has purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.”* I have no disagreement with this. I only question its necessity.
3. **Old:** We believe that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, having been conceived of the Holy Spirit 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.

New: *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.*

- a. “True God and true man” becomes *“fully God and fully man”* and I know that the authors believe this to be a stronger phrase, but I am not certain. They add *“God incarnate”* which is redundant to me, as well as *“Israel’s promised Messiah”* which I agree with but think unnecessary here.
 - b. New: *“He lived a sinless life”* is added. This was an important addition. Also added was an historical ‘anchor’ with the phrase, *“under Pontius Pilate.”* This is good.
 - c. “Virgin Mary” becomes *“virgin Mary”* so that we are not recognizing the word “virgin” as a noun and therefore a part of Mary’s title but rather as a descriptive adjective.
4. **Old:** 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.

New: *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, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.*

- a. An omission: “regenerate the believing sinner” becomes “He regenerates sinners” in the revised SOF. This is a concession to the Calvinists who think that we believe because we are regenerated. Arminians, like myself and the majority of the authors of the current SOF, think that belief leads to regeneration, not the reverse. (“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...” Acts 17:31). I can agree with revised statement because I choose to infer prior belief in this process. I think most will do the same. (I will add that this is my most serious objection with the revised SOF and it is a primary reason that the Intermountain West District chose to reject the statement.) Still the current wording does not force me to believe anything different than I have believed. My disagreement is not with the revised SOF but with the theology behind this change.
- b. An addition: “They are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God.” This seems to define the baptism of the Holy Spirit for us and while I agree with it, I am not sure that everyone does and wonder if this will be used to “weed out” some of our more charismatic friends in the future. I don’t think it is necessary. I like “freedom in non-essentials.”

5. **Old:** 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.

New: 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 sinners 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.

- a. The generic "man" in the current statement becomes "*Adam and Eve.*" This is another historical 'anchor' and I like it. Similarly, "fell into sin" becomes "*sinned when tempted by Satan.*" I appreciate the active voice of the verb as well as the historical allusion.
 - b. In a day and age when 'the wrath of God' seems to be avoided by preachers and teachers, our revised SOF adds this important element ("*sinner by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath.*").
 - c. "Only through regeneration....life be obtained," becomes, "*Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.*" I like it, but all these things end up using more words.
6. **Old:** 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.

New: 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.*

- a. Jesus is further defined in the revised SOF as "*our representative and substitute.*" "*Substitute*" is a challenge to Pelagian thinking which suggests that Jesus died as an example of pure love, instead of to "pay the price for my sins."
- b. The "only ground for justification and salvation" becomes in the revised SOF, "*His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.*" Since we are in both cases dealing with "the only ground" I conclude that the revisers considered the resurrection implied but now stated.
- c. In the revised SOF, it is said that Christ's death is the "*all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins.*" It's good – just a few more words.

- d. The authors of the revised SOF add more than a few words and don't take away much, but when they do take away it is notable. Once again (See 4.a.) the idea of the need to believe is removed with the omission of "for all who believe." Remember, for the Calvinist, belief is more a gift given to the elect than it is an act that the sinner must perform in order to be saved. In other words, if you are blessed to be among the elect you will be regenerated and faith will then come to you.

7. **Old:** 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.

New: *7b. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.*

- a. In the revised SOF the ordinances are said to be "mandated" by the Lord. There is a strange omission: "water baptism" becomes "baptism" in the revised SOF, allowing one to more easily imagine this to be spirit baptism, which of course, was not the intent of the original framers. I am quite sure that it was not the intent of the revisers either. Still, it seems strange. I would have preferred to leave the old phrase.
 - b. The ordinances are said to "visibly and tangibly express the gospel." No problem, just more words.
8. **Old:** 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.

New: *7a. 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.*

- a. The phrase “who through saving faith in Jesus Christ have been regenerated...” becomes, in the revised SOF, “*all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.*” I don’t think that I am overly sensitive here, but once again it appears to me that the authors of this document are shifting the older wording which suggests that believing is a prerequisite for regeneration. (Cf. 6.d. and 4.a. above.) Regardless, the lean of the revised SOF is clearly toward God’s activity (justifying) and away from man’s activity (believing).

- 9. **Old:** We believe that those who are, thus, members of the true Church shall be eligible for membership in the local church.

New: *7b. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers.*

 - a. The revised SOF clarifies an important piece: “*The true church is manifest in local churches.*” This is biblically true and ought to challenge all of us.

- 10. **Old:** 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.

New: (Introductory statement) “*The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches...*”

 - a. Congregationalism, as this form of church governance is called, is also protected by Articles of Incorporation.

- 11. **Old:** 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.

New: *9. We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed*

hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

- a. An addition: “personal, premillennial and imminent return” becomes “*personal, bodily and premillennial return.*” The use of “*bodily*” affirms that Christ’s resurrection was not merely spiritual or some sort of expression of the “immortality of the soul.”
- b. An omission: “imminent” is replaced with “*at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy...*” I am not happy with this omission still it is another hill that I will not die on. The new wording does not require me to change my belief in imminent return of Christ. The new statement does require more words.
- c. The last half of the statement is simply an update of language. I like the update.

12. **Old:** 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.

New: *10. We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by 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.*

- a. Added in the revised SOF: “*We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.*” This is my favorite addition in the revised SOF and worth the ‘price’ of revision by itself. Implied in the current SOF, the authors of the revised SOF rightly deemed it too important to leave to implication. With that said, I would have worded one phrase differently:
 - i. “*To believe the gospel.*” I would have said, “To believe in Jesus.” 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). Still, the overwhelming exhortation is to “believe in the

Lord Jesus.” (Acts 16:31; cf. John 3:16; 4:48; 6:29; 7:5; 14:1; 17:20; Rom. 4:24; 10:14, etc.)

- b. The essentials of the old statement are restated with greater clarity which again takes more words.

- 13. A final statement is completely new and addresses the vital area of Christian living. I am in support of it, however I wish that it could have been stated more concisely. It reads,

New: 8. *We believe that God’s justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another, 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 commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.*

Revised Statement of Faith, EFCA (Adopted June 26, 2008)

The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches united around these theological convictions:

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.

The Bible

2. We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both 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.

The Human Condition

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 sinners 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.

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.

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.

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, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.

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. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

Christian Living

8. We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another, 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 commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.

Christ's Return

9. We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

Response and Eternal Destiny

10. We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by 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.



10658 210th St. W.
Lakeville, MN 55044
Phone: 952-435-5548
Fax: 952-435-5017
www.trinityefc.net