

What We Believe (Why Good Theology matters)

Acts 20:17-32

March 5, 2017

Believing the right thing really matters. For example, believing the right thing about your car will help it run longer. The Owner's Manual can really help out with this. But, we have a tendency to throw it aside. How hard can car maintenance be, right? We can always "Jerry Rig" it! Here's a creative way to fix body damage, fix a flat, fix the AC, and add more horse power to your engine!



I was pretty thankful back when I had my old green van Daisy. Through a plan of good maintenance, she went 290k. Maybe you've had even better success with one of your cars? Have you ever driven something over 290,000 miles? Believing the right thing matters in helping your car run longer. This is just as true in matters of theology. Good Theology can help our faith run longer. Theology can be defined as "the study of the nature of God and religious belief."¹ Believing the right things about God will make a difference in how well our faith runs. Today, we're going to begin a new sermon series on theology. We are going to talk about: Why is what we believe so important? First of all...

1. Good Theology gives us a foundation for answering the new questions of our day. How should a Christian live in these changing times? Christians are being challenged to make up their minds about everything from tattoos and oil pipelines to refugees and global warming. We now live in a time that celebrates same-sex attraction, legalized marijuana, and abortion rights. It's such a random assortment of complex issues. Now, I'm not making any comment for or against any of these issues. But, I am making this point: Beginning with a strong foundation of unchanging core beliefs can help us to navigate the new questions of our changing times.

Theology can not only make or break our own personal faith, but it can also impact the next generation of Christ-followers. They need an apologetic that answers these new questions. And, if we fail to explain the relevance of the Christian Faith in the modern-day world, the next generation will either become agnostics, atheists, or converts to other religions. These new questions are not easy stuff. But, they do compel us toward embracing the pursuit of a good theological foundation.

Another reason why What We Believe is so important is that...

2. Good theology guards us from being misled into lies. Earlier we read Paul's warning to the Ephesian Christ-followers in Acts 20:29-31: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!..." There are spiritual wolves out there in sheep's clothing. Acts 20 is just one of the many warnings throughout Scripture that there are those in this world who are intentionally trying to trick us.

1 Timothy 4:1-2 warns us, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron." 2 Timothy 4:3-4 warns us, "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." So we need to be on our guard! We need Good Theology to keep us from being misled by lies.

A 3rd reason why What We Believe is so important is that...

3. Good theology keeps us on the road to spiritual maturity. Hebrews 5:11-14 urges us to continue studying what we believe: "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone

¹ According to Google.

to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

It's important that we spend time in God's Word every day; that we wrestle through even the hard parts of Scripture so that we understand what the Bible teaches. We can't allow ourselves to grow complacent as spiritual infants. Continuing to study what we believe is so important to spiritual maturity. In John 15:5-8 Jesus reminds His followers, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."² If our life and ministry is not in line with the Truth of God, we labor in vain and we will bear no real, lasting fruit. But, as we embrace Good Theology, it ensures that our Lord will continue to work in and through us to accomplish His work in the world. Good theology will keep us on the road to spiritual maturity.

Well, let's agree that What We Believe is important. But even so... why does our church need a Statement of Faith? Can't we just believe the Bible? Why isn't that enough? Let's be clear at the outset, our Free Church tradition has a strong conviction that our Statement of Faith is fully UNDER the authority of Scripture. You'll hear me reference the phrase "'where stands it written' which is a reference to the Bible as our highest authority, not the Statement of Faith."³



Back in Ephesians 4:14 we were urged to grow TOGETHER in spiritual maturity so that "we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming."⁴ As a Grace Community, there is great value in uniting around God's Truth and a common theological understanding of who Jesus is.⁵ That's why I'm personally excited about the new sermon series that we are launching today. Over the next few months, we will take a closer look at our church's 10-point Statement of Faith; including everything from what we believe about God and The Bible to what we believe about The Holy Spirit and Christ's Return. You'll notice at the top of that Statement of Faith this preamble: "The Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of autonomous churches united around these theological convictions:"

The word "Evangelical" has to do with the gospel, the "evangel." Our convictions are centered first and foremost around Jesus and what He did on the cross to purchase our salvation. This is why you'll often hear us say that the purpose of Bemidji E-free is to promote the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is at the core of our doctrinal statement.⁶ This resonates with 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

It's worth noting a word of caution here: Be careful not to let today's media cast a negative stereotype on the word "Evangelical." Part of our evangelical heritage is that we were Evangelicals BEFORE we were Protestants. The Reformation of the 1500s was a rediscovery of the gospel, with its focus on justification by faith alone.⁷ As you may know, the year 2017 marks the 500-year Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. A godly, stubborn monk by the name of Martin Luther presented 95 ways that he thought theology had gone wrong.⁸ In essence, he was calling the church back to Good Theology. And that's what we hope that we can do together as a church over these next few months. If you'd like to learn more about this amazing time in church history, we are currently offering a Small Group called "Digging Deeper." It's discussing the reformation in Room 5 of the Community Life Center on Sunday mornings.

The word "Free" in Evangelical Free ties in with the word "autonomous." This simply means that we are independent as a church and not under the control of any outside denominational authority. Thus, as

² Earlier in In John 6:68 Peter makes a profound statement, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

³ *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, 2011, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, p. 16.

⁴ The sermon *Spiritual Scams* from Ephesians 4:13-16 was preached on 9/11/16. The transcript and audio are available for download at www.efcbemidji.org Just click on the "MEDIA" tab.

⁵ *NIV Study Bible* 2011, Zondervan, p. 1990 footnote.

⁶ In fact, see this detailed for each of the 10 points at <http://www.efccm.ca/wordpress/aboutus/learn-about-the-efcc/important-info/statement-of-faith/>

⁷ See *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 23

⁸ Learn more at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2017/02/03/500th-anniversary-protestant-reformation/34420/>

a congregation, we make our own decisions as to how we conduct our ministries.⁹ That being said, we do associate with other churches. We are united around the theological convictions with hundreds of other E-free churches in America.¹⁰ It's also healthy for us to associate with churches and ministries from other denominations who are like-minded. These ministry partnerships are pleasing to God and also strategic in terms of stewardship and ministry impact. Churches who are united around the cause of Christ can accomplish more together than separately.

Well, let me give a few particular reasons why our church needs a Statement of Faith. First of all...

1. A core summary of our beliefs helps us to zero in on the majors. The Bible is a long book, made up of 66 books that requires thousands of pages. Most of the Bibles in this room right now are 1 - 2,000 pages long. Having a succinct summary enables us to synthesize our core principles into a more usable format. There is only so much time and attention we can give something before we get either distracted or confused. A Statement of Faith ensures that we are aligned with the major truths of the faith. A great summary for majoring on the majors and minoring on the minors is this: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."¹¹ Our "Statement of Faith focuses on the essentials of the gospel and provides a certain amount of freedom in nonessential matters."¹² And, in all these things, we want to love one another. We'll come back to this idea again in a little while.

Another reason why our church needs a Statement of Faith is that...

2. It creates a framework for having a healthy dialogue. Rather than trying to have a long, thorough discussion on where each of us stands on every single verse from Scripture, the Statement of Faith gives us a starting foundation. Can we generally agree on these 10 statements? If not, which of the 10 are challenging our fellowship with one another. Let's begin with a healthy dialogue there, before we get distracted or split apart over less important matters of the faith. A wonderful distinctive of E-free churches is "The Significance of Silence."¹³ There is an agreement to once again "major on the majors" but then remain silent on the minors. Now, this does not mean we have a gag order on any topic outside of our 10 points. Rather, it means that we will have vibrant, robust debate on secondary issues of the faith but we won't let those issues divide us from Christian fellowship with one another.

The key distinctive for this dialogue is the word "Healthy." I once read an article entitled, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are... arguing."¹⁴ It's such a sad reality when less important issues distract us from our primary mandate. It feels very much like a scheme of our enemy. Romans 14:1-2 urges us to, "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables."

All of this makes me think of a story I heard a while back from a man named Dave Wilson:¹⁵ "I was once walking in San Francisco along the Golden Gate Bridge when I saw a man about to jump. I urged him not to take his life but instead to consider that God loved him. A tear came to his eye. I then asked him, "Are you a Christian, a Jew, a Hindu, or what?" He said, "I'm a Christian." I said, "me too, what denomination?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "well, me too, Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Well, terrific! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist." I said, "Remarkable! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?" He said "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "A miracle! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region of 1912." I said, "Die heretic! And I pushed him off the bridge!"

Now, please understand I'm not picking on the Baptists. I have roots in the Baptist Church and I have a lot of love for them. Obviously, this is just a silly story. This didn't really happen. But, it's not really that far off. We get so caught up in our debates over disputable matters that we fail to thrive in the key areas

⁹ The EFCA is an association of churches but there is no ecclesiastical control from higher up. This approach comes out of our history of breaking free from the state church, when we were still over in Scandinavia.

¹⁰ About 1,500 nationwide.

¹¹ Or, "In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas." This is attributed to the Lutheran pastor Rupertus Meldenius (1582-1651)

¹² *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 17.

¹³ The book by this title is part of the EFCA Heritage Series. Written by Arnold T. Olson, published in 1981.

¹⁴ Taken from *Church Smart Vol. 3, No. 3*, by Paul R. Ford

¹⁵ This is an edited version of the April 27, 1997 original. (This story was also used in a sermon by Pastor Fred M. Martin on February 4, 2001.)

where we do agree. Our Statement of Faith is intentionally non-divisive. It's designed to create a framework for having a healthy, meaningful dialogue around the major tenets of our faith.

Another reason why our church needs a Statement of Faith is that...

3. It safeguards us from gradual doctrinal slide. Over time, things can slowly atrophy and decline, unless we have a way of measuring if we are losing ground. Revisiting our Statement of Faith from time to time is a way to push back from theological attrition and the "frog in the pot" syndrome. You've heard about the "Frog in the Pot" right? It's actually a fairly gross analogy. The theory is that if you put a frog in a pot of lukewarm water and slowly increase the temperature, he won't notice. He will just sit there in the pot until he boils to death. Now, the point isn't to test this theory and find out if it's actually true; it's just an analogy!

The point is that slowly, over time, our beliefs can be eroded by things like societal changes, political movements, the lure of sin, and so on. Analyzing trends can be a helpful corrective to avoid sliding too far down the slippery slopes of change. George Barna is one of the best-known names in statistical analysis. Here are a few stats from his recent book, "America at the Crossroads."¹⁶

90% of adults in America believe in God. But only 60% believe in the God of the Bible.

80% of Americans accept the idea that Jesus Christ was a real person. But only 40% believe He was both human and divine and the He lived a sinless life on earth.

Only 25% of Americans believe that Satan is a living entity.

91% of American households own a Bible but only 33% of adults firmly believe it is totally accurate. I don't share these statistics to discourage anyone. I just share them to get us thinking about why we need a Statement of Faith. It will be very good for us as a church to spend some time thinking carefully about the beliefs in our Statement of Faith over the next few months. And that's what we plan to do.

So, do you think your car will start today? Or will you possibly need to "Jerry rig" it again? What about your theology? Will you live your life according to a strong, well-thought-out faith this week? Or, will it be something a little more pieced together and "Jerry Riggged"? What we believe will impact the way we live. Let's commit ourselves to Good Theology!

The Apostles' Creed¹⁷ is an ancient statement of faith that has been widely used by the Christian church. Although it cannot be traced directly to the apostles, it most likely existed as early as the 2nd century A.D.¹⁸ The Apostles' Creed continues to serve today as a simple but powerful affirmation of the foundational teachings of Christianity. These words are now familiar to Christians worldwide and orthodox Christians of all denominations agree:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day, he rose again. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on March 5, 2017 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

¹⁶ George Barna, *America at the Crossroads*, Baker Books, MI, 2016, p. 26-28.

¹⁷ Creed is from the Latin "credo" which means "I believe." See *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 19.

¹⁸ (at least in a simplified form)