

Why Have a Statement of Faith?

By Lance Gentry

sermonaudio.com

Preached on: Sunday, October 7, 2007

Austin Bluffs Evangelical Free Church

3435 Maizeland Rd
Colorado Springs, CO 80909

Website: www.austinbluffschurch.net

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/abefc

Ok. Well, tonight... Thank you for sharing, ladies. Tonight we are going to begin a little series on the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Free Church of America.

As I have shared with you or tried to share with you several times over the past several months, the Evangelical Free Church of America is in the process of considering a revision to its statement of faith.

If you have been through my newcomer's class you will be familiar with the statement of faith. If you have looked on our doctrinal statement on the website, if you have looked in our constitution, you will find our 12 point statement of faith. That has been the statement of faith for the Evangelical Free Church of America since about 1950 something. So it has been there for a long time.

The statement of faith has been considered for revision, as I am to understand it, several times in the last 20 plus years. So this is not something new in terms of, you know, a new idea to do this. This is something that people have been thinking and praying about for a long time within the Evangelical Free Church of America.

Now, again, all that I am saying here, I am talking about the Evangelical Free Church of America, not Austin Bluffs Evangelical Free Church. That is an important distinction to make. These are folks in the home office there in Minnesota. So this has been part of discussions at the national leadership level within the Evangelical Free Church of America for some time.

And so finally under Bill Hamel's direction, he is the president of the EFCA, he formed a spiritual heritage committee which would serve as the body who would come up with a proposed revision. They would have no authority in themselves in terms of enacting such a revision but they would come up with the document. So everyone is not just staring at a white page saying, "What should our statement of faith be?"

So they began working on this a couple of years ago. It was a group of pastors, only I think one or two individuals from the national leadership team was there. The others were made up of pastors from across the country, some of whom you may be familiar with.

They came at it and put forth a first draft. And on the first draft they distributed that to all the churches and the pastors within the Evangelical Free Church and they stated very clearly that this was a first draft. This was just what they were working on.

Then they got some input from the pastors and they came up with a second draft. On the second draft they went around to the different districts and attended the district conferences and the district conferences that year were all about the statement of faith and they got input that way from the pastors. And so they came out with a third revision of the statement of faith and that has not been too long ago. That third revision was then finally given to the board of directors for the Evangelical Free Church of America. The board of directors took a look at it, made some, I think, significant changes to it and then are now submitting that to the churches as the proposed revision of the Evangelical Free Church of America statement of faith.

So that is kind of where we are today. Where the future goes, anyone knows. They are going to vote on the subject, the revision of the statement of faith at the summer 2008 meeting of the national meeting which will be in... do you remember? [?] He is no help. There he is. He is help. It is June, but where is it going to be? St. Louis? Did we hear that? I don't know. It is on the website. I just haven't looked yet. I am going to be there, but I don't know where I am going to be yet, but I am going to be there wherever that is happening.

So that is going to be voted on at the 2008 national conference. So that is kind of where things are at. That is where things are headed. The statement, I am going to hand it out to you in two weeks, not tonight. I just didn't want to... what we are going to talk about tonight is sort of preliminary to that. So I am going to hand it out to each of you along with our present statement of faith so you can do kind of side by side comparison and see what has been changed and kind of what remains the same.

Tonight we are going to talk about why have a statement of faith. I mean, is it legitimate to have a statement of faith? What is the purpose of a statement of faith? So kind of preliminary to actually diving into the statement itself.

But my intention is to—over the next several weeks—to go through the statement, statement by statement. Our present statement is 12 sentences, essentially 12 statements. The new one is 10, I think, but they are much longer so it has almost doubled in length, the doctrinal statement which isn't always a bad thing. That can be a very good thing if the length helps with precision and in this case I believe it does.

Next week I will not be here. I am going to Indiana for some time with my family so we are driving out for a fall break. But Peter Wise will be speaking next Sunday evening. I encourage you to be here. Peter is one of our instructors at the Bible institute, also a member of our church and he will be sharing with us from the Word of God and using some PowerPoint, maybe on our new screen. See our new screen? So be sure to be here next week.

So then the following week we will get into statement one and I will pass out the statements of faith. The statement of faith, both the present statement of faith and the proposed one are both on the Evangelical Free Church of America website if you want to go there and review it. There is also additional documents, some commentary on the statement of faith as to why they did what they did and why they worded it the way they worded it. Very interesting if you want to see some kind of behind the scenes dialog that was taking place on these issues.

That is at [www dot EFCA dot org](http://www.efca.org). So tonight though we are just going to talk about why have a statement of faith. So before we go any further, let me pray and ask the Lord's blessing as we study these things.

Lord, tonight we want to grow and learn. We want to understand your Word better. We want to understand our beliefs better. Help u to do that, we pray. I pray that this wouldn't be simply an academic exercise, but we would see the importance of beliefs, how that beliefs can have eternal consequences. What we believe about you and what you have said and what you have revealed to us is so crucial and vital. So help us to understand that tonight in Jesus' name. Amen.

How many of you—I want to see a show of hands—I am not going to call on you or anything, but I do. I am just curious. How many of you—everybody gets nervous, you know? Is he going to trick me again or something? How many of you want... have come from a church background in which there was no statement of faith for the church?

Ok, one right here. Ok, [?], I am going to call on you. What... you can confront me on that, sister, talking about lying earlier. What background was this? American Baptist? They have no creed but Christ. Really? I did not know that about American Baptist. They need one. It would have helped them.

All right. I have already shown my hand, haven't I?

Yes, but we are glad you are here. But we are sad for the American Baptists.

Yes, Heidi.

Yeah. Many of the Lutherans follow the Augsburg Confession. I don't know if that is across the board or not. Yeah, ok.

Someone else had their hand up. Yes, Tom. Did... Church of Christ? Yes, that is a classic one, yeah. Church of Christ.

Anybody else have a different background?

And I am not here to bash these folks. I am just... there are those strains of belief, of churches that take a very strong position that we should have no statement of faith, we

should have no confession of faith, no summary statement describing what we believe about the various big issues of theology and belief.

They often go by these kinds of statements, “No creed, but Christ.”

Now, in one sense that sound pretty good, doesn't it, right? I mean, that sounds good. I... “No creed but...” Yeah, I believe that, sure. Christ is... I mean, Christ is it, right? No law but love. No guide, but the Bible.

We can give pretty hearty amen to a lot of those things and, in a sense, others will say things like this. “We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent.”

Ok, good.

The question is: Where does the Bible speak? And where is the Bible silent? And if you speak where the Bible speaks, then why not put it in a succinct statement so that we know what you believe and where you are coming from?

Their desire to do this, in a sense, I can identify with in part because it is a desire to not have man made creeds and confessions begin to dictate and supersede the Scriptures. And in that I give a hearty amen. Manmade statements of faith and creeds, as good as they may be are still man made. And they must always subsume themselves under the authority of the Scriptures which are God breathed to us.

So there is an aspect at which I can say amen to the spirit, I guess, behind what they are doing. On the other hand, I think it just falls short of the needs of contemporary life and the marketplace of ideas in which we live. We are a pluralistic society with a host of different beliefs about everything.

And so there comes a need, I believe, practically, for a succinct statement of what you believe about, at least the very basics of what the Scriptures teach.

These individuals will often cite several verses who want... or at least churches will often cite several verses to justify not having a statement of faith. They use, you know, classic verses like 2 Peter 1:21 talking about, “No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”¹

1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.²

¹ 2 Peter 1:21.

² 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

2 Peter 1:3 that says that God has given us everything we need for live and godliness.

So all these verses appealing to the sufficiency of the Scirptures for faith and life. And, again, we give a hearty amen to that. The Scriptures are sufficient. We need nothing else in order to be all that God wants us to be as believers than what he has already given to us in his Word.

Revelation 22:18-19 is sometimes cited.

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.³

So, again, pointing to the sufficiency and the authority of the Scriptures and saying, “Look, any attempt to put your beliefs in writing and in creedal form or in a statement of faith is tantamount to adding to the Scriptures.”

And, again, I understand and appreciate the spirit behind that, but I think it is misguided. It is failure to take into account that we don’t view these creeds as being the Word of God. We don’t view these statement as being on a par with Scripture. They are in every way subservient to Scripture and where they fail to meet the bar of Scripture they should be changed and altered as soon as possible, as soon as error is discovered in them.

So they always bow before the Scriptures.

And I think as long as we do that, creeds and confessions can be very, very useful to us as a church and as individuals.

Pastor Todd, are there creeds in the back of our hymnal? I meant to check that before I got up here. Now everyone goes for it. They are going to see if they can beat him to it.

I don’t think there is a creed in there. Yeah. Yeah, we are Free Church. [?] So that is not part of our history so much.

Well, sometimes it is mentioned that we don’t do creeds because creeds divide. Statements of faith, when you start talking about doctrine that divides.

For instance, if you have a Baptist creed then you are going to produce a Baptist Christian. You will produce a Lutheran Christian. You will produce a Nazarene Christian. You will produce a Presbyterian Christian. You will produce an Evangelical Free Church of America Christian. That is a mouthful, isn’t it?

Well, there are distinctions within denominations. That is why denominations have

³ Revelation 22:18-19.

formed. As much as we would like them not to exist, they do. As much as we would like to all think that we all believe the same thing about everything, we don't. Not even within this room, probably, are we all agreed on a lot of things within the Scriptures.

But there is a place for putting out there and saying, "This is who we are," putting out your sign and saying, "Look, this is who we identify with. This is the stream of church history which we can identify with. This is where we are at."

If you are ok with that, we would love to have you come be a part. If you are not, then God bless you. We hope you, you know, find a church that matches more of what you are looking for.

So the question is: Is it enough just to say that we believe the Bible? No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.

Well, I think we can easily answer that by asking a few other questions. Don't Catholics believe the Bible? Do Catholics believe the Bible, class? Yes, they do.

So if you are going to say, "You know, the Bible is our only guide book," which is true, but you don't get anything beyond that, you don't specify exactly what you mean by that, and articulate the distinctions that you might draw between yourself and someone else who might say, "We believe the Bible," how is that helpful?

Don't Mormons believe the Bible? Class? Yes. And then some, yes.

Is it enough to say that we believe in Christ? No creed, but Christ. That is good in a sense. But it just doesn't go far enough.

You know, Judaism... Does Judaism believe in Jesus? Yes, as a historical person.

Do Muslims believe in Jesus? Yes, as a historical prophet. No question.

So that's all good to say no creed but Christ, but we are not living in a simple age anymore and we haven't been for a very, very long time.

We need to specify what we are saying, what we truly believe about these things. It is not simply enough to say I believe the Bible or to say, "You know what the Bible is good for us. Whatever the Bible teaches, that is what we believe."

Well, goodness, you know, I mean, we could fill, you know, the Library of Congress with views on what the Bible teaches. There has been no shortage of that through the centuries. It is not enough to say, "No creed but Christ." Christ is all we need.

Well, again, in a sense that is true, but you better tell me who you are talking about. Who is Jesus Christ? Who did he claim to be? What did he come to do? How did he accomplish that? What was his relationship with the Father? What was his relationship

with the Spirit? All these things are essential and fundamental to, I believe, true saving belief.

The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo* which means, simply, “I believe.” And so a creed is any statement of what one believes. So even saying, “No creed, but Christ,” is in a sense a creed. Isn’t it? That is a little bit, you know, self negating. It is a little bit like saying there is no absolute truth and I believe that absolutely.

No creed but Christ is a kind of creed. In fact, any time someone would ask us the question: What do you believe about Jesus Christ? Any time someone asks you that question, whatever comes out of your mouth next is a creed.

Now, it is not a formal creed. It is not one that would be recognized through the ages, probably, unless you have it memorized and you just spout it off. But whatever you say is a creed of sorts, a verbal creed. You are stating what you believe about Jesus Christ.

Matthew 16 verses 15 and 16, “Jesus said to all his disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”⁴

In a sense, Peter was giving creed then. Now, I don’t believe he was, again, reciting anything. He was just speaking forth what he believed. He was giving forth his credo, his belief in who Jesus was.

Creeds do all kinds of things to help us.

If you haven’t identified it already, I am all for creeds and confessions of faith.

So what is the difference between a creed and a confession of faith? Well, the best I can tell creeds are typically referred to as those given to us by the Church fathers, the early Church fathers in the second, third, fourth centuries. And confessions of faith are kind of everything after that, roughly.

And then you have got catechisms in there, too, which are similar, but slightly different.

Creeds do all kinds of things to help us and confessions of faith. And by creeds I am meaning in the very broadest sense of our own statement of faith and confessions of faith as well as the ancient historic creeds.

Creeds help us to define truth from error. They help us to define truth from error.

The wonderful thing about creeds is most of them have been around for a very long time. They have stood the test of time. Men with and women in some cases, but mostly men with great minds and huge hearts for God spent hours laboring over these things in committees and subcommittees and formulizing these things so that they would accurately reflect the teachings of Scripture.

⁴ Matthew 16:15-16.

And most often they came as a direct counter assault on heresies that were cropping up. And so there would be this aberrant teaching going on around about Jesus and his nature. And so you have a creed that comes together as a result of that, in response to that so that people could be instructed rightly about who Jesus truly was.

These things could be used for teaching purposes. They could be memorized to, you know, to plant the truth within your mind so that you always had it with you. They help us to identify the true from the counterfeit. They protect us from error and they guide us in the truth.

Some people say, “Well, creeds aren’t biblical.”

Well, I think there is a couple of potential areas where we can turn to the Scriptures and say, “There are forms of creeds within the Scriptures.”

Certainly we can find hymns within the Scriptures, ancient songs that were sung by the early Church which were a kind of creed. Indeed, some of our songs that we sing are forms of creeds in a very loose sense for we are stating what we believe.

We just sang, “Holy, holy, holy.” That is a statement about what we believe about the nature of God to be. We have set it to music and it is a really nice song. But it is a statement of belief.

Turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter six, perhaps the earliest example of a creed like statement in the Scriptures.

It is called the שְׁמָיִם (shaw-mah’). Deuteronomy 6:4.

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.⁵

A pretty good creed.

The Lord is one. You shall love that Lord with your whole person.

It was repeated over and over and over again by the children of Israel.

Turn to the New Testament for some other examples. There is just a couple I want to draw our attention to.

1 Timothy 3:16.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Notice what Paul says. “By common confession,”⁶ ooh, interesting. Think of what we are talking about here. We are talking about statements that have been carefully written, carefully articulated, circulated and held in common by various groups of Christians and so now Paul is talking about this common confession.

“By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.”⁷

I believe this is a very early, very ancient form of a creed that was going around. It was a common confession that was being used in the early Church.

So I believe we can see creeds at least in a very basic form within the Scriptures.

So what kinds of creeds are around today?

Well, and I may print these up and give them to you next time, too, because I just think everybody ought to have these. These are just... I was kind of hoping they were in our hymnal, but it is all right. Sorry, Todd. Find a new hymnal.

What creeds? Well, probably the oldest is the Apostle’s Creed. Does anybody know that by heart? You know it all by heart? I am not going to put you on the spot. You are wavering.

You know it off by heart? Yeah, please stand. Can you stand and share that with us?

Ok.

That is ok. I do, too.

Yes.

Correct.

Very good. Well, it took a Presbyterian to do that. And he is a Presbyterian pastor, ok? So I... Yeah, that’s right.

Do you do that in your services regularly?

With what frequency?

Ok, so you do the... you will do the Apostle’s Creed once a month and then the Nicene Creed once a month and so forth.

⁶ 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁷ Ibid.

Ok. Very good. Correct understanding of Jesus Christ and so forth. Very good.

Well, good. I count on my Presbyterian brother to get that done. That is great.

So Apostle's Creed being probably the most ancient. Others that you may have heard of: Nicene Creed, defense of Christ's nature against the heresy of Arianism; Westminster Confession of Faith; the London Baptist Confession of Faith, the Thirty-Nine Articles which served as the Basis for Anglicanism, the Church of England; and then the various, you know, other creeds and confessions. Luther, Zwingli and you could go on from there.

So there is all kinds of these and they are very helpful They are very thought provoking. I encourage you to read them. I encourage you to find a set of them. If you have a more modern theology book, I think Wayne Grudham's theology has a lot of the creeds in there at least several of them. You can find them, obviously, on line in abundance. So I encourage you to check those out.

So confession of faith help to determine what is truth and what is error. Now, again, they do so under the authority of the Scriptures. But they make these statement in concise ways so that we can summarize the teaching of Scripture and not just say, "I believe the Bible. Whatever the Bible believes, that is what I believe." But they help us to formulate truth in our minds and crystallize that in a succinct way.

Confessions of faith also help to determine who is in the Church and how is out of the Church, what is orthodox teaching and what is heretical teaching. All of these things are done by these confessions and creeds as they accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture.

They also help to succinctly and accurately define the basics of the gospel message, the inspiration, the authority of the Scriptures, the trinity, the virgin birth and the sinless life of Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. All of these things are summarized in the creeds and confessions and in our own statement of faith.

Statements of faith are also helpful in screening pastors and elders and teachers within the Church. It is not enough to say, "Ok, prospective Sunday school teacher. Do you believe the Bible?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, here is your class."

It is not enough to say that. We need to know more. We need to understand better what do you believe? What specifically do you believe about the person of Christ, about the authority of Scripture, about the resurrection, about the coming of Christ? Confessions and creeds help us to do that in a formal, succinct, helpful way.

So why have a statement of faith? Because I would argue it is absolutely necessary in the day and age in which we live. It is absolutely necessary to define truth, to define what you believe the Bible teaches. I don't believe that, you know, saying that we believe whatever the Bible teaches and no creed but Christ is sufficient for the day and age in which we live and I don't believe it has ever been sufficient, because heresy is has always been around. And you won't find a heretic who won't say, themselves, "No creed, but Christ and no book but the Bible." They all believe that as well.

Well, questions. Do you have some questions for me?

Leslie.

Yes.

Yeah. How do you know your lifeline, yeah, if you don't delineate what your mind is?
Yes.

Yeah.

Isn't that so helpful, you notice, to have that and say, "Hey, look this over. And if you can agree to these things, you know, let us know"? So...

Yes. Yes.

Phil.

Yes.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, that... sure.

What would you believe? Yeah.

Well, absolutely.

It is so important. You know, I am so encouraged when people come and, you know, the first thing they say is, "We want to see your statement of faith," or they come and we have already seen your statement of faith and we agree with it or whatever. But what is discouraging is when people come and they say, "Hey, what kids programs do you have? Hey, what is your music like? Hey, what do you, you know, what do you do with this and that and the other? What programs do you have?"

Statement of faith doesn't seem to be on their radar. Hey, listen. That is the most important thing about us is what we believe. If we have the greatest children program in the world and the greatest music program in the world and, you know, you have made the greatest friends in the world, but we are not believing the right stuff, you have made a horrible decision. So it is the most important thing about is what we believe. Yes.

Yes.

Yeah

Yes. Certainly not having a creed doesn't prevent you from having splits. And, in fact, it can breed, you know, it can breed divisiveness, sometimes.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Another question or comment?

Terry.

Yeah.

Well, some people think, what? Don't you trust me or, you know? They take it personally or whatever. But, yeah.

Yeah.

Sure.

Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

Well. Having laid out the case for a statement of faith, we are going to go through it, ok? We are going to go through it statement by statement beginning in two weeks from tonight.

So I hope that you will be here. I hope that you are able to make it. As I said, there is nothing more about us than what what we believe. And this is a crucial time for the

Evangelical Free Church of America. It is a crucial time for Austin Bluffs Evangelical Free Church.

Considering a change of your statement of faith is no small task. It is no minor issue and it is one that we all ought to be concerned about, all ought to be praying about and all ought to be investigating. That is why I am going to devote the next, you know, however many weeks it takes to go through this statement by statement with you.

One, to raise awareness for you of what is going on within the Evangelical Free Church of America and, two, just making sure that we all take a chance to look at this thing carefully and say, "Is this what I believe? Is this what we should believe together?"

So I hope you will be a part.

Let me pray.

Lord, we thank you for your work in history and these great statements of faith. These creeds of ancient Christendom speak of how you have illuminated minds through your Word and that we can benefit from previous illumination from these folks who have done diligent study in your Word and formulated simple statements of truth about who you are and what you have done for us.

Lord, I pray that we would not be so arrogant as to say, "Well, I need to come to up with my own ideas on that and formulate my own beliefs without the aid of reading these others who have gone before us." Lord, how much we can benefit from them.

Also understanding that they could get it wrong. They could be errant in some places and always submitting human wisdom and human words to the authority of the Scriptures. Help us to do that in every area of our lives.

I pray, God, that you would give wisdom to the leadership of the Evangelical Free Church of America as they seek to put forth this initiative and put it to the people and to the churches. I pray for unity. I pray for clarity. I pray, God, for our own church that you would give us wisdom and the leaders of this church and particularly the elders of this church as we pour over the documents, as we consider these things prayerfully and consider whether or not this should be a part of our future as part of the Evangelical Free Church of America.

We thank you now and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

God bless you and have...