



EFCA Statement of Faith: Article 9
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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.

11. We believe in the personal and 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.

I. Introduction

II. History of Discussion

- A. Our intent and purpose was to emphasize the essentials of the gospel.
- B. We distinguished between the purpose and role of a Statement of Faith and distinctives.
- C. Our key identity is our focus on the gospel; we are evangelical. Not only is this our key essential, it is also our key distinctive.
- D. This meant two key, major changes: church polity and eschatology.
- E. Our history/heritage does include a broader statement on eschatology. Consider the Norwegian-Danish Free Association statement of 1912: "XI. We believe that Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven, shall come again in great power and glory."
- F. After three Draft Revisions, it was determined that it would be best for our movement to reinsert premillennialism.

III. Logical Flow of This Article And Article 11 of the 1950 Statement of Faith

- A. This follows the biblical narrative, the unfolding plan of God's redemption.
- B. It follows theologically and logically in that the work of Christ applied by the Holy Spirit creates a new community that is marked by a new way of believing and living, both within the new community of believers and outside that community including unbelievers. The gospel changes lives.

- C. Next in God's redemptive plan to bring glory to Himself, as revealed in the Bible, is Christ's return.
- D. This article in the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*) (9) is almost parallel with article 11 of the 1950 Statement of Faith.
- E. The term "bodily" was added.
- F. A statement of humility was added, "at a time known only to God."
- G. The expression "imminent" was changed to "constant expectancy," and it was strengthened through the addition of the word "demands."
- H. The "Blessed Hope" was changed to "blessed hope."
- I. The "vital bearing on the personal life and service of the believer" was expanded to include "motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission."

IV. Article 9

Christ's Return

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- A. We believe in the personal, bodily (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7) and premillennial (Rev. 20:1-10) return of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 25:31; Tit. 2:13; 2 Thess. 1:6-8; Rev. 19:11-21)..

- personal
- bodily
- premillennial

- B. We believe the coming of Christ will occur at a time known only to God the Father (Matt. 24:36; Mk. 13:32).

- C. We believe the coming of Christ requires constant expectancy (Matt. 24:42-51; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Js. 5:8-9; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Rev. 3:3).

D. We believe the coming of Christ, as our blessed hope (Tit. 2:13), motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission (2 Thess. 1:6-8; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 2:14; Heb. 9:28; 1 Jn. 3:2-3; 2 Pet. 3:10-14).

- blessed hope
- motives the believer
- godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission

Summarizing connection to the gospel: *“God's gospel will be brought to fulfillment by the Lord Himself at the end of this age.”*

V. Specific Ways the Article on the doctrine of **Christ's Return** has been strengthened, or new issues addressed.

- bodily
- at a time known only to God the Father
- blessed hope
- demands constant expectancy
- motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission

VI. Importance of Reaffirming the Biblical/Doctrinal Truths of **Christ's Return** Today (which also carries with it denials)

- Bodily – This is important to reaffirm over against those who would conclude that it is only spiritual.
- Certainty – The certainty of Christ's return is part of the gospel. If this is denied the gospel is denied.
- Future – This affirms Christ's faithfulness to His promises, over against those who would say that either He will not return, or those who conclude that all the prophetic promises of Christ's return happened in the fall of Jerusalem, 70 AD (full-preterism).
- Humility – At a time known only to God the Father is a recognition that He knows and we do not. This is over against those who would attempt to set dates.
- Demands constant expectancy – This is an exhortation to believers. Though they profess and confess the coming of Christ, it has very little bearing in the lives of believers. We are aliens and strangers, and we await our return home.

- Motivates the believer – This awaiting Christ’s return is not “pie in the sky” and an avoidance of “living in the world,” but a strong incentive to be “in the world but not of the world.”

VII. Additional Resources

Questions for Further Study

1. Why is it important to emphasize “the personal, bodily . . . return of our Lord Jesus Christ”? By strongly affirming His “personal, bodily” return, what is being denied by some? What does the “premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ” entail? How does this view differ from other views? Is the specific timing of Christ’s return as important as the fact of His return?
2. Why is it important to acknowledge our ignorance and the Father’s knowledge of Christ’s return? Who alone knows the day and the hour (“at a time known only to God”)?
3. What does Christ’s certain coming “demand” of believers? What does the term “constant expectancy” mean?
4. How is it that Christ’s coming is “our blessed hope”?
5. Not only does Christ’s coming “demand” a “constant expectancy,” it also “motivates” believers? How? In what ways?
6. What happens if we become complacent about Christ’s return? What happens if we become overly consumed with the details and intricacies of Christ’s return? How do we retain the constant expectancy, while at the same time giving ourselves faithfully to “godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission”?

Preaching/Teaching Texts

Mt. 24:30-44

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

2 Pet. 3:3-13

Memory Verses

Titus 2:11-13

1 John 3:2-3

Hymns

Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending

Hallelujah, What a Savior!

Jesus is Coming Again

Choruses

Soon and very soon

The King is Coming

Therefore the Redeemed of the Lord

We Shall Behold Him

Appendix 1

EFCA Statement of Faith Commentary¹

Christ's Return

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bodily—

Though the notion of a “bodily” return of Christ was implicit in the word “personal,” we believe it is important to make it explicit by including the word.

The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God—

This is a clear biblical teaching: cf. Mark 13:32—“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” 13:33—“Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.” 13:35—“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.” All tribulational views must be compatible with this affirmation.

demands constant expectancy—

With regard to the elimination of the word "imminent", our Committee observed that at the time of the merger in 1950, the EFCA was predominantly pretribulational.² In that context, the word "imminent" was assumed by many to mean an "at-any-moment rapture of the church" before the Great Tribulation. This position also had very important implications in the outworking of the saving plan of God in history and in the interpretation of the Old Testament, particularly in the way that passages referring to Israel were to be understood.

Though we know that as early as 1957 the posttribulational position was accepted for ordination in at least one case, now many of our pastors hold to that position,³ and this position was given official sanction in 1977 in a decision of the Committee on Ministerial Standing. In a memo of December of that year, President Tom McDill, on behalf of that Committee, recommended that

¹This commentary will only highlight changes from the 1950 Statement of Faith and not expound the theological truth common to both statements.

²Cf. A.T. Olson, *The Significance of Silence* (Free Church Press, 1981), p. 199.

³ There are some who hold a midtribulational position, which has more in common with pretribulationalism than posttribulationalism.

district ordination councils allow a candidate for ordination "to interpret imminency within his convictions as long as such interpretation remains within the framework of premillennialism."⁴ This policy has prevailed since that time.

Among those who hold this posttribulational view, the word "imminent" is commonly not understood in the way that the original framers would have used it,⁵ and the millennial kingdom has a different sort of theological significance. In addition, the posttribulational position does not require the same approach to interpreting the Old Testament or the same role of Israel in the plan of God.

This change in theological understanding raises an important issue. Some consider it "fudging" when people sign a statement that uses the word "imminent" when those people no longer use that word in the way it was originally intended. We believe that that kind of erosion of a doctrinal statement is dangerous. The elimination of the word "imminent" effectively deals with this already recognized theological shift in our midst and clears away the confusion caused by the different ways this word "imminent" is now used.

We should note, however, that in the final sentence we have retained the biblical emphasis which the framers of the 1950 statement held dear—that the coming of Christ (whether that coming is in one stage or two) ought to motivate the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission. The Bible speaks of our need for constant vigilance and self-control, being constantly prepared as we eagerly await the coming of Christ (cf. esp. Matt. 24:36-51; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:10-12; Rev. 3:3). We can affirm this without specifying an eschatological timetable.

our blessed hope—

The expression "blessed hope" is no longer capitalized or put in quotation marks, since it is not considered a technical term but simply a biblical phrase taken from Titus 2:13. In that passage this hope specifically refers to the "glorious appearing" of Christ (cf. also 2 Thess. 1:6-8). This statement affirms simply that we long for the coming of Christ, whether that coming be in two stages or in one. This statement refers to the "return of Christ" as one big event and is not intended to exclude the view that the blessed hope may refer more specifically to the initial stage of a "two-stage" return of Christ (i.e., to the pre-tribulational rapture in Dispensationalism).

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

This phrase clearly expresses the biblical emphasis on the proper attitude toward the coming of Christ (cf. esp. Matt. 24:36-51; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Rev. 3:3). It

⁴This position came before the National Conference in 1985 and was given denominational standing in the approval of tenure at TEDS for Doug Moo.

⁵The term is now understood by some to mean "impending," "about to appear," "the next major event in the timetable of God."

expands the 1950 statement's reference to the "vital bearing" that the coming of Christ ought to have in the personal life and service of the believer.

Appendix 2

Frequently Asked Questions – Article 9

Why was the whole gospel structure framework removed with the addition of premillennialism?

From the beginning, the Spiritual Heritage Committee (SHC) set forth a vision to craft a Statement of Faith explaining the "Evangelical" part of our name—a statement of the biblical gospel within the historic Evangelical tradition, incorporating only those theological convictions that are vitally connected to that gospel. It sought to embody that well known expression of Christian unity, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, charity; and in all things, Jesus Christ." It was an attempt to ensure that we truly majored on the majors and minored on the minors. This, we believed, was who the Free Church was – a movement centered on the gospel as we engaged in "the significance of silence" on the non-essentials. As a consequence, the Statement was explicitly structured around the biblical gospel, and it removed two aspects of the 1950 Statement that were not considered essential aspects of the gospel itself: our church polity, congregationalism, and our particular premillennial eschatology. This framework was evident in the all of the Drafts.

After the Board of Directors received the results of their research project, which revealed there was a strong minority – not a majority – that wanted premillennialism in the Statement of Faith (SOF), they asked the SHC to revise the Fourth Draft to include premillennialism. (By the way, all the articles of that Draft, with the exception of article 9, were what was presented to the BOD.) After this was done, the BOD unanimously approved this as a Proposed Revision to be presented at the 2007 national Conference, and it was adopted as our new SOF by the Conference in June 2008.

As you have observed, the addition of premillennialism in the SOF resulted in three major changes.

The first major change was the addition of the premillennial return of Christ in article 9, which was the basis of all of the changes. Here is the article in its two versions, the first the Third Draft, the following the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*):

God's gospel will be brought to fulfillment by the Lord Himself at the end of this age.

9. 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, requires constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

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As you compare these two versions, you will notice that we have eliminated the word "glorious" and all language about angels, the coming Kingdom, and Christ as Judge ("with His holy angels when He will bring His kingdom to fulfillment and exercise His role as Judge of all.") because of the objections by some that these terms all referred to specific events in the eschatological timetable which they could not subsume under the term "Christ's coming." We simplified the statement as much as possible to avoid misunderstanding and contention and to achieve the widest acceptance.

The second major change was that the reference to the gospel in the preamble is removed and it is shortened. Here, again, is the Third Draft, followed by the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*):

The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches united in a common commitment to God's evangel--the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to give us eternal life. To God's glory, the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Our essential theological convictions are vitally connected to this gospel.

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

Emphasizing the critical truths of the return of Christ, along with the essential gospel truths in the other articles, we could say with integrity that "Our essential theological convictions are vitally connected to this gospel." This meant that each of the articles was vitally connected to this gospel. It was a gospel essential SOF. With the addition of premillennialism, we did not believe we could say the same thing with biblical integrity. This is why we shortened it to read that we are "an association of autonomous churches united around these theological convictions." Saying that is accurate to the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*), but it is quite different than the previous statement acknowledging that all of the theological convictions stated in the SOF are vitally connected to the gospel such that if you do not embrace the statements your commitment to the gospel as understood biblically and informed by historic Evangelical tradition could be questioned. This led to the third key change.

A changed preamble also meant that the gospel headings, which flowed from the preamble, are removed and shortened to include theological titles for each article. This was the third major change. It was no longer fitting or appropriate to include the gospel headings.

As much as we desired to retain a gospel framework, we simply could not do it with a clear conscience. This was the SHC's attempt to resolve the tension between saying we major on majors and minor on minors and we include the autonomy of the local church and premillennialism in our SOF. We had defended the Draft Revisions as a SOF that focused on and emphasized gospel essentials. We had believed that our identity was rooted in Jesus Christ and the essentials of the gospel, not in our distinctives.

In summary, due to all of these connections to the gospel, we believed it would have been misleading to retain the gospel focus and framework. We believe it not only would have perpetuated the tension but added to it. We initially struggled with this as well, but the more we have pondered this and what this decision to add premillennialism entails, the stronger our convictions that what we did with the structure was right.

Why was the term “imminent” changed to “constant expectancy”?

You will see that we have replaced the term "imminent" with "constant expectancy." The reason this was changed is because "imminent" is a technical term meaning a pretribulational rapture. In the Free Church this is one of the acceptable positions but not the only acceptable position. In 1957 A. T. Olson approved an ordination of one who believed in the posttribulational position. In 1977 this was formally approved by the Committee on Ministerial Standing, and this was approved by the Conference in 1985 when they approved Doug Moo for tenure at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. When this was done, Dr. Olson stated that he believed it was providential that the term pretribulation was not used.

What does “constant expectancy” mean?

To your concern about the impact Jesus' return is to have on believers, we also believe that a good statement about this in our 1950 SOF has been made even stronger in the Draft Revision: "This coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, requires constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission." As we state in the commentary in the Draft Revision, "This phrase clearly expresses the biblical emphasis on the proper attitude toward the coming of Christ (cf. esp. Matt. 24:36-51; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:10-14; Rev. 3:3). It expands the 1950 statement's reference to the "vital bearing" that the coming of Christ ought to have in the personal life and service of the believer."

Why the change from “Blessed Hope” to “blessed hope”?

Similar to the change from “imminent” to “constant expectancy,” we believed it was also important to change “Blessed Hope” to “blessed hope”. The former phrase is another technical term for a pretribulational rapture, and it is understood in this way because it is capitalized and placed in quotation marks. Since this is not the only acceptable way of understanding this we removed the capital letters and the quotation marks. For those who are not Dispensationalists they read this expression, taken from Titus 2:13, as a reference to Christ’s appearing, not a pretribulational rapture (“waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”). What we are saying is though a pretribulational rapture is an acceptable position in the EFCA, it is not an exclusive position. Therefore in order to make this statement explicit in our SOF this expression was changed.

What does it mean that Premillennialism has been reinserted? Does this affect our interpretation?

Broadly speaking this means that the EFCA will still be premillennial. But we will still be premillennial in all of this breadth with all of its nuances which has been true since 1977. This means we embrace a premillennialism that consists of Dispensationalism, Progressive

Dispensationalism and Historic Premillennialism, along with the pre, mid, or post tribulation positions. As we learned at the 2007 Midwinter Ministerial, however, the Historic Premillennial hermeneutic is similar to the hermeneutic of Amillennialism, the key difference being in how they interpret Revelation 20. In the Free Church one can embrace one of those, but they must not deny the other positions or refuse to live and minister with those of another perspective. We are premillennial, but there is liberty granted within the broader premillennial category. Within the broader premillennial category we engage in "the significance of silence," much like we do with the Arminian and Calvinist position.

What is stated in article 9 on premillennialism?

It contains a statement of certainty (Christ will return personally and bodily), a statement of humility (at a time known only to God), a statement of ethical implication ("motivates the believer") and a statement of identity ("premillennial"). Because of the confusion with the term "imminent," the article refers to the preparedness as "constant expectancy." "Our blessed hope" (Tit. 2:13) is not to be used as a reference to the pretribulational rapture but rather to the return of Christ, and it is Christ's return that motivates the believer.

It appears that the SHC did not uphold our spiritual heritage for much of this discussion.

We were aware of all of our history and heritage, which includes 1950 but goes further back than that. For example, when recommending that the Free Church broaden our position on eschatology, though it was a change from our 1950 Statement of Faith, it was consistent with the article on eschatology from the 1912 Statement of Faith of the Norwegian-Danish Free Association: "XI. We believe that Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven, shall come again in great power and glory." They focused on the essentials of the return of Christ, which was the attempt in three Draft Revisions of the Statement of Faith. Though this broadened position is not part of the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*), it has been present in our history.

Is there a single way the Bible is interpreted in the Free Church? Is there a single hermeneutic for understanding Israel in the EFCA?

This question is asked as if there is a single hermeneutic in the Free Church. This is not true. Even within the premillennial understanding of eschatology, which is the only position allowed in the EFCA SOF, there are significant differences between a Dispensational, Progressive Dispensational and Historic Premillennial interpretation of the Bible. All of these eschatology positions are committed to the inerrancy of the Bible and the premillennial return of Christ (granted liberty on the question of the tribulation, pre, mid or post), but among them are differences of understanding of Israel and the Church, prophecy, promise, fulfillment in Christ, the land. These differences are espoused by those who are premillennial and committed to the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of the Bible.

Is premillennialism the only millennial position that embraces the doctrine of inerrancy?

It is one of them, and we thank God for that, but not the only one. Many of the most ardent and ablest defenders of inerrancy through the years have not been premillennial: Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J. Gresham Machen (these were all amillennial). Additionally, there is not a causal connection between a denial of

inerrancy and eschatology. Most of those in denominations that have become liberal have done so through a denial of inerrancy and the deity of Christ, not eschatology. It is true that some of the denominations that have become liberal are not premillennial, but their eschatological position is not the cause for going liberal.

Was this revision an attempt to become more inclusive of evangelicals more broadly, especially with the suggestion in the first three draft revisions to broaden our statement on eschatology?

Our purpose was not to be "more inclusive" but rather to emphasize the essentials of the gospel, and our unity centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. A result might be that it would have been "more inclusive" for other evangelicals of like belief, heart and commitment to become a part of the EFCA. But we must not confuse purpose, a focus on the essentials of the gospel, with the result, more openness to evangelicals more broadly. We believed our recommendation would have broadened where Scripture teaches us to be broad, and also narrowed where Scripture teaches us to be narrow. We do not want to broaden where Scripture exhorts to be narrow (liberalism), or narrow where the Scripture exhorts to be broader (separatism).