

Why Our Elders Oppose the EFCA Leadership’s Recommendation to Remove Pre-Millennial from the EFCA Statement of Faith

Tim Johnson, Ph.D.
Pastor at Rock Valley Chapel
Beloit, WI

Prologue

This June 19, 2019, at the Evangelical Free Church of America’s (EFCA) Annual Conference, delegates will act on the leadership and staff’s proposal to change the denomination’s Statement of Faith (SOF) by replacing the word “premillennial” with “glorious” in article nine.

The same proposal was also pursued by the leadership and staff for the 2008 SOF, but was tabled for the sake of “unity” and “honoring our past”.¹ Why neither unity nor honoring our past no longer suffice to prevent this second attempt to remove premillennialism is not meaningfully addressed.²

We are convinced the proposal is akin to removing a load-bearing wall that undermines the EFCA’s structural integrity. We urge delegates to reject it.

Brief Biography

For the sake of full disclosure, I have served at Rock Valley Chapel since 2008 and am a former Associate Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at a seminary. I am also a past and scheduled adjunct professor for TEDS in Bible.

Why We Oppose the Proposal

There are three reasons we oppose the EFCA’s proposal to exchange the word “premillennialism” with “glorious” in article nine of the SOF.

¹ “The Proposal to Amend Our Statement of Faith: A Rationale for the Change,” 4. The “Rationale” is a brief, five-page document that can be found at our website (rockvalleychapel.org) or here: https://www.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2017/09/the_proposal_to_amend_our_statement_of_faith-a_rationale_for_the_change.pdf. It is difficult to find by simply going to EFCA.org as there is no clear “button” or tab to direct the reader. It can be found, however, via a simple google search.

² See, *ibid.*, 4 where the “Rationale” states: “We now sense that it is time to reconsider our position and to move forward in the best interest of our future.” Note that no substantive reason is offered.

First and foremost, it seems that the primary motive for offering the proposal is pragmatism. The proposal is not based on a new exegetically-established understanding of what constitutes the clearest interpretation of Revelation 20. Each delegate should read the “Rationale” for themselves to test our claim.³

According to our own EFCA documents, a SOF “is a brief summary of what is true as revealed in the Bible.”⁴ While the EFCA has held to the “truth” of premillennialism for nearly 70 years, the proposal does not argue why premillennialism is no longer considered “truth”.

Instead, the “Rationale” indicates that it is becoming increasingly difficult to replace both retiring pastors and missionaries, and to recruit church planters because many otherwise potential candidates cannot support premillennialism.

As a result, our leaders argue that “premillennialism...is an unnecessary hindrance” to filling these vital positions.⁵ For those of us who aligned with the EFCA because of premillennialism, those words are difficult to absorb.

A SOF should be a sacred collection of truths, not a tool to advance pragmatic objectives no matter how honorable or urgent the need.

Another pragmatic argument claims that “Premillennialism is clearly a minority position among Evangelical believers around the world”.⁶ Surely popularity should never serve as a motivation for accepting or rejecting an article of faith.

Other pragmatic examples include the claim that premillennialism is “a significant deficiency” in light of the Canadian EFCA’s 2007 decision to adopt “glorious”.⁷ And another example, “premillennialism is simply not a pressing theological issue among most preparing for ministry today.”⁸ Both of these pragmatic reasons cater to what others think is popular instead of pursuing truth.

³ Ibid. It is a brief five-page document.

⁴ See, “EFCA Statement of Faith: Introduction”, Greg Strand, 1.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 1. The assertion made by the “Rationale” is unsupported by any evidence. In fact, according to a 2011 survey, premillennialism was held by 65% of Evangelical leaders. See:

<https://www.nae.net/premillennialism-reigns-in-evangelical-theology/>

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

Finally, the “Rationale” appeals to that tired old plea for unity: “we need to unite more than ever around the essentials of the gospel.”⁹ History has shown over and over again that when “unity” becomes a primary objective, truth is compromised.

Dr. Walter Kaiser offers a full exegetical defense of premillennialism as central to God’s unfolding plan in history, which has been the historical position the EFCA has taken.¹⁰ Abandoning a commitment to premillennialism and the overarching hermeneutic it entails may, in fact, produce deep divisions rather than unity.

For many of us, premillennialism has served as a rugged, durable, reliable load-bearing wall in a denomination where already too many key doctrines have been banished to the cellar of “Significance of Silence” (SOS)

Why No Meaningful Debate?

This leads to the second reason we reject the proposal; the EFCA leadership and staff will not allow for meaningful debate on the topic. No one has been given an opportunity to offer an alternative perspective than what is in the “Rationale”.

While they shared their “Rationale” nationally they have not shared the platform with anyone who could provide even one alternative perspective. There is no effort to examine Scripture like the Bereans and no “iron sharpening iron”.

Whatever happened to the EFCA’s primary commitment to “Where stands it written”? It would seem terribly unfair, irresponsible and unlike evangelicals to remove such an important pillar of our fellowship without at least debating it.

Even our SOS asserts issues found there “does not mean that we will not discuss and debate these issues but simply that we will not divide over them.”¹¹ It is no

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰Walter Kaiser, “What’s So Important about Pre-Millennialism” (2nd Edition; May 2018); unpublished. It is available at our church website: www.rockvalleychapel.org. In particular, Dr. Kaiser argues that what is most at stake is “the doctrine of redemption and God’s promise-plan for the ages”, 11. The first edition of this paper was made available privately during the run-up to the 2008 SOF discussions. Dr. Kaiser addressed 20 or so pastors and elders recently at a conference to elaborate further on his concerns about the EFCA’s proposal. A video of that discussion can also be found at our church website.

¹¹ Evangelical Convictions, 24 n. 18. We encourage readers to visit the EFCA website, EFCA.org where some excellent resources are available at the very bottom of the website listed under “Theological positions.” Several of the “significant of silence” issues are discussed there. Underlining added.

small hypocrisy that our leadership and staff will not allow for a true debate concerning their recommendation BEFORE the issue is voted on.

Even those who defend the proposal must admit the approach to changing the SOF falters under an unbiblical process that has routinely denied objective critique and analysis. Surely we should be able to “measure twice and cut once.”

Supporters of the proposal should be wary about supporting such a one-sided precedent. The same approach could come back to haunt the EFCA later over a future issue the leadership and staff consider the next “unnecessary hindrance.”

For example, what will prevent the EFCA from denying the existence of hell, which is a long-held truth currently questioned as “central to the Gospel” among many leading Christians; evangelical and otherwise? Will that be the next historic truth to be consigned to SOS because it is no longer pragmatically useful?

When the full body is denied rigorous, objective exegetical debate and discussion to ensure we are making a God-ordained and Holy Spirit-inspired decision, our leaders are in essence forcing their will upon the whole.

Premillennialism is either true or it is not. If it is true, then we should preserve and defend it. If it is not true, then our leadership owes us an exegetical rationale and genuine debate to determine why it is not now true. Where stands it written?

We urge every delegate to carefully read Dr. Kaiser’s paper and watch the discussion he held with several pastors so that each can make up their own mind on exegetical grounds instead of relying exclusively on the “Rationale”.¹²

A Brief Exegetical Defense

Our third reason for rejecting the proposal is because the text of Revelation 20 is simply too clear to avoid due to one significant exegetical point.

While we know Revelation 20 states 1,000 years six times, verse 3 reveals that after 1,000 years of imprisonment Satan will be released “for a little while” (mikron xronon). Thus, John demonstrates he is able to use both unspecific language and specific language to represent time within the immediate context.

¹² See our church website: www.rockvalleychapel.org.

Therefore, he was perfectly capable of indicating that Jesus would reign “for a long time” and would not need to use 1,000 years as a symbol to represent a long, unspecified period of time as some suggest. Furthermore, John uses the phrase “long time” in John 5:6, so we know he had the phrase at his disposal.

We believe John meant a literal 1,000 years, but even if some like D.A. Carson suggest the millennium is symbolic, the fact of Jesus’ earthly reign seems clear to Carson and many others.¹³

To that point, Walter Kaiser shows that the two resurrection orders revealed in Revelation 20 (the Saints when Jesus returns and then the unregenerate at the Great White Throne Judgement) are also portrayed in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 and other passages such as Isaiah 24:21-23.¹⁴

Why the EFCA?

The whole purpose of denominations is to serve as particular fellowships of believers who hold to beliefs different from other fellowships of believers. Thus, the global body of Christ represents a usually healthy diversity of a variety of fellowships that collectively represent the fullness of Christian belief.

Altering the DNA of the EFCA not only creates an essentially new EFCA, it dilutes an important exegetical distinctive that has hitherto contributed greatly to the worldwide preservation of a much-needed position on premillennialism.

Again, we urge delegates to reject the proposal primarily on the grounds that it is pragmatically-driven and that the prospect of removing premillennialism and its potential impact on the EFCA has been objectively debated.

What to do?

Thankfully, we are not without good options to exercise. While not exhaustive, allow me to suggest the following:

First, pray. Pray for God’s will to be done, for humility and for wisdom for our EFCA leaders, staff and the delegates preparing for the Convention.

¹³For Carson’s full lecture on Revelation 20 see: <https://www.efca.org/podcasts/episodes/episode-132-da-carson-revelation-20>.

¹⁴ See Kaiser, “What’s so Important”, 3-6.

Second, read the EFCA's "Rationale" carefully and make up your own mind as to whether or not it effectively justifies this dramatic change to the EFCA.

Third, read Dr. Kaiser's paper, which can be found at our website.

Fourth, watch Dr. Kaiser's discussion with pastors from March 2019.

Fifth, listen to Dr. Carson's lecture to pastors on Revelation 20.

Sixth contact the EFCA Board of Directors, EFCA President Kevin Kompelien and your District Superintendent asking that they allow for an alternative perspective to be offered by someone like Dr. Kaiser at the Conference.

**Note, as of May 1, 2019, the EFCA BOD has created another Q & A session on Tuesday, June 18, which is the day before the Business Meeting and vote. Please suggest that since they can add another Q & A session, it would be helpful to add an equal opportunity for an alternative perspective to be presented orally.

Seventh, preach on premillennialism between now and the Conference. Dr. Kaiser has noted many times, accurately, that since EFCA pastors no longer preach on premillennialism regularly, we have only hurt ourselves. Preach it!