

The Proposal to Amend our Statement of Faith: A Rationale for the Change

At our EFCA One General Conference in June of 2017 the Board of Directors introduced a motion to amend our Articles of Incorporation by replacing the word "premillennial" with "glorious" in Article Nine of our Statement of Faith (hereafter SOF).¹ This motion will be considered for action at our Conference in 2019. In order to foster discussion of this motion, we offer this rationale for the proposed change.

Why should we speak of the "personal, bodily and glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ" rather than the "personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ" as a required theological position in the EFCA?

1. This change better reflects what we say about ourselves.

We believe that one of the most positive features of our movement is that we are centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the inerrant Scriptures, and that we aspire to be an association of believers only, but of all believers who can join with us in affirming those truths integral to the biblical gospel. So we say that we "major on the majors and minor on the minors." In light of this distinctive EFCA value of uniting around the central doctrines of the gospel, our SOF is silent on significant issues on which we have divergence of conviction and agree to disagree, such as Calvinist/Reformed vs. Arminian/Wesleyan views of conversion, cessationist vs. continualist views of the miraculous gifts, believer vs. infant baptism and the young vs. old age of the earth.

In presenting this EFCA identity we believe there is a significant inconsistency in continuing to include premillennialism as a required theological position when it is clear that the nature of the millennium is one of those doctrines over which theologians, equally knowledgeable, equally committed to the Bible, and equally Evangelical, have disagreed through the history of the church. All, however, have agreed that Christ's return will be "glorious"!

Premillennialism is clearly a minority position among Evangelical believers around the world and one widely recognized among us as a doctrine that is not central to the gospel. Broadening the acceptable millennial views in our SOF would allow us to be consistent with who we say we are, and the proposed change will allow us to speak with greater integrity when we affirm that our essential theological convictions are all vitally connected to the gospel and that they set forth "sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God," which he has now entrusted to us (1 Tim. 1:10-11).

¹ The Statement of Faith is found in Article III of the EFCA Articles of Incorporation.

2. This change will improve our SOF inasmuch as our current failure to affirm that the return of Christ will be "glorious" is a significant deficiency in what we proclaim about the coming of Christ.

The conviction that our Lord Jesus Christ will return *in glory* was fundamental to the faith of the first Christians, and this aspect of his return is currently missing in our SOF.

His return in glory was asserted by Jesus himself (Mt. 24:30; 25:31; Luke 9:26), and it reflected the notion that his vindication through the resurrection would be revealed to all at his return (Mt. 24:30; Rev. 19). His glorious return was also an assurance to the first believers that their suffering would not be in vain, for when he returns they would share in his glory (Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; 1 Pet. 4:13). Indeed, it is integral to faith, for as Paul writes, "We wait for this blessed hope: the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

It is this glorious appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ which is our "blessed hope." This, furthermore, is foundational for living our lives with "constant expectancy," which is the mark of Christians. And while we wait for the Lord's return, we are joyfully motivated "to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission."

The affirmation of the "glorious" return of Christ was included in the 2005 draft presented by the Spiritual Heritage Committee to the Board of Directors, but it was removed when the word "premillennial" was added in its place. We believe our SOF would be strengthened if this change was reversed.

A similar expression was included in Article 9 in the Norwegian-Danish Free Church Association Statement of Faith adopted in 1912 as part of their merger: "We believe that Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven, shall come again in great power and glory." Some have stated that removing premillennialism would be a move away from our history. This earlier SOF suggests that including "glorious" instead of "premillennial" is equally a part of our EFCA heritage.

The Evangelical Free Church of Canada adopted a 2007 draft of our SOF which included "glorious" as a description of the return of Christ.² We believe that its absence among our evangelical convictions is a significant deficiency.

3. This change will help to strengthen the integrity of our SOF as it operates in our churches.

Many churches in the EFCA, recognizing that premillennialism is merely a denominational distinctive and not an essential of the gospel, simply do not enforce it as a required doctrinal position for members, elders or even for pastors.³

² Article Nine of the SOF of the Evangelical Free Church of Canada reads as follows: "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, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission."

³ However, all pastors *ordained* by the EFCA must currently affirm premillennialism.

They want their church to do what we in the EFCA say we do—"major on the majors and minor on the minors." In addition, ReachGlobal sometimes makes an exception for premillennialism in partnering with churches and other movements.⁴ This exception, either explicitly recognized or implicitly allowed, may have the long-term effect of diminishing the overall authority of our SOF and potentially weakening the theological health of our movement.

The proposed change is by no means a concession to a weakened view of biblical truth. It is rather a recognition that not dealing with the widely held discrepancy between our commitment to uniting around the central truths of the gospel and our inclusion of premillennialism as a required theological position may, in fact, undermine the authority of our SOF in our churches.

4. This change will not diminish our adherence to biblical inerrancy nor change our framework for interpreting the Bible.

These were the two central theological objections to broadening the acceptable millennial views in our earlier revision of our SOF, and both were addressed at the EFCA Theology Conferences of 2006 and 2007.

In 2006, respected church historian John Woodbridge and New Testament scholar Grant Osborne, both from TEDS, affirmed strongly that there is no necessary link between one's millennial position and a commitment to biblical inerrancy.⁵ In fact, some of the strongest proponents of inerrancy in Christian history and today have *not* been premillennialists, including Jonathan Edwards, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen.

In 2007 we had respected Evangelical scholars representing four different eschatological views discuss their interpretive principles (hermeneutics), and it was clear that the amillennialist and at least one of the premillennialists were nearly identical.⁶ The particular interpretive framework found in a Dispensational understanding of the Bible is not currently mandated by our SOF, so the proposed change would not alter the hermeneutical approaches that are already widely accepted within the EFCA.

This change is fully consistent with our unwavering adherence to biblical inerrancy and to our shared framework for interpreting the Bible which entails discerning the intended meaning of the biblical writers understood in the context

⁴ An emphasis on the importance of premillennialism is largely an American phenomenon and is generally found internationally only among churches heavily influenced by American missionaries.

⁵ Both Woodbridge (since 1971) and Osborne (since 1978) are credentialed in the EFCA, and, as faculty members at TEDS, they are required to affirm annually their reaffirmation of the EFCA Statement of Faith.

⁶ On this, cf. "Inerrancy, Hermeneutics and Eschatology: A Report of the 2007 Midwinter Ministerial Conference," *The Ministerial Forum*, 17.1 (Fall 2007), especially the summary discussion on pp. 7-8. This document can be accessed here: https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2013/03/ministerial_forum_fall_2007.pdf

of the whole of the canonical Scriptures which ultimately point us to Jesus as "Israel's promised Messiah."

5. This change will be in the best interest of the future of our movement.

In 2008 a compromise was reached in the interest of our unity and as a way of honoring our past. We now sense that it is time to reconsider our position and to move forward in the best interest of our future.

The doctrine of premillennialism is simply not a pressing theological issue among most preparing for ministry today. Many District Superintendents are facing this issue with young church planters, pastoral students at TEDS and churches that would otherwise be eager to join with us. Many who would be highly qualified and fully committed to a strongly biblical, gospel ministry, simply cannot affirm the premillennial position "without mental reservation," and so cannot join our movement. In the same way, some otherwise highly qualified missionary candidates cannot serve with ReachGlobal because of their millennial position.

One of the great challenges that faces the EFCA is replacing the many pastors and mission leaders who will be retiring in the next decade, not to mention the challenge of finding those who will plant new churches here and around the world.⁷ The retention of premillennialism as a required theological position in our SOF is an unnecessary hindrance to this mission imperative.

Conclusion

Some in our EFCA past have believed that we in the Free Church had been raised up with the special purpose of proclaiming a particular eschatological viewpoint. That view is much less prevalent among us today, particularly as the eschatological viewpoints represented by credentialed pastors and leaders in the Free Church, while all still premillennial, are much more diverse in the way that the millennium is spelled out and in what it means for understanding the Old Testament and the relationship between the Church and Israel. As a result, many in the Free Church see things very differently than did our forebears. What seemed obvious and essential to them no longer seems that way to many among us today.

⁷ We recognize there are always some limiting factors for people to serve in these various ministries in the EFCA. Even if premillennialism were removed as one of those limitations, there would still be others. Although the retirement of many is forthcoming, and the need for replacing those individuals is a reality, including this as one of the reasons for the change is not merely a pragmatic matter. It is true there are other more important theological reasons for the change, which is why this is stated last, but it is a reality, one which we want to steward faithfully as we consider where we are today, and where God is leading is in the future. As we do so, we are assured "God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). J. Hudson Taylor articulated the truth of this Scripture, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."

In the light of the present circumstances, we have to ask whether retaining premillennialism in our SOF is now actually *contrary* to the spirit of our founding principles. Theologian Alister McGrath, in his book *The Genesis of Doctrine*, makes an observation with regard to the formulation of doctrinal statements that seems applicable here:

Certain specific contingent historical circumstances lead to the perception that a given doctrine is of normative importance for the self-definition of a community in that situation. . . . With the passing of those circumstances, the community may wish to define itself with reference to different parameters.⁸

In proposing this change, we believe we would *not* be *re*-defining ourselves. Instead, we would simply be affirming who we have always been, but in a new way because of our present circumstances. If we really do major on the majors and minor on the minors, as we say we do, we believe that our statement of the central and essential matters of the gospel should not include a specific statement on the millennial issue. This change will not require anyone to change their own eschatological view. It simply means that no one view will become a boundary that excludes other Bible-believing Evangelical brothers and sisters from full fellowship in our churches. We would thus treat the millennial issue in the same way that we currently treat issues such as Calvinist/Reformed vs. Arminian/Wesleyan views of conversion, cessationist vs. continualist views of the miraculous gifts, believer vs. infant baptism and the young vs. old age of the earth. We believe that just as the change from an exclusively pre-tribulational view to one that includes mid- and post-tribulationists⁹ has been a healthy and positive change, enriching our movement, so we believe a move to allow non-premillennialists to join us is not only appropriate in principle but will also allow other godly men and women to partner with us in our churches to reach the world for Christ.

The decision ten years ago looked to the past—now we want to look to the future. We need to allow the EFCA to be who we always were—but in the present circumstances in which we are more engaged with a broader swath of born-again, Bible-believing, orthodox Evangelicals. In a culture that is becoming more hostile to the gospel we need to unite more than ever around the essentials of the gospel.

This is the rationale for the proposal that was presented in our June Conference. We look forward to opportunities at District Conferences and at the EFCA Theology Conference to consider further the issues related to this proposal. We trust that our discussions will be held in a spirit worthy of the gospel and honoring to our Lord.

⁸Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Blackwell, 1990, reprinted Eerdmans, 1997), p. 47.

⁹This change was officially recognized in 1977 by the Board of Ministerial Standing and was affirmed by the Conference in 1985.