

# Reflections on the Evangelical Free Church of America 2019 Revision of the Statement of Faith

*This paper is a response and clarification of the most recent revision of the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) Statement of Faith (SOF), 2019.*

*The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches united around theological convictions delineated in our SOF.*

## I. Current 2019 revision is one word in Article 9.

Previous 2008 SOF Article 9 states:

We believe in the personal, bodily and **premillennial** return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The 2019 revision Article 9 states:

We believe in the personal, bodily and **glorious** return of our Lord Jesus Christ

## II. Background to the Statement of Faith (SOF) 2019 revision

The SOF is comprised of ten statements declaring our belief regarding God, the Bible, the human condition, Jesus Christ, the work of Jesus, the holy Spirit, the church, Christian living, Christ's return and response and eternal destiny.

The first SOF of the EFCA came in 1950, when the EFCA merged with the Swedish Free Church and the Norwegian-Danish Free Church. It contained 12 articles and was in place for over 50 years. In 2008, the Theological Advisory Council (TAC) appointed by the EFCA Board of Directors (BOD) recommended a revision to the SOF which included the removal of "premillennial" from the article dealing with the second coming of Jesus.

Quoting a member of the Council, *the BOD added (back) the word, "premillennial" which had been in the 1950 SOF but which our Council had decided to eliminate. The BOD made it clear that they did this, not because they did not understand or agree with our reasoning, but because they feared a denominational split if premillennialism were removed.*

Why did the TAC appointed by the Board of Directors recommend premillennial be left out of the 2008 SOF? It was not because any of the TAC members (all pastors and theologians) held a different position. In fact, all the TAC members were premillennial in the doctrinal belief. The reason for the removal was they did not believe premillennial was at the level of a "first-order" doctrine—it was not at the center of God's Gospel.

Again, quoting, *Our rationale also included the following reasons: first, many otherwise knowledgeable Christians cannot even define the various millennial positions. It is a complicated theological issue that relatively few are equipped to defend. Second, a great many godly, intelligent scholars who are committed to the inerrancy of Scripture nevertheless reject premillennialism, or at least question it. That is not true of any other point in our SOF. We do not find evangelical scholars differing in respect to the Trinity or the deity of Christ or the Virgin Birth or the depravity of man or the vicarious atonement or the Second Coming, but they definitely do disagree on the millennium. Third, there has*

*been a definite move away from Dispensationalism in evangelical circles over the past 70 years.*

### III. Significance of the change in Article 9

While all Christians believe Jesus will return as King to completely fulfill His kingdom, not all believers agree on how this takes place. With variations, there are primarily three doctrinal positions; premillennial, post millennial and amillennial.

#### **Premillennial**

Based principally on Revelation 20: 1-10, this doctrine posits Christ's return first inaugurates an "intermediate kingdom" between our present age and our eternal state. In this millennium (1000 years) Jesus will reign and rule on earth in glory and majesty, unlike His first coming in humility. Christ's Kingdom is future, not present. Its time frame of 1,000 years is literal, not symbolic. It will be material, not immaterial. It will be headquartered in the city of Jerusalem in Israel on the earth, not in the hearts of believers.

There are two predominant variations within premillennialism: dispensational and historic. In dispensational premillennialism, the restoration that comes at Christ's second coming is primarily the restoration of the nation of Israel, in distinction to the New Testament church. Historic Premillennialism is more traditional and holds that promises to Israel are fulfilled in the Church so that the focus of Christ's return is on the Church. Both dispensational and historic premillennials believe Jesus returns *before* (pre) His 1000-year (millennium) reign.

#### **Postmillennial**

This doctrinal position believes the powerful work of the Holy Spirit will result in a great portion of the world's population becoming believers in Jesus. This will result in significantly improved moral conditions in families, communities, churches and cultures around the world. Quoting, *Because Christ will return only after this time of earthly blessing, this view is called post-millennial.*

In Psalm 72 we learn of Christ's ruling "from the River to the ends of the earth" (Psa 72:8). And we learn that this will occur before the conflagration (2 Pet 3:10-12) that produces the new heavens and new earth, because he will reign "till the moon is no more" (Psa 72:7).

Postmillennialism holds that Jesus Christ establishes his kingdom on earth through His preaching and redemptive work in the first century and that He equips and empowers His church by the Holy Spirit. He charges the church with the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) to disciple all nations. Postmillennialism expects that eventually a great number of people living will be saved. Increasing gospel success will gradually produce a time in history prior to Christ's return in which faith, righteousness, peace, and prosperity will prevail in the affairs of men and of nations. After an extensive era of a great increase in the number of believers, Jesus Christ will return visibly, bodily, and gloriously, to end history with the general resurrection and the final judgment after which the eternal order follows.

## **Amillennial**

This view of the earthly kingdom, most prominent in the history of the church, believes the rule of Christ is already operative during the present age. Most adherents to this doctrinal position do not deny a 1000-year period but that the millennium in Revelation 20 is taking place now (figuratively) and consequently there will be no future “Golden Age” prior to Christ’s coming and inaugurating the eternal state of believers.

Mark 1:14-15 teaches that the time for the kingdom to be established was fulfilled and that it was at hand when Christ first came, not 2,000+ years later when He will someday return. Acts 2:22-36 teaches that Jesus was seated on the throne of David when He was resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God.

1 Corinthians 15:20-28 teaches that when Christ returns, He will deliver up the kingdom to God. The kingdom will not begin on earth when He comes back; rather, its existence on the earth will end.

Amillennialism is the simplest of the various views of the 1000 years referenced in Revelation 20. It affirms that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead and then comes the resurrection, or the eternal state, where Christ will reign forever.

#### IV. Does the revision mean the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) is moving away from orthodoxy?

The EFCA SOF intends to “major on the majors,” meaning the SOF is meant to set forth theological positions vitally connected to God’s gospel and held by Bible-believing Christians throughout history. And not taking a position on issues that evangelical Christians have differed on through all ages. For example, the time and mode of baptism and Reformed vs Arminian doctrines of salvation. The 2019 revision reinforces what has been the position of Bible-believing Christians—that solid, orthodox Christians have different views of the millennium. It is meant to include believers who differ on the place of the 1000 years relative to the return of Jesus. If one is premillennial, post-millennial, amillennial they need not change to affirm the 2019 revision. All three positions are accepted. The words of Titus 2: 13 overarch this revision. “We wait for the blessed hope—the *glorious* appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (italics added).

Is the EFCA SOF an expression of a move toward liberalism? First a brief description of moving toward liberalism. Liberal theology (LT) believes true religion is not based upon external authority so that Christianity should be modern and progressive with interpretation founded upon modern knowledge and experience. LT presents Christianity as a movement

of social reconstruction which must be credible and relevant. Historical accuracies about biblical facts and events are not crucial. One writer states, “Liberals believe they are making Christianity relevant, credible, beneficial, and humane. [Evangelicals]...believe they are making something other than Christianity. That was the dividing line a century ago, and the division persists.”

What truths are at the center of God’s gospel? The Trinity, the character of God, inerrancy of the Bible, the human condition, the deity and work of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit, the composition of the Church, the importance of Christian living, the fact of Christ’s return, and the resurrection of believers to eternity with Jesus. We believe these truths are Gospel central.

V. What response is available to GBC? (We acknowledge this is “Elder territory”)

GBC can accept the EFCA 2019 revision of the SOF. Alternatively, GBC can vote not to accept the revision, and is so doing, agree to only portions of the current EFCA SOF. (We believe this position can be dangerous as selectively accepting a doctrinal SOF may open the door to various heresies.)

I am indebted to three friends for some of the information in this paper. Dr Gregory Waybright, former pastor at GBC, Dr Greg Strand, EFCA Executive Director of Theology and Credentialing, and Mike Andrus, pastor/theologian and member of the Theological Advisory Committee that presented the 2008 revision of the SOF.