

“What We Believe about the Church” (Statement of Faith Article #7)

May 21, 2017

Acts 2:36-47

Today we are learning about Article 7 in our Statement of Faith, “What We Believe about the Church.” Before we dive in to Article 7, take a look at this overview of the topics in our 10-point Statement of Faith: 1. God, 2. The Bible, 3. The Human Condition, 4. Jesus Christ (the Person of), 5. The Work of Christ, 6. The Holy Spirit, 7. The Church, 8. Christian Living, 9. Christ’s Return, 10. Response and Eternal Destiny. We are a little more than half way through this sermon series. If you missed a sermon or two, I urge you to get the transcript or to go to our website and click on the audio link. (www.efcbeidji.org then click on “Media.”) We’ve been behind on our links for a while, but one of our Trustees, Richard Anderson, has kindly begun getting our website caught up. Make sure that you take advantage of this overview on our church’s 10-point Statement of Faith. It’s not perfect, but it is very good because it is firmly grounded in God’s Word. Even as we consider Article 7 this morning about the church, it’s important for us to recognize that part of what we are united around as a church is our common doctrine. What we believe makes us who we are as individual Christ-followers but it also makes us who we are as a local congregation. We are united around these spiritual beliefs and godly practices. Article 7 begins: We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God’s grace through faith alone in Christ alone.

1. What do we believe about the “true Church?” The “true Church” is what we sometimes refer to as the Church with a capital “C.” It “is a community ultimately known only to God.”¹ So here we don’t mean just one local body of believers but all of those who have trusted or will trust in Christ throughout time; people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.² The phrase “true Church” sounds kind of elitist or exclusive, maybe even a little “cultish” to some of us. Well, that’s not what we are trying to convey here. The term is attempting to distinguish something beyond what most of us might think of when we first think of the church. It’s not the church building or the people who gather in it. The “true Church” is neither of those things. There’s an old saying that sitting in a garage does not make you a car.³ Well, sitting in a church building does not make you a Christian. God alone is the only One who can place us into the fellowship of the “true Church.” And, He does that through a process called justification. Romans 3:22-24 says, “...righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Justified is an important word. Justified is an act of God by which the sinner, who is under condemnation, puts his or her trust in Christ, and is then acquitted by God the judge.⁴ (God declares us righteous.) 500 years ago, the Protestant Reformation brought us back in line with the doctrine of justification. It’s through faith in Jesus that God justifies us and makes us a member of His “true Church.” There is nothing that we can do to earn it. And that’s why it’s important for us to realize something about our faith: “Faith is not our contribution to the saving work of God, it is simply the means of receiving it. Faith is not a meritorious work; it is a beggar’s empty hand.”⁵ We can’t even take credit for the act of believing because every part of our salvation is due to the love and mercy of God. An interesting thing about justification by grace through faith is that there is a communal aspect to it.⁶ You see, not one of us can boast. Every Christ-follower is a member-in-good-standing of the “true Church” only because of Christ. We are a Grace COMMUNITY because we share a common justified status through Christ.

Article 7 goes on to say: They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The church, by its very nature, is not crafted or designed for people to be in isolation. Christianity is not a solo sport. In fact, very much the opposite, we are to be a united body! We

¹ *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011, p. 158. See also 2 Timothy 2:19.

² See Revelation 7:9

³ Billy Sunday, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/27312-going-to-church-doesn-t-make-you-a-christian-any-more>

⁴ Tenney, Merrill C., *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 3, MI, 1976, p. 764

⁵ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 161.

⁶ See discussion on p. 162 of *Evangelical Convictions*.

learned this back in Eph. 4:15-16, "...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love...." We are one body with many parts but with only one Head. Christ alone is the Head of the "true Church" which means he also OUGHT TO BE the Head of every local church. In fact, local churches, who chose to honor Christ as their Leader and Lord, are what make the "true Church" visible to the watching world. This is why Eph. 3:10-11 says, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." Local churches are the instrument through which God is demonstrating His wisdom in our world.

2. What do we believe about the local church? The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. That phrase "composed only of believers" is stated rather directly due to our Free Church history, way back to when we were still in the old country. It used to be that the state churches, in Scandinavia, made just about everyone a member of the church, regardless of their faith and practice. When we moved over to America we eventually adopted the name "Evangelical Free Church of America." In part, we wanted to establish that local churches were "Free," as in autonomous, and free to govern their own affairs. Our membership is composed of believers only because members are the key decision makers and the leaders for this local fellowship. Not just the pastors or hired staff, but ALL of the members lead and decide together.

Because of our desire to have our membership be believers only, we have established 5 steps to becoming a member here at BEFC: 1) 1 ½ hour Class, 2) Written application, 3) Interview with the Elder Board and their wives, 4) Congregational vote, 5) Welcome on a Sunday morning. We are offering our next Membership Class on Sunday, June 11. You can also contact the church office for a Membership Application. As our church commits to a membership of believers only, we do so with an understanding that Christ is the head of this local church. And, the way that we determine the mind of Christ for our ministry direction is through a group of Christ-following members who prayerfully seek God's leading together.

You've probably noticed by now, I the description of the church as a "Grace Community."⁷ It's such an accurate and beautiful description of who we are. Together, we are "the embodiment of the gospel in the world."⁸ Earlier we read about Peter's message at Pentecost where 3,000 people accepted his message and were baptized. "They did not (then) go home to become followers of Jesus privately and independently."⁹ They kept meeting together, even OUTSIDE the church walls. Acts 2:42-47 teaches us that, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to FELLOWSHIP, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common...Every day they continued to meet TOGETHER in the temple courts. They broke bread IN THEIR HOMES and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." This is why we are launching the idea of Section Picnics. The bulletin insert look like this:

SECTION GROUPS: 1 2 3 4 5 6 (Circle one) Service Times: 8:30 or 11:00 (Circle one)

Please circle your section group number and service time above. Our desire is to provide individual care for every person in our church. We want to make sure that no one falls through the cracks. **Our goal is to invite EVERY PERSON to a Section Picnic** this summer. Please write your name and email and then circle how you'd like to participate:

My Name: _____

My Email: _____

Check one or more that most interest you:

Host a Section Picnic at my home

Host a Section Picnic on the church grounds



⁷ Each church is "not simply a part of the whole, but a manifestation of the whole ...demonstrat[ing] to the world something of the truth and beauty of the gospel of Christ." (*Evangelical Convictions*, p. 164.)

⁸ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 157.

⁹ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 157.

- ___ Attend a Section Picnic
- ___ Help provide food for the Section Picnic
- ___ Help plan games/activities for the Section Picnic
- ___ Sorry, I am just not interested in something like this right now.

Please don't feel forced into doing any of these things. You can simply say "no thank you" if this sort of thing makes you feel uncomfortable. But, please consider this opportunity to be a blessing to others in our Grace Community.

Article 7 goes on to say "The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances¹⁰, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel." In Matthew 28:19, when Jesus gave the Great Commission, He commanded, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Christ-followers should get baptized. In Luke 22:19, at the Last Supper Jesus commanded, "...This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Christ-followers should celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Christ-followers ought to participate in both of these ordinances as they have opportunity. These ordinances accomplish at least 3 things: 1) First of all, they encourage Christ-followers to publicly identify themselves as part of the "true Church." 2) Secondly, they visibly and tangibly express the gospel. They are visible and so they are an illustration; they teach us and remind us of the gospel. Augustine referred to them as "visible words."¹¹ They are also tangible: We sense our physical entrance into the water and feel it on our skin. We hold our breath as we are buried under the water and we take a deep breath as we are brought up again in the symbol of new life in Christ. We see the bread and the juice and recognize how they symbolize the body/blood of our Lord. We taste them as they enter into our bodies. We set down the empty cup and consider what was poured out for our redemption. 3) Thirdly, they confirm and nourish believers. By this we don't mean physical nourishment as though the water has some medicinal value or the bread and juice are some kind of super food. Rather, we are talking about the spiritual nourishment that comes when we experience and enjoy these ordinances together. As we worship God in these ways, they give us a wonderful sense of confirmation and reassurance us of God's goodness and love. We feel, once again, a deep appreciation for our spiritual cleansing and our spiritual food from God.¹²

Article 7 goes on to clarify that "...they are not the means of salvation...." We refer to these as ordinances rather than sacraments. While either term is fine, the word "sacrament" can sometimes be misleading. A sacrament might communicate to some, that we are doing these things to gain favor with God or as a means of gaining grace. This is why Article 7 specifically includes the phrase "they are not the means of salvation." We cannot and should not trust in some outward act to remove our sin. Christian Faith = Christ + NOTHING. Neither baptism nor partaking in the Lord's Supper do anything to save us. Thus, they are not efficacious; they hold no saving power in and of themselves. They are signs which point us back to the actual events of Jesus' saving work.¹³ Time does not allow us to go into great detail about baptism and the Lord's Supper. But, our pastors and elders would be glad to visit with you and encourage you in this area of your faith. Their names are listed out on the bulletin board in our church foyer. Now that we've worked our way through Article 7, it begs the question:

3. Why should we commit to a local church?¹⁴ Well, how many examples do you think you could find in the NT that recommend being an "Unchurched Christ-follower?" I think you would be hard-pressed. ...Unfortunately, in our American culture of individualism, day after day there are more and more examples of "unchurched believers." With internet churches on the rise, apparently, some Christians are beginning to feel that gathering in a building on Sundays is outdated and antiquated. It's interesting to note that the Greek word "ecclesia" which we translate "church" actually means an

¹⁰ See footnote #28 on p. 167 of *Evangelical Convictions* for a list of the 5 other sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church.

¹¹ As quoted in *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 167.

¹² Contemplate Matthew 4:4 and John 6:68.

¹³ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 168.

¹⁴ "[T]he word 'membership' is not used anywhere in the Bible...there are no clear examples in the New Testament of written membership lists being kept." ("Why Should I Join a Church?" Christ Fellowship, 2003, "Adapted from the Statement of Faith of Christ Fellowship, Kansas City," Written by Jim Elliff and Daryl Wiingerd, p. 1.)

assembly or gathering of people.¹⁵ What do you think? Is there really a need for Christ-followers to gather as an assembly in person or can a “virtual faith gathering” be just as helpful? Clearly there are some, who for health reasons, are unable to attend our public services. Does that in some way lessen their faith? Well, I suppose you’d have to ask them. But, I imagine that most of them very much miss participating in the vibrant life and worship that happens in our church building. This is why, as a church, we are committed to home visits with people from our fellowship who are unable to attend. Kay Sue Eriksson has a vital ministry as our church’s Visitation Caregiver. And there are many other people from our church who help with this ministry. Many of you make it a point to visit your fellow Bros/Sis in Christ. This is such a blessing and encouragement to them and it makes their faith a little less isolated as they enjoy wholesome Christian fellowship.

Most of us, however, have the incredible privilege of being able to gather here most weeks for worship, instruction, and face-to-face fellowship. You won’t find anything in the NT recommending being an “Unchurched Christ-follower.” It’s a concept that’s outside of the framework of God design for the church body. The gathering of the local church is much more than an “optional extra” or “a mere helpful tool;” “faith without fellowship” is foreign to the NT.¹⁶ Commitment to a local church is the clear NT pattern! In addition to the clear biblical pattern, there is a very practical reason why every Christ-follower should commit to a local church: Spiritual Safety (from sin).¹⁷ Hebrews 3:12-13 says, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” We all have our own struggles and blind spots in this life. And here’s the thing about blind spots – YOU can’t see them...but someone else can! Whether it’s something hanging out of your nose or a case of bad breath or perhaps something far more serious, there are times when we need someone else to give us feedback. Some of us have deceived ourselves into thinking that our spiritual peripheral vision is enough. But, no one has eyes in the back of their head! (Well... except maybe moms!) Every one of us who drives a car has learned to use the side mirrors. I miss my school bus – it had at least 9 different mirrors to help me see what was behind and alongside me. But even then, there were many blind spots I still couldn’t see! In combat situations, a key strategy of our enemy is to outflank us. They try to sneak around behind us or alongside of us and attack from a position where we can’t see them coming. As we collaborate and work together in the body of Christ, we can keep each other spiritually safe. If you or someone you know thinks that the Christian life is a private thing, then beware. This is a foolish choice. When the sin and temptations of this world start to overwhelm you, no one will have your back. You will have foolishly put yourself in the position of a soldier who has become separated from the platoon. You are in the midst of a war zone and, frankly, you don’t have a chance!¹⁸

Why should we commit to a local church? “Because our mutual spiritual safety depends on it.”¹⁹

Here on the corner of Carr Lake Rd and Washington Av, we have gathered as a group of Christ-followers. We are far from perfect, but we’re a GRACE Community. And, we are here to uphold each other, to encourage each other, and to share life with one another. If you don’t have a group like this that you can gather with, why not join us today? Why not commit yourself to this local church? And let us commit ourselves to you. As a body of Christ, we are sending out a message about who Jesus is and what He is like. Together, we proclaim the gospel by the way we love and serve one another. Jesus is VERY fond of us because we are His church. He is deeply in love us because He laid down His life and died for us. We are the bride of Christ. Let’s do all that we can to be radiant and beautiful to the watching world!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on May 21, 2017 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson.

¹⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 303). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 156.

¹⁷ Adapted from Elliff and Wiingerd article.

¹⁸ See discussion on p. 3 by Elliff and Wiingerd.

¹⁹ Elliff and Wiingerd, p. 3.