



EFCA Statement of Faith: Article 7
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The Church

7. We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

7. We believe that water baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances to be observed by the church during the present age. They are, however, not to be regarded as means of salvation.

8. We believe that the true Church is composed of all such persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and are united together in the body of Christ of which He is the head.

9. We believe that only those who are thus members of the true church shall be eligible for membership in the local church.

10. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Head of the Church, and that every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs.

I. Introduction

II. Combination of Four Articles (7-10) Into One Article (7)

- A. This follows the biblical narrative, the unfolding plan of God's redemption.
- B. It follows theologically and logically in that the truth about the application of the work of Christ by the Holy Spirit creates a new person, a new humanity, a new community, the church.
- C. It combines the various statements regarding the church included in articles 7-10 into one article.
- D. The order is changed, as the church is first defined, and only then are the ordinances introduced.
- E. Christ is the Head of this body, the church, but the statement on local autonomy (cf. article 10) is placed in the preamble.
- F. This is a Trinitarian statement.

III. Article 7

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True Church

A. We believe the true church (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:4-6; 5:25; Heb. 12:28) comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone (Ps. 103:12; Isa. 44:22; Jn. 3:16; Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:20-28; 4:3; 5:1, 21; 8:1, 30, 33-34; 10:4, 9; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9; Tit. 3:7; Heb. 10:14).

- True church
- All who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone

Headship of Christ

B. We believe all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27), of which He is the Head (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 1:18; 2:19).

- United by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ
- Christ is the Head

Local Church

C. We believe the true church is manifest in local churches (Acts 9:31; 20:28-30; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 16:19; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1-2), whose membership should be composed only of believers (Matt. 18:15-20; Acts 2:41, 47; 14:23; 20:7; 1 Cor. 1:2, 9; 11:20; 12:13; 14:40; 16:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:9; Tit. 1:5-9; Heb. 10:25).

- True church is manifest in local churches
- Membership should be composed only of believers

Ordinances

D. We believe the Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism (Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12) and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:15-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), which visibly and tangibly express the gospel.

- The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances
- Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- Visibly and tangibly express the gospel

E. We believe that though baptism and the Lord's Supper are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer (Jn. 6:55-56; Acts 2:38; 8:39; 16:34; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:29-30; Col. 2:12).

- Not the means of salvation
- Celebrated by the church in genuine faith
- Confirm and nourish the believer

Summarizing connection to the gospel: *"God's gospel is now embodied in the new community called the church."*

IV. Specific Ways the Article on the doctrine of **The Church** has been strengthened, or new issues addressed.

- justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone

- true church is manifest in local churches
- the Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper
- ordinances visibly and tangibly express the gospel
- not the means of salvation but a God-ordained means of spiritual growth (sanctification)
- celebrated
- when genuine faith confirm and strengthen the believer

V. Importance of Reaffirming the Biblical/Doctrinal Truths of **The Church** Today (which also carries with it denials)

- Justification – this affirms the biblical teaching, over against the teaching of the Roman Catholic understanding, and the New Perspective on Paul (covenantal nomism, i.e. one enters into the covenant by grace, but one remains by works)
- Faith alone in Christ alone – solas of the Scripture, rediscovered during the Reformation, and essential to reaffirm today
- True church is manifest in local churches – this is contrary to the notion of lone ranger Christian, or the churchless Christian
- Not the means of salvation – over against those who claim they are – Roman Catholics, Lutheran, and other denominations or groups that claim salvific efficacy of the ordinances
- Celebrated in genuine faith – this is a celebration as the church body participates, and it is for those who have been justified, those who have true saving faith, i.e. genuine faith, and those alone come to celebrate, faith is not created by the participation in the ordinances

VI. Additional Resources

Questions for Further Study

1. Who makes up the “true church”? What does it mean to be “justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone”? Is it important to emphasize the “alone”? Do you think the Reformers had it right when they stated that justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls?
2. Regarding the true church, what is the ministry of the Holy Spirit? What is the ministry of Christ? As Head, why is it more accurate to refer to t his as a Christocracy rather than a democracy?
3. Why is it important for the “true church” to be “manifest in local churches”? Is there such a thing as a churchless Christian?

4. Because we are a believers' church movement, "membership should be composed only of believers." Upon first reading, why do you think it should read "membership must be composed"? Upon further reflection, why is it appropriate to use "should"? Does the "true church" find an exact parallel in the "local church"? Does the "local church" consist of both wheat and tares?
5. What are the two ordinances the Lord Jesus mandated? Please note these are mandated by the Lord Jesus! What does an ordinance mean? How is it they "visibly and tangibly express the gospel"?
6. Though the ordinances are clearly "not the means of salvation," could they be a means of spiritual growth or sanctification? If so, how? What is the important connection between "genuine faith" and the fact that the "ordinances confirm and nourish the believer"?
7. Often the ordinances have been relegated to the place of unimportance or indifference in the life of the local church. What do the terms "mandated" and "celebrated" have to say to this trend?

Preaching/Teaching Texts

Acts 2:36-47

Ephesians 3:4-12

Ephesians 4:11-16

Memory Verses

Matthew 16:18

1 Peter 2:9-10

Hymns

I Love Thy Kingdom Lord

The Church's One Foundation

We Are God's People

Choruses

How Beautiful

Lord, Be Glorified

EFCA Statement of Faith Commentary¹

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10. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Head of the Church, and that every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs.]

This statement combines what is affirmed in statements seven through ten in the 1950 document, all of which concern the church. The order is changed, as the church is first defined, and only then are the ordinances introduced.

We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone.—

This statement of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone in Christ alone is lacking in the 1950 statement. This teaching is prominent in the New Testament, and it was rediscovered during the Reformation to become a central teaching of the Reformers. For these reasons it should be included in our statement. It is placed at this point for it defines those who belong in the true church—those who are justified by God's grace.

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

They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head.—

This language comes from the 1950 statement #8. We have not spoken of regeneration at this point because it was mentioned in the previous article of the Statement of Faith (*adopted June 2008*).

The true church is manifest in local churches—

This connection is lacking in the 1950 statement.

whose membership should be composed only of believers—

This restates the 1950 #9, but seeks to do so humbly, recognizing that we do not have infallible knowledge of who is actually a member of the true church. We can only make a judgment on the basis of a credible profession of faith, hence the term "believers." The word "should" in the revised statement also reflects this. We cannot demand what is impossible to accomplish in this regard. However, that the local church is to be a fellowship of believers is strongly affirmed here.

The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances—

This phrase grounds these ordinances in the authority of our Lord Jesus, which link this statement of the ordinances directly to Paul's reference to the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11:23ff. Because Jesus is Lord of the church, what he ordained for us, we must practice. The number "two" emphasizes that we believe that He mandated just these two ordinances and no more.

visibly and tangibly express this gospel—

Their relationship with the gospel is part of what defines them as ordinances. They are "visible words" of God. Yet the ordinances are not only seen, they are also experienced physically—we "eat and drink" and we are "washed," hence, the inclusion of the term "tangibly".

Though they are not the means of salvation--

First, in changing this statement from "*a* means" to "*the* means" of salvation, it affirms that the ordinances, in themselves and apart from faith, do not regenerate or justify. In that sense, they have no saving power. This is what was most important to our forebears in the 1950 statement. However, the revised statement allows that when believers participate in the ordinances in/by faith, God can use them as means by which the faith of believers is strengthened—like other means such as biblical preaching, reading the Bible, worship with God's people. In addition, we have repositioned this part of the statement to the beginning of the sentence so that we might end with a positive rather than a negative statement about the ordinances. In sum, with the 1950 statement we affirm the biblical importance of the ordinances, and we deny they are salvific, i.e. they automatically produce salvation. Additionally, we add that the ordinances provide spiritual strength to the believer when engaged in *in faith*, and we emphasize their positive, celebratory nature.

When celebrated by the church—

This change reflects a more positive assessment of the value of the ordinances.

in genuine faith—

To ensure that the ordinances are not perceived to be efficacious in and of themselves, we have included the necessity of genuine faith if they are to have spiritual value. In this way we believe that we have safeguarded the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone, and the concerns of those who framed the 1950 statement.

these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer –

We affirm that the ordinances are not the means of justification, but we wanted to affirm also their important place in the life of the church and of the Christian. The Lord Jesus Christ commanded them, so they must be beneficial. As we come in faith, God works through baptism and the Lord's Supper to attest to the gospel of which they speak in our hearts—the one confirms the new believer in the inaugural act of faith and the other nourishes the believer in the on-going Christian life. They are, in that sense, means of grace. But they are not the means of salvation. This phrase is fully compatible with a "memorial" view of the Lord's Supper, and it also allows for a "spiritual presence" view.

We have deleted the words "during the present age", considering them unnecessary. They were included in 1950 to counter the view popularly known as "ultra-dispensationalism," ("sometimes known as Bullingerism, O'Hair-ism, or the Grace Movement") which denied that baptism was an ordinance for the church today. This view is rarely held today and the context makes it clear that this is what we mean. This reasoning applies also to the deletion of the word "water" before "baptism."

Significantly, the revised statement has omitted the distinctive element of the 1950 statement #10: "every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs." This is the only reference to the autonomy of the local church and our congregational form of church government in the 1950 Statement of Faith. We suggest that this affirmation does not belong in our doctrinal statement as an article of faith which expresses the truth of the "Evangelical" part of our name. Matters of church polity are secondary to our faith. This affirmation of church polity belongs, rather, in an explanation of the "Free" part of our name, which speaks of our structure and defines us as congregational. We have included a reference to our polity in the preface to this statement as a simple declaration that the EFCA is "an association of autonomous churches."

Not having this affirmation of the autonomy of the local church as an article of faith in our doctrinal statement will not affect our church polity, since our Articles of Incorporation declare that "The Evangelical Free Church of America shall be an association and fellowship of autonomous but interdependent congregations of like faith and congregational government" (II.A). Notice here the distinction between our "like faith" and our polity. These are treated as separate issues.

Certainly there have been debates among us about exactly what form congregational government should take, but those debates have never been settled by what is stated in our Statement of Faith. Those debates will have to be settled in our broader discussions about how we want to order ourselves, not in the central statement of our "like faith."

Appendix 2

Frequently Asked Questions – Article 7

What does it mean the “true church comprises all who have been justified . . .”? Should it state the “true church is composed of all who have been justified . . .”?

To the question regarding article 7 and the statement “We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.” It is important, first, to note the distinction between composed of or composes and comprised of or comprises. The former, composed, means “to form by putting together, to fashion a committee composed of . . .” In distinction, the latter, comprised, means “to include within a particular scope or to be made up of.” To compose, then, would mean that the church has been formed by putting together various groups. To be comprised, then, is a statement of what already is. In the SOF the basis of the church is not any human putting together but rather a divine work. “Comprises” in the SOF recognizes the divine scope or make up of the church. The true church is made up of “all those who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head.”

Why is it stated the membership “should be composed of believers” rather than “must be composed of believers”? Does this suggest that membership may include unbelievers?

Interpreting “should be composed of believers” as “should, but do not have to be . . .” misses the point of the expression. This in no way suggests that an unbeliever can now become a member. It is rather a statement of humility, recognizing our human frailty in determining who ultimately is a true believer and who is not. We do not ultimately know, and every local church is comprised of both believers and unbelievers, whether we would like to admit it or not. If we state that membership in the local church “must be believers,” then an expectation has been placed upon leaders and local churches that is impossible to enforce, though we will do our best to try. Jesus clearly spells out that there will be tares that grow with the wheat. This means that though we are all committed to the ideal, i.e. all members in a local church are believers (wheat), we are also aware of the real, as was Jesus, i.e. members in a local church will be made up of believers and unbelievers (wheat and tares). And then to get the proper perspective of the intent of this expression, place it in the larger context of this article. The true church is comprised of those who have been “justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.” This is a clear statement of salvation. All those who have experienced this ministry of the Holy Spirit “are united by the Holy Spirit” and are part of the true church. This true church is manifest in local churches, but the local church is not comprised of the same people that make up the true church. It is not one and the same. This is what the expression means in this article.

By not including congregationalism in one of the articles in our Statement of Faith, are we moving away from congregational autonomy?

The reason our specific free church polity is not in an article is because it is not considered an essential of the gospel. We are congregational, and we will remain congregational in our polity.

What guarantees this is the preamble, where we are identified as an association of autonomous churches. And our Articles of Incorporation also state that we are congregational.

Why the deletion of “water” from ordinance of baptism?

The ultimate reason it is not included is because it comes in a statement on “The Church” not “The Holy Spirit.” If the expression occurred in article 6, then we would have had to distinguish Spirit baptism from water baptism. You will notice that we did reference the Holy Spirit’s baptism: “and in Him [the Holy Spirit] they are baptized into union with Christ . . .” Moreover, there is reference to the fact that “the Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.” We believed that all of this made a reference to water baptism unnecessary, as that is what baptism in this article clearly means. And for those who were overly concerned about length, it did save one word.

Ultra-dispensationalists would not have denied a baptism of the Holy Spirit but they did deny water baptism. This why the 1950 authors of the SOF believed it was imperative that they state explicitly water baptism. This is one of the groups that they were intentionally “keeping out” of the EFCA. (As you know, SOFs both include and exclude.)

What is your understanding of the ‘spiritual presence’ view, and doesn’t the word ‘nourish’ open up some unnecessary confusion?

It is very important that one answer your question regarding a specific word and phrase from an article with the whole article in mind. Notice the important truths stated in the article that shed vital light on properly understanding the implication of those partaking of the ordinances, particularly the Lord’s Supper:

- “true church . . . all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.” This means that those who hear the Lord Jesus Christ’s mandate for the ordinances actually have ears to hear because they are the Shepherd’s sheep. These people are born again, converted, true believers, and they are such through justification by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone. This is very clear, and vitally important if you are to rightly understand those who will participate in the ordinances.
- “They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ” This acknowledges that the Holy Spirit’s ministry is that of regeneration (cf. the previous article), and He is the one who unites us as one body, and thus we as one body partake of one loaf (1 Cor. 10:16). This is the application of the work of Christ in our lives.
- “local churches . . . composed only of believers” Here, once again, is an emphasis on the state and status of those who are a part of this local church, at least as members. This is a believers’ church with Christ as the Head. This means true believers are the ones that hear and respond to Jesus’ mandate to partake of the ordinances.
- “visibly and tangibly express the gospel” When we preach the Word, we hear the gospel through the ear; when the ordinances are celebrated, we see the gospel through the eye. Both of them depict for us through the eye the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why the word ‘visibly’ is used. The reason “tangibly” is used is because there is an actual substance to baptism, water, and Communion, the elements of bread/wafer and wine/juice. These elements actually have a physical

substance. They are material and physical, not immaterial and spiritual, though they do have an important spiritual meaning.

- “Though they are not the means of salvation” This is similar to what our 1950 SOF said, but we are not putting it in the place of emphasis. It begins with a concession, “though.” This does not make it unimportant; it is an attempt to emphasize the positive aspects of celebrating the ordinances. There is another important change. In our 1950 SOF it says that they are “not to be regarded as means of salvation.” In one sense, a narrow sense, this is true. It means that salvation, viz. conversion/regeneration, is not attained through the actual participation of them, contra the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, and some other mainline denominations. Remember the first statements of this article. And yet, there is a broader sense that the larger category of salvation does include them. In many ways, under the broader category of salvation - which is past, present and future – is sanctification. In that sense, the ordinances do play an important role. This is a correction to the previous statement that says they play no role at all. This is why the statement says the ordinances are “not the means of salvation.” The means of salvation is stated earlier in the article: “justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.” I think the 1950 statement was an attempt to deny the former, narrower understanding of salvation, but in doing so they said too much as they also denied the broader understanding of the role the ordinances play in our sanctification after salvation.
- “when celebrated by the church in genuine faith” This emphasizes the positive aspect of the ordinances – they are to be celebrated! We ought not to state what they are not, emphasizing the negative, but also a statement of what they are, a statement of the positive. That is one of the intentional changes. The other important truth is that the ordinances are to be celebrated in “genuine faith.” Those who have been justified by grace through faith in Christ, also participate in the ordinances in genuine faith. There is no benefit gained from the ordinances apart from participating in genuine faith. Apart from genuine faith they mean nothing, except that one would be eating and drinking judgment on himself.
- For those who have been justified by grace through faith and celebrate the ordinances in genuine faith, they “confirm and nourish the believer.” Note again the reference to believer. What this means is that believers are spiritually strengthened when they participate in faith. They are a means of grace, i.e. when celebrated in faith, the spiritual life of the believer is strengthened. For many, “means of grace” equals “means of salvation.” This is not accurate, as there is a huge distinction. The Roman Catholic Church and many of the mainline denominations will often use these expressions synonymously. Evangelicals will make a clear distinction between them. But for some evangelicals, because they are used synonymously in the mainline churches, they will not use either expression. What we think has happened is that many evangelicals have denied a truth, i.e. ordinances are a means of grace when participated in by faith, by attempting to affirm a truth, i.e. the sacraments (a term we do not use but rather we prefer ordinances) do not work *ex opere operato* . We believe this has resulted in a diminishing of the importance of the ordinances almost to a place of being an *adiaphora* . There are, of course, other means of grace, those means ordained by God

for the strengthening of the life of the believer, when engaged in by faith, e.g. preaching the Word, reading the Word, prayer, fellowship, etc. (For a helpful chapter on "Means of Grace Within the Church," cf. Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, pp. 950-965). The ordinances are one of those means of grace. The "confirm" word picks up on the importance of obeying a mandate from the Lord Jesus as a mark that we have, indeed, been justified by grace through faith in Christ. Participating does not save one, in the initial conversion sense, but it does manifest one is saved. The "nourish" word picks up the symbol of the bread and the cup and applies it spiritually. And in reality, when we participate in faith we are strengthened and nourished spiritually. And apart from faith, there is absolutely no spiritual benefit at all.

- Regarding the "spiritual presence" view of the Lord's Supper, Grudem, interestingly, includes "the rest of Protestantism" embracing "a symbolic and spiritual presence of Christ" over against the Roman Catholic view of transubstantiation and the Lutheran view of consubstantiation. He rightly acknowledges that Calvin and Zwingli (Zwingli is the one from whom we get our reference to the memorialist view), both agreed that Christ was present in a symbolic way, though they disagreed on the nature of Christ's presence. At the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, Luther and Zwingli had their famous debate about the Lord's Supper. Here Zwingli strongly stated the strictly memorialist position over against Luther's strongly stated real presence of Christ in the meal. Historians/Theologians will refer to this as the earlier Zwingli. Later in his life, when he was not in the midst of a debate about this, he did not state a strictly memorialist position but recognized there was a sense in which Christ was spiritually present. This is probably why Grudem included them together. It is also why we have included both positions. The two positions that are not acceptable are transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic position, and consubstantiation, the Lutheran position. If interested, you can read a bit more about this in Grudem (pp. 988-1002, esp. 991-996).

Appendix 3

“What is Congregationalism? The structure of the EFCA,” *EFCA Today* 80/4 (Winter 2006), 22-23.

http://www.efca.org/today/media/06win_impressions.pdf