

Dear friend in Christ,

Last week I was at an historic conference for the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA), the denomination of which we are a part. About a year ago the Leadership Board of the EFCA commissioned a group of 8 EFCA pastors who are also theologians to revise our 12-point doctrinal statement. It is agreement with this doctrinal statement that binds every EFCA congregation together in this association. The reason for this revision was a growing concern that our current statement, which was written in 1950 when the EFCA was formed, was not specific enough in certain areas and was too specific in other areas. There are new heresies gaining ground within the church that need to be excluded and some of the things our predecessors viewed as essential doctrines have been shown to not be as central as they believed.

The conference I attended was a part of the process of considering this revision. 400 EFCA pastors from around the country gathered for three days to discuss the proposed revision. This revision is currently in the midst of a very long and careful process of which the conference was just one step. My aim in this article isn't to discuss this proposed revision or the process. We will be doing more of that later on as a congregation. However, I want to have you think with me about the fundamental principle that governs how the EFCA has always thought about our doctrinal statement. I want to think about how this principle applies to us as a local church.

The people who founded the EFCA really had two primary guiding principles as they set out to construct our doctrinal statement. First, the Bible is our ultimate authority, not creeds or confessions or doctrinal statements. All summaries of the bible's teaching in doctrinal statements must always be open to evaluation and revision according to the Scriptures. Second, we aim to be an association of churches comprised of believers who agree on what all Christians must believe while giving freedom to believe differently on those things about which all Christians do not have to believe. In other words the EFCA was formed around the recognition that over the course of the past 2000 years there has existed a core of doctrines and practices upon which all true Christians, regardless of their denominational affiliations and doctrinal distinctives, have agreed. It was the ambition of the founders of the EFCA to assert in our doctrinal statement what it is that all Christians must believe and to leave room for people in the same church to disagree about things that not all need to believe. That continues to be the spirit in which the current revision is being considered.

What was so interesting to observe at this conference is that the founders of the EFCA were in large measure successful. It was quite clear in the discussion that there is large disagreement among EFCA pastors about very significant doctrines and yet all present recognized that all present are faithful Christians because we all agree on these central, core doctrines and practices. What we agree on is far more significant than what we disagree about. The spirit of respect and affection even while disagreeing about very important issues was very encouraging to witness.

What I saw modeled at this conference is what I hope we are seeing grow here at RHCC. We are joined together by our common faith in the gospel of Christ, which is expressed in a set of core doctrines and practices, even while we disagree about doctrines and practices that are beyond the core. It seems to me that Christ is greatly honored when we are able to accept, love and serve one another out of our mutual affection for Christ even while we disagree about important things. I don't think this is easy, it goes against the inclinations of our natural man, but it does show the gracious work of Christ powerfully just because it is not easy and so unnatural.

This is clearly the NT vision of the local church as Paul expresses it in Ephesians 4:1-7: "As a prisoner for the Lord then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." Living together in unity requires humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and lots of communication with one another so that we understand what each other is saying rather than jumping to conclusions and presuming upon each other's motives. There is a unity that exists among us that is created by the Holy Spirit's revealing the glory of Christ to each of us. It is this unity of affection for Christ that we aim to preserve even as we discuss our differences. May God have mercy upon us that we may experience that unity of the Holy Spirit.

Striving with you for that unity that includes diversity,