

“Significance of Silence”

In the EFCA we allow beliefs within certain acceptable theological parameters on a number of doctrinal issues. We focus on the essential truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ as articulated in doctrine while allowing differing views/understandings of the position to be acceptable. For example, this is true regarding the issue of the age of the universe, time and mode of baptism, whether faith precedes regeneration or regeneration precedes faith (the Arminian and Calvinist discussion).

We refer to these theological differences as the “significance of silence” and believe “this expression does not mean that we will not discuss and debate these issues but simply that we will not divide over them (*Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 24, n. 18).

Here is the definition/explanation in *Evangelical Convictions*, (24-25):

Once [the early Free Church leaders] began to put in writing what was commonly believed among them, they were *silent* on those doctrines which through the centuries had divided Christians of *equal dedication, Biblical knowledge, spiritual maturity and love for Christ.* This ‘significance of silence’ reflected our strong concern for Evangelical unity in the gospel.

Because many misunderstand this expression today, another way to refer to this commitment is “unity in essentials, dialogue in differences.” It is helpful to spell out what this means and what it does not mean.

What it does mean – we affirm the following truths and commitments:

- the gospel is central and essential to who we are as the people of God and what we believe
- we are committed to the essentials of the gospel in principle and practice, in belief and behavior, in orthodoxy and orthopraxy
- we acknowledge there are differences in theological views, what we would consider non-essentials, but they are secondary and ought not to distract from or prevent our shared commitment to the gospel and ministry of the gospel

- we are committed to the essentials of the gospel of Jesus Christ and we acknowledge differences, although we do not believe these differences are absolute, either as it relates to unity or purity (doctrine)
- from the foundation of the essentials we will engage in robust dialogue regarding the differences, without dividing

What it does not mean – we clarify the misunderstandings:

- the notion that this commitment means we cannot embrace and teach our view strongly and with conviction
- we must remain quiet and passive so that we are not allowed to talk about theological views or the differences that exist between views
- this is a lowest-common-denominator theology that values unity at the expense of doctrine
- one cannot affirm a position but must meld them all together (in which everyone feels theologically compromised)
- we expect that the local church will reflect in practice what we state in principle, viz. the church will be equally represented by each view, overlooking the reality that the “big tent” is reflective of our denomination, not each local church, or because of this liberty we do not have to allow a voice from the other perspective to be heard