

Statement by President William J. Hamel
Proposed Revision of the EFCA Statement of Faith
Wednesday, June 25, 2008

It is a joy to speak to you as your President regarding the process of revising our Statement of Faith. This is truly an historic moment! For me this brings to culmination a process that began during my ministry as the Executive Vice President to President Paul Cedar when we initially began discussing the need for and possibility of a revision to our Statement of Faith (SOF).

For the first time in 58 years the delegates are being asked to vote on a revision of the Statement of Faith. For more than two and one half years we have had public discussions regarding this revision. Every district conference and several churches have invited members of the Spiritual Heritage Committee to lead sessions where the fine points of the document have been discussed. Two mid-winter ministerials were dedicated to presentations and discussion regarding the revision. Many church leadership boards and congregations have had intense discussions. Never in my thirty-six years of EFCA ministry has more attention been given to a topic and a recommendation to our general conference.

Let me remind you of some of the history of this discussion. Entering into this process four years ago, the Board of Directors began with a great appreciation for our current Statement of Faith. It has served us well. But as early as the late 70s, questions about certain aspects of our Statement of Faith were raised, leading to a proposal in the mid-90s to examine it more closely. That proposal was tabled for a time, but when the Board of Directors raised the question again about a possible revision to our Statement of Faith they asked, Are there ways that our Statement could be strengthened, so that it might be refreshed and reaffirmed and thereby continue to be a standard that is truly embraced and not become a historical document that is given mere lip-service as happens all too frequently in church bodies?

From the beginning, the Board was committed to a clear rationale for this revision. Here are four key issues the BOD affirmed. First, this kind of examination is helpful if for no other reason than it reminds us that every doctrinal statement is a human product and should never be accorded the status of authority and permanence that is held by the Bible alone.

Second, every doctrinal statement is a product of its time and is couched in the terminology and issues of its historical setting. The immediate context of the merger of two kindred movements in 1950 has provided us an invaluable foundation, but over time the meanings and usages of words change and new issues arise. In addition, there may also be other theological issues that were not mentioned or simply were not on the radar screen in 1950 and which ought to be addressed today.

Third, a revision of our Statement of Faith would provide an opportunity to update archaic language, to clarify some theological ambiguities, to seek greater theological precision, and to craft a Statement of Faith that might be better suited to be used as a teaching tool in our churches.

Finally, a revision of our statement of faith provides a time for us to reexamine who we are in the EFCA. A Statement of Faith is not just a list of things we happen to believe. We believe lots of things that are not in the statement of faith. But it sets forth what we believe is most important to affirm, guard and preserve, and this, then, also becomes our identity.

As your President, I want you to know my strong affirmation of this process. In the first public discussion held at the Midwinter Ministerial in 2006 I said the following at the end of my opening address: “. . . it is time to have a robust dialogue. The framers of our present Statement of Faith were not immune from these kinds of discussions. I firmly believe that walking through them with godly respect for one another will strengthen the EFCA. It is time to search the Scriptures, it is time to set aside accusations, it is time to interact, and it is time to pray. May we commit ourselves to a stronger, more gospel-centered EFCA that glorifies God by multiplying healthy churches among all people.”

I also want you to know of my strong affirmation of the end result of this process. The Board of Directors has presented to you for consideration and discussion three drafts of a revision with the following statement: "The EFCA Board of Directors submits the 'Third Draft Revision of the EFCA SOF' for consideration and discussion with an accompanying explanation that this is an ongoing process (particularly with regard to the millennial issue) and not a final document that has been approved by the BOD." (February 1, 2007)”

As was evident in the Board of Directors’ preamble statement in the draft revisions, one of the main areas of discussion was premillennialism. The Board submitted these drafts without premillennialism, which I publicly affirmed at the Midwinter Ministerial in 2006, and then they provided leadership and listened. They listened and continued to provide leadership, consistent with our polity. All along, the Board affirmed this “consideration and discussion” among our Free Church family. Finally, the Board determined that for the sake of the ongoing spiritual health and vitality of the EFCA and in the interest of unity within our movement premillennialism should be reinserted. I stand with the board and want to publically affirm the wisdom of this decision.

After presenting three draft revisions for consideration and discussion (December 2005, February 2006 and February 2007), the Board of Directors has now made a recommendation that was formally presented at the 2007 Conference, with debate and action to occur following my opening statement. This proposal comes as a relief to some, and it causes disappointment to others. That is what it means to live together in a world in which none of us has perfect knowledge, and we trust that God is working through the priesthood of all believers to reveal His will. I believe the Proposed Revision, though not as far-reaching as some would like, will still be very helpful in strengthening our SOF, with language that is more precise, more theologically rich, and which avoids some of the ambiguities that have caused problems in the past.

This has been a long, difficult process but the Board of Directors and the Spiritual Heritage Committee deserve the appreciation of all EFCA leaders. They have led well with incredible grace, at times under immense pressure. These men and women represent the finest godly leaders in the EFCA. Please join me in praising the Lord for them.

The time and attention devoted to this discussion has been necessary because we should not take these changes lightly. The leaders of the EFCA in 1950 wisely stated the following in Article XII – Amendments of the Articles of Incorporation: “Amendments to these Articles of Incorporation must be introduced at an Annual Meeting, but cannot be acted upon until the next Annual Meeting, and for adoption must receive the affirmative vote of two thirds of the membership present and voting.” The Statement of Faith resides in the Articles of Incorporation; thus the process has been clearly defined.

The time for final debate has arrived. Two questions remain from my perspective. First, will we affirm a new Statement of Faith that strengthens our commitment to evangelical, historic theology? I am absolutely thrilled by the way the Statement of Faith has been strengthened, rooted in that commitment to the Bible, “where stands it written!,” and also how it addresses key theological issues of our day. Here are a few of the ways this Statement does that.

Article 1 – The doctrine of “God” clearly gives guidance regarding His “limitless knowledge and sovereign power” (over against open theism).

Article 2 – The doctrine on “The Bible” is strengthened by acknowledging that it is “the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged.” And that this Word is to be “believed,” “obeyed” and “trusted.”

Article 3 – The doctrine on “The Human Condition” is strengthened by explicitly including Adam and Eve as historical personages, reaffirming the inerrancy of the Bible. It also addresses that in sin, men and women are “under His [God’s] wrath.” This truth is being denied by many today.

Article 5 – The doctrine on “The Work of Christ” has been strengthened in that Christ is “our representative and substitute . . . the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death . . .” It clearly states the doctrine of substitutionary atonement – He is “the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins,” not “a sacrifice for our sins” (cf. article 3, 1950 SOF).

Article 7 – The doctrine on “The Church” is strengthened by emphasizing justification by “God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.” Moreover, our commitment to the ordinances is stated more strongly, and we acknowledge, in a positive, affirming way, they are to be celebrated by believers.

Article 8 – The doctrine on “Christian Living,” which consists of a statement on orthopraxy, is unique to doctrinal statements but long overdue from my perspective. It is not only important to be orthodox but it is critical that we declare that sound doctrine is to result in right living. In my opinion, this addition may be viewed by EFCA historians as the most important revision in the SOF.

Article 10 – The doctrine on “Response and Eternal Destiny” completes the Statement of Faith on a doxological note.

So brothers and sisters, here again is the question: will we affirm a new Statement of Faith that strengthens our commitment to evangelical, historic theology, or will we miss an opportunity to address key theological issues of our day? I am prayerful we will do the former.

To the second question, will the EFCA history report that we debated and voted with godly character? When we are passionate, especially regarding the defining statements for our movement, our human nature can become a negative factor in the debate. I am praying for myself and the entire assembly of delegates that we not only make a wise

decision, but that the decision will be made in the context of the exhibition of godly character.

May we keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) and manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) so that we will be an aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14-16), bringing honor to Him and glory to God for the good of all people.
