

Dear Friend,

You may remember reading in this letter a number of months ago that the Evangelical Free Church of America, of which we are a member church, is in the process of considering revising the doctrinal statement that has been the unifying foundation of our denomination for 57 years. There are a number of reasons for this proposed revision. [You can read all the material explaining those reasons and the process that is being followed to evaluate this proposed revision at the EFCA website ([www.efca.org](http://www.efca.org)) by going to the link "Statement of Faith".] One of the main reasons for this proposed revision is to make the statement more closely conform to one of the dominant principles undergirding our association. When the EFCA was formed in 1951 through a merger of the Norwegian Free Church and the Swedish Evangelical Free Church, one of the guiding principles in the merger was to write a statement of faith that created an association of churches in which membership was limited to true Christians but was broad enough to permit all true Christians to belong.

Probably the clearest expression of this commitment can be seen in our statement regarding baptism, which simply states that baptism is an ordinance that is to be practiced by the church but is not to be regarded as a means of salvation. In other words, our statement of faith permits both those who believe in the baptizing of babies (paedobaptism) and the baptizing of people upon profession of faith (credobaptism) to be full members of the same church with the condition that no one can believe that baptism in any form confers salvation. Throughout the history of the Christian Church baptism has divided believing Christians from one another. The EFCA intentionally wrote a statement of faith that would permit those who disagree about this important issue to be members of the same church.

While our statement of faith has successfully incorporated true Christians with differing opinions on important doctrines into the same church, yet many are arguing that in one area the statement was written in an excessively narrow way. For a variety of reasons those who wrote our statement of faith limited membership in EFCA churches only to those who can agree with this statement regarding the return of Christ: "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."

The proposed revision regarding the return of Christ says this: "9. God's gospel will be brought to fulfillment by the Lord Himself at the end of this age-- We believe in the personal and glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with His holy angels, when He will establish His kingdom fully and exercise His role as Judge of all. This coming of Christ at a time known only to God requires constant expectancy and should motivate the believer to godly living, sacrificial service, and energetic mission. This is our blessed hope."

Notice that the primary change is in the removing of two words: "premillennial" and "imminent". The removal of these two words is the most controversial part of the entire proposed revision. I want to take the rest of this article to try to outline the core of the controversy for you. (I'm not going to be able to deal with all the details. I will give a list of resources at the end of this article for you to do additional reading if you desire.)

What makes this controversy difficult to follow is that while the particular doctrine under discussion is the return of Christ and the end of this age (The technical term for these doctrines is "Eschatology" or "the doctrine regarding the last things") yet the core of the debate revolves around this question: What is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, particularly regarding God's relationship, especially in the future, to national, ethnic Israel?

How are we to understand God's unconditional promises to Abraham and his descendants that they would possess the land of Canaan (Genesis 13:14-17, etc.) and that all the nations of the world would live in submission to Israel (Micah 4:1-8, etc.) and her king (Ezekiel 37:21-28, etc.)? This core question then raises the entire question of how we are to read the OT. What does it mean to us as we read it now, as Christians? The relationship of Christ and his church to Israel and its history as recorded in the OT has been an issue since the beginning of the church. In one sense the whole NT is a working out of this question.

In the middle of the nineteenth century a theological position was originally developed by a pastor named John Darby in England. It was restated and modified over the years by Louis Sperry Chafer, C.I. Scofield, and Charles Ryrie. This position became known as "Dispensational Premillennialism." At the center of this position is this assertion: In order for the Bible to be true and for God to be faithful to his promises, then there has to be a literal fulfillment by God of all the promises he made to Israel as a national, ethnic people. He must give them the land of Canaan. They must live in that land in a time of prosperity and blessing. The Messiah, the Son of David, must reign in Jerusalem over the nation of Israel. All the Gentile nations of the world must bow in submission to the Messiah and his people, the nation of Israel. The assertion was made that a "literal" reading of the Bible led to this conclusion and that the only way to deny this fact was to engage in an "allegorical" or "spiritualized" reading of the Bible.

Beginning with that presupposition of what a "literal" reading of the Bible required, the position then seeks to answer the question as to when these promises to national Israel will be fulfilled. The answer is "during the millennial (1000 year) reign of Christ that is described in Revelation 20:1-11." Since the beginning of church history many Christians, on the basis of Revelation 20, have believed that Jesus, when he returned was going to reign on this earth visible for 1000 years before the final judgment and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth. This position is what is currently referred to as historic or classic Premillennialism. What "Dispensational Premillennialism" added to that concept was that the purpose of the millennial kingdom was the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Out of this reading of Revelation 20 and then the other relevant NT texts and OT prophetic books like Daniel came the entire system regarding the end of the world that has been popularized in the "Left Behind" book series. However, while those details, the secret rapture of the church, the 7 year Tribulation, the Antichrist and his one world government, etc., are the most well known features of "Dispensational Premillennialism," yet the core of the controversy does not rest in those details but in this question of what God meant by his promises made to Israel throughout the OT.

This relates to us, the EFCA and to our statement of faith in this manner. All of the individuals who began the EFCA were committed to “Dispensational Premillennialism.” For them, to read the Bible any other way was to deny the Bible’s authority. To say that God was not going to literally fulfill to national Israel those promises in the OT was to say that God was unfaithful and the Bible could not be trusted. Therefore, in article #9 of the original statement of faith they required that every EFCA church be Dispensational by describing the return of Christ with the words “premillennial and imminent.” There were historical reasons why including this very particular doctrine in a document that in every other way was not so particular made sense. However, over the past 57 years it has become very clear that within evangelical, orthodox Christianity there are many Christians who believe the Bible is without error and who believe in the absolute authority of the Bible but who do not believe that all those OT promises to Israel must be literally fulfilled to Israel in order for the Bible to be true and God to be faithful.

Again, without going into the details, Christians throughout the centuries have understood that Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire OT as he claims for himself in Matthew 5:17-20 and numerous other places in the NT. Christians across the theological spectrum have recognized that the promises to Israel were always about more than national Israel based upon the clear and literal teaching of the NT. There is even recognition in the OT itself that the promises made to national Israel were not simply about Israel. (For one example of this you can read my recent sermon on Hebrews 4:1-11.) How these things are worked out and explained vary among the orthodox theological systems but the main point is that many Christians beyond Dispensationalists know that God’s word is trustworthy even though Israel will never literally possess the land of Canaan with the Messiah ruling over all the nations.

It is the desire of many within the EFCA to change this part of our statement of faith to more completely reflect our desire to be a denomination that is thoroughly orthodox and committed to an authoritative Bible but is yet broad enough to include Christians who differ in how they understand the relationship of the OT to the NT. Over the next year we will be providing opportunities for all within our church who are interested to be able to discuss the proposed revision and give input. At this point the revision will probably be voted on at the national conference in June of 2008.

Learning with you,

I hope this brief discussion of this one issue has motivated you to want to understand more. To find out more you can check out these resources in our church library:  
“The Meaning of the Millennium, Four Views” edited by Robert Clouse  
“Systematic Theology: An introduction to Biblical Doctrine”, chapters 54 & 55, by Wayne Grudem  
28 Lectures on the book of Revelation by D.A Carson, audio  
“Understanding Dispensationalists” by Vern Poythress