

Background

The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) voted in 2019 to make a change in its [Statement of Faith](#) (SOF).

Section 9: Christ's Return was changed as follows:

Previous

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.

New

We believe in the personal, bodily and *glorious* 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.

This amendment to the SOF is more consistent with EFCA policy and practice of only including core, essential Christian doctrines in its SOF. The premillennial position, it was argued, is more of a denomination distinctive than a Gospel imperative. The new wording was, therefore, proposed at the EFCA One General conference in June 2017 and adopted by a vote at the General Conference in 2019. The EFCA has put together a short document explaining the rationale behind changing the SOF here.

HPC is a member of the Northern Mountain District of the EFCA. Each district must adopt the SOF to remain a part of the EFCA. Adoption of the SOF for the Northern Mountain District requires a constitutional amendment which requires a 75% approval of the assembled delegates at the Annual Conference. The Annual Conference was convened in Liberty Lake on May 7, 2021.

At the annual conference the constitutional amendment did not receive a 75% approval of convened delegates. Therefore each member church in the Northern Mountain District will need to inform the EFCA as to their disposition regarding membership in the EFCA. Member churches may continue to be members of the EFCA without adopting the change to their individual SOF's. Should HPC continue to be a member of the EFCA, it could do so but will no longer be a member of the Northern Mountain District as the Northern Mountain District's relationship with the EFCA will be dissolved. This document is meant to serve as a position paper from the elders regarding this change in wording. Hopefully it serves to ensure, to those who take the time to read it, that the elders have thought this through, evaluated it's harmony with Biblical teaching, and have deemed the change in wording to be the best for the Body of Christ at HPC.

Throughout this document there are some terms being used that warrant definition as to their usage in order to remove ambiguity that may otherwise arise:

- **Eschatology:** The doctrine concerning "last things", especially end-time events, the second coming of Christ, and the ultimate destiny of the saved and unsaved
- **Premillennial:** Christ's return occurring prior to the 1,000-year reign of Christ on Earth
- **Glorious:** Full splendor of Christ in His immutable attributes displayed and made manifest
- **Essentials:** Doctrines that are non-negotiable, necessary for faith and practice, and have been understood and accepted by the Church (for the most part) throughout Church history
- **Hermeneutic:** Consistent methodology used for interpreting the Bible

HPC Elders' Position

It is the conviction of the HPC elders that the change in wording of the EFCA SOF should be adopted. Below are the salient issues the elders believe are important to address related to the amended EFCA SOF:

- Veracity and Biblical accuracy of the statement “glorious return” in the context of Christ’s return
- Primacy of the eschatological position of the timing of Christ’s return in relation to the essentials of the Gospel
- Promotion of unity within the Body of Christ
- Addressing of the “slippery slope” argument and on what trajectory this amendment to the EFCA SOF might place the EFCA on. Does it move the doctrinal position of the EFCA to a more liberal and/or less literal interpretation of scripture?

Rationale and Biblical Justification for Adopting SOF Amendment

Though there are perhaps other aspects that could be looked at in regards to determining whether or not to adopt the amended EFCA SOF, and though those arguments may bear some significance to the issue at hand, the ones being addressed here are those that the elders believe to be the most important and most determinative in making the decision to accept or reject the SOF as worded or not.

Veracity and Biblical Accuracy

There are many mentions of Christ in the fullness of His being that are accompanied by the word “glorious” or “glory” — several of which are connected with his second coming:

- **Matthew 24:30:** Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.
- **Matthew 25:31:** When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.
- **Titus 2:11-14:** ...waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,...
- **Philippians 3:20-21:** But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.
- **Romans 11:36:** For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Christ’s glory will be on full display at his return. Therefore, the HPC elders conclude that changing the EFCA doctrinal statement to read: “...glorious return of our Lord Jesus Christ...” is both true and Biblically accurate.

Timing of Christ’s Return

By definition, “premillennial” describes the timing of Christ’s return. The HPC elders believe the timing of Christ’s return is not a doctrinal issue of salvific import and, therefore should not be a barrier to church membership.

Replacing “premillennial” with “glorious” does not in any way preclude HPC from continuing to teach a premillennial return of Christ. At the same time, this change does allow for individual believers who do not hold to a premillennial view to become members of EFCA affiliated churches.

While the Elders of HPC believe that a premillennial view is not a primary doctrinal issue regarding the message of the Gospel, this is not to say that one's understanding of Christ's return doesn't matter. Rather, that it should not be an issue that divides the body – neither with those within HPC nor between HPC and other congregations. Since the SOF being amended is the same SOF that members sign and agree to in order to become members of HPC, the Elders do not believe that those who do not hold to a premillennial view of Christ's return should be excluded from membership.

Unity Within the Body of Christ

Ultimately, since the change from “premillennial return” to “glorious return” is biblically sound (which the Elders affirm) and since one's eschatological position on Christ's premillennial return should not bar one from church membership (also affirmed by the elders), then the issue that is left should be evaluated through the lens of Christian unity. The elders believe, therefore, that Church unity should be sought and preserved in this issue and, as is within our ability as believers, that we should seek for greater unity. This is only if it is possible to attain without compromising the meaning or teaching of the Word of God.

As has hopefully been established above, the change in the doctrinal statement to “glorious return” neither dilutes nor misrepresents the Word of God, nor changes HPC's commitment to teaching the premillennial return of Christ. Therefore, this is not a matter of seeking unity at the price of doctrinal integrity. Changing to “glorious return” serves to widen the tent to those who may be considered members and in full fellowship with the Body of Christ at HPC, which should be viewed in the context of promoting greater unity amongst the Body of Christ.

The importance of unity may be found in these and many other passages throughout the Bible:

- **John 17:22-23:** The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.
- **Romans 15:5-7:** May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.
- **Ephesians 4:1-6:** I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Slippery Slope to Apostasy

One argument raised against the changing of the wording of the SOF is that doing so sends us down a slippery slope. While this has been true with many denominations' changes to their SOF, ecclesiology, etc, the elders at HPC do not believe this to be the case with the EFCA SOF in this instance.

The beginning of the headlong journey down the slippery slope begins with compromise in the understanding and teaching of essential Christian doctrine. Moving from a statement of “premillennial return” to that of “glorious return” is actually moving away from the slippery slope as it substitutes a disputed, non-essential doctrine (premillennialism) with an essential doctrine (Christ's imminent return) worded to be more in line with what Scripture clearly says.

Another argument against changing the wording from “premillennial return” to “glorious return” is that the premillennial position attempts to interpret the Bible literally in all points that are obviously not metaphorical in passages that are concerned with eschatology. Other eschatological positions require a much more metaphorical hermeneutic. It may be argued that this may be a subtle way of opening the door to changing the Biblical hermeneutic that HPC might eventually adopt if it were to abandon the premillennial position. The elders of HPC reject this argument because HPC does hold to a premillennial position and it is not being suggested that HPC abandon this position in its teaching. To bolster this, the premillennial position will be added to the new members instructional material and handouts.

Some are concerned that the EFCA is watering down the Gospel message in order to attract people who do not have an appetite for the hard sayings of the Word of God. While this certainly has been and is true in many churches, the elders at HPC do not believe this is the case with the EFCA SOF. The tent is widened in this case, by simply recognizing the appropriate differentiation between primary and secondary doctrine.

Summary

To summarize, the elders of HPC affirm the following:

- That the phrasing of the return of Christ as “glorious return” accurately states what the Bible has to say about Christ and His return
- That a premillennial understanding of the return of Christ is not an essential doctrine, and therefore it should be removed from the SOF
- That the Body of Christ should seek unity in as much as within our capacity to do so and that we should not divide over our differing views regarding when Christ is to return
- That there are issues of primary importance related to the Gospel and that there are secondary issues that, though they are important for the believer and to their faith, they are not issues that should divide us
- This is not the beginning or continuing of a “slippery slope” wherein we are by degrees moving away from the infallible, inerrant Word of God and into apostasy. It is, rather, affirming that which is of primary importance and relegating that which is of secondary importance to their proper place

Recommendation

The elders at His Place Church recommend that the amended wording of the EFCA SOF be affirmed by a vote of the members of HPC for HPC’s SOF and that the “What We Teach” section of the new members handout be modified to reflect that HPC holds to a premillennial view of eschatology.