



Where We Stand in the EFCA: Denials and Affirmations A Biblical-Theological Commentary

Introduction

Many of those who attended the EFCA One Conference in 2023 were deeply moved when president Kevin Kompelien read the declaration [Where We Stand in the EFCA: Denials and Affirmations](#) and responded with resounding affirmation.¹ In the light of the controversies of our current cultural context, this became a defining moment for the EFCA. We in the EFCA seek to stand firmly on the authority of Scripture, centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ, and not on any human ideology, whether political or cultural. This document seeks to articulate that stance.

Because we are responding to questions, claims, and accusations against the EFCA, this statement begins with denials, declaring what we are not. This is followed by positive affirmations clarifying where we stand. This declaration was approved by the Board of Directors and the Board of Ministerial Standing, the two boards that are elected by and accountable to the EFCA Conference. Subsequently, it was affirmed by the District Superintendents of the EFCA. While personally endorsing it, President Kompelien also explained, “As with all statements that are not formally approved by the Conference, this statement is not binding on our churches, but we believe it represents who we are as a movement of churches and is shared with you today as a resource for EFCA churches.”

In response to requests for further resources subsequent to the Conference, we first devoted four episodes of our [EFCA Theology Podcast](#) to this topic. The Spiritual Heritage Committee, along with the Chair of the Board of Directors (and with input from others), is now providing an additional resource in the form of these brief biblical-theological commentaries, grounded in God’s inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word, that accompany each of the eight points of the Denials and Affirmations document. What follows seeks to bring clarity and commentary that will have to be carefully and pastorally applied with precision in the context of the local church. If you need help as you do so, please reach out to others in the EFCA family for guidance. We need each other as we address these important issues together. Again, this is not a prescriptive document, but one we hope will provide further biblical reflection and foster healthy discussion in our movement.

As we contend for the faith in a spirit of convictional kindness and humble courage, with both No and Yes, Jude’s doxological prayer is ours (Jude 24-25): “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

¹ Our recent doctrinal survey confirms the widespread support for the viewpoints affirmed here. See attached addendum.

The Statements of Denial and Affirmation

#1—We are *not* adherents of the secular “Social Justice” movement as held in progressive circles, *but* we do believe that biblical justice has social implications, particularly in protecting those who are most vulnerable and marginalized.

Commentary

The Bible is replete with commands to care for the poor, defend the powerless, seek justice for the widow and orphan, and come alongside and support the oppressed. This is biblical justice or righteousness (in Scripture, both words belong to the same word group and carry similar meaning), and it necessarily has social implications (this is not the social gospel which views social reform as central to the church’s ministry and mission). It reflects God’s nature (Dt. 32:4; Isa. 45:19) and his design for shalom in the kingdom (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:6; Jn. 14:27; 16:33; Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14-15), in which Jesus is the King (Ps. 2:6; 110:1-2; Jn. 18:36-37; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:11; Rev. 19:16), which is now and not yet. Some will refer to this biblical concern as a desire for social justice, which is not the gospel, but it is an outworking of the ministry of the gospel.

The secular “Social Justice” movement, as held in progressive circles, shares some of the same concerns as a biblical understanding of justice. However, it reflects a commitment to Critical Theory, which analyzes human societies, including the entirety of cultural ideas and values, solely in terms of the power imbalance between oppressors and the oppressed. “Social Justice” specifically focuses on power and the need for emancipation of marginalized groups within structural domination, oppressive societal systems and institutions. It offers no hope of forgiveness or redemption, and it has no goal apart from continual revolution. It fails to deal with the deepest problem affecting human societies—the reality of human sinfulness and our separation from God (for more on Critical Theory, see below).

In contrast, the Bible offers the redemptive story of creation (Gen. 1:26-28), fall (Gen. 2:16-17; Gen. 3), redemption (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 6:9-11), transformation (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18), and consummation (Phil. 3:20-21; Rev. 21:5). Our righteous and just God created a “very good” (Gen. 1:31) world that has been spoiled by human sin. All humanity stands under God’s just judgment. But in his mercy, God has purposed to provide a means of redemption through his Son Jesus Christ, who satisfies God’s justice through his sacrificial death, thereby justifying the unjust (Rom. 3:21-26). He was raised to new life as Lord of all through his resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4). In union with Christ (Jn. 3:3, 5; Rom. 6:5-11; Gal. 2:20-21; Eph. 1:3-14), God’s people are to be renewed by the Spirit (Tit. 3:5) to be instruments of God’s grace, seeking to reflect the love of Christ in the world. In Christ, the categories of justice and power are fulfilled only as they are transformed through the gospel (1 Cor. 1:18-25) so that weakness is strength (2 Cor. 12:9), dying is living (Mk. 8:34-38), and serving is greatness (Mk. 10:45; Phil. 2:5-11).

Jesus, our Lord, who was “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29), taught that the greatest commandment was to love God supremely (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37-38; Mk. 12:28-30; Lk. 10:27; cf. 1 Jn. 4:8, 10, 16) and to love others sacrificially (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39; Mk. 12:31; 1 Jn. 3:16-18). Our sacrificial love of others reflects our love for God (Jam. 3:9; 1 Jn. 4:20). We are especially called to show compassion toward the poor (Dt. 15:11; Psa. 82:3,4; Prov. 22:9,16,22,23; Jer. 22:16; Gal. 2:10), including any who are needy, powerless, and vulnerable, such as widows and orphans (Jam. 1:26-27), the elderly, the disabled, the unborn, the immigrant, the minority, or the mistreated (Zech. 7:10; Lk. 14:10). We are called to have compassion for the poor because this reflects God’s concern (Prov. 14:31; 19:17) and reflects a love toward God. Moreover, when we show compassion to others (cf. Heb. 10:34), we are exhibiting the character of Christ (cf. Matt. 9:36; 14:14; Mk. 8:2; Lk. 10:33; 15:20).

With hearts touched by the gospel, those who have experienced God’s compassion toward them in their own poverty (Matt. 5:3) cannot help but extend that compassion toward others (2

Cor. 8:7-8). Under the old covenant, God established laws that were intended to promote justice (Ex. 22:16-23:9), and the Lord, through the prophets Isaiah (1:1-17) and Amos (5:7-15), refused to accept Israel's worship when their hands were guilty of injustice to the poor and needy (cf. Prov. 21:3). Through the fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ (Jer. 31:31-33; Lk. 22:20; Heb. 8:13; 9:15; 12:24), enabled and empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Thess. 1:5-6), the church, at her best, has always lived out the gospel with compassion for the poor and justice for the oppressed. In the early church, it was evident in the way God's people cared for those with physical needs, especially among those whom society marginalized (cf. Acts 2:42-47; Gal. 6:9-10; Jam. 2:1-10).

Our love for our neighbor ought also to include a desire for justice for the oppressed (cf. Pss. 33:4-5; 82:3-4; Prov. 29:7; 31:8; Isa. 1:16-17; Jer. 22:16; Zech. 7:8-10; Matt. 23:23-24; Lk. 4:18-21). The commands of Scripture are clear and unambiguous such that seeking biblical justice is an imperative for Christians—an imperative grounded in the indicative of God's grace in the gospel: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8).

The church has often vacillated between two extremes in pursuit of ministries of compassion and justice: either by focusing on the physical needs of people while neglecting the spiritual or by seeing people only as "souls to be saved" and disregarding their tangible suffering in this world. The example of the early church in Acts 6 provides a helpful model. When the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jewish believers) raised a complaint against the Hebrews (Aramaic-speaking Jewish believers) that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food (Acts 6:1), the apostles guided the congregation to address the situation by appointing some to oversee this task (Acts 6:3). But they did so while maintaining the priority of their ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:2, 4). Jesus met the material needs of many through feeding (Jn. 6:1-14; cf. Matt. 14:13-21; Mk. 6:30-44; Lk. 9:10-17) and healing (Matt. 8:13; 9:2, 22, 28; Mk. 3:5; 5:34, 41-42; Lk. 5:13; 17:11-19; Jn. 9:6-7) while also maintaining the priority of preaching His Kingdom and the forgiveness of sin (Lk. 5:17-26; 19:10; Jn. 6:35-36).

Certainly, our highest priority must be the ministry of the Word and the proclamation of the gospel (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:1-3), for the gospel alone addresses our deepest need (Acts 4:12; Rom. 5:1; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; 5:9; 1 Tim. 2:5-6), and the church alone can bring this gospel to the world (Matt. 28:18-20). But while maintaining this priority, we ought not to neglect the very pressing material needs of those around us (Matt. 7:21-27; Jam. 2:15-17). Love requires no less.

#2—We are *not* "woke" in the sense of having embraced a progressive ideology that is grounded in Critical Theory rather than the Bible, *but* we do see the need to be awakened to the global and indeed cosmic impacts of sin, including racial injustice, and to be attuned to the biblical call for gospel-driven efforts toward reconciliation and restoration.

Commentary

Our world is shrouded in darkness, but the light of Christ shines into the darkness, bringing new life (Jn. 1:4). In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, we are to be transformed by this new life in the Kingdom of light. One biblical way to describe this transformation is to be "awakened." Paul exhorts, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Eph. 5:14).

Paul gives this admonition, for the darkness of the world around us threatens to lull us back to sleep spiritually. Like those who enjoy a warm blanket on a cold winter morning, we can prefer to stay in darkness, but Christians are called out of darkness into the light of the new day – "The hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed" (Rom. 13:11).

We also can slide into spiritual sleepwalking, going through the motions in our lives without any real life or passion for Christ. In John's record in Revelation, Jesus exhorts the church

to “wake up” (Rev. 3:2). We need to be awakened to a reminder of our own need for the gospel (Rev. 3:3), and to the realities and dangers of the darkness around us.

So, *awakening* is used throughout the New Testament, as a metaphor for new life in Christ, living in holiness rather than sin, and as the antidote for empty moralism.

In recent years, the word “woke” has entered into our cultural vocabulary, but it has become nearly definition-less. Language that started as a specific term within minority communities to refer to the need for awareness of ongoing inequalities and injustice was quickly coopted left and right. For some, “woke” has come to be more narrowly defined by the progressive end of secular ideologies in terms of contemporary Critical Theory, the ideology of “antiracism,” human sexuality as a social construct, and radical individual autonomy. For others, “woke” seems to have become a catchall term to describe anything perceived to be coming from the political left.

Though we do not look to any secular ideology to change or transform lives, that is, we are not seeking to be “woke” in that way, neither do we want to be found dead or cold or asleep. Scripture is clear that regarding the pervasive impact of sin in our world (Ps. 14:1-3; Rom. 3:23), it should not surprise us that the systems and structures that sinful people establish will themselves fall short of perfection, leading to injustice and oppression (Prov. 13:23; Ps. 82:3). As those who have been reconciled to God in Christ, we are now entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2Cor. 5:18-19), and we are to participate in God’s work of bringing his will on earth as it is in heaven and of renewing and restoring all things for His glory (Rom. 8:20-25; Rev. 21:5).

Throughout the New Testament we see the tensions that rise up as Jesus brings people together from across the lines that divide us, crushing the dividing wall of hostility (Eph. 2:14), and calling all people into one new family (Gal. 3:28-29; Eph. 2:19). One way to love our neighbors as ourselves is to reach across the walls of racial divides, awakened to, and aware of the historically rooted racial challenges and injustice in our nation, in love and for the good of all people. Our desire is to see all people awakened to the new life in Christ, and to be reconciled to him and to one another.

#3—We are *not* adherents of “Critical Race Theory” that reduces all racial inequities to a struggle between oppressor and oppressed and presents a worldview that is contrary to the Scriptures, *but* we do believe that the questions and challenges it raises stir us to recall critical biblical truths that we may have neglected and require our attention.

Commentary

“Critical Race Theory” (CRT), a development of the broader Critical Theory, follows Karl Marx in his view that human societies must be analyzed in terms of the power imbalance between oppressors and the oppressed. Marxism saw this power imbalance purely in economic terms, but proponents of Critical Theory broaden this to include the entirety of cultural ideas and values. Those in power control what is considered normal, true, valuable, and good in every aspect of culture. In so doing, they oppress those who don’t belong or measure up as abnormal, deviant, or worthless. This biblical notion of sympathetic care for the outcast, like Jesus’ concern for the leper (Matt. 8:2-3; 11:5; Mk. 1:40-42; Lk. 7:22), becomes a central driving force in the proponents of Critical Theory, and that is part of what has made it so attractive.

Critical Race Theory asserts that American society is dominated by a “White culture” in which those who are White are in a position of power and privilege over people of color. Thus, not only all who are White, but also the very structures of American society, are inherently racist. Only a total reconstruction of our culture transforming the balance of cultural power can alleviate the problem that racism has created in this country.

It is sadly true that those in positions of power can (and do) oppress those who are socially weaker. The Bible gives us plenty of illustrations of that sin, and the prophets often spoke against it (e.g., Amos 5:21-24; 8:5). It is also true that social structures and institutions can reinforce and

perpetuate forms of oppression. Slavery itself was one such institution, and the racist legacy of slavery has hindered the economic and social prospering of African Americans.

It is also reflective of our experience that, as the saying goes, “Where you *stand* is determined by where you *sit*.”² Perspective matters in how we view the world. And because of the pervasive influence of human depravity, power can corrupt our perception of reality, leading to self-deception and self-justification in support of unjust structures. It is also why God and his Word, outside of but speaking to where we stand, are essential to reveal truth to us (Ps. 119:60; Jn. 14:6; 17:17). Because of sin, we all have blind spots—especially in those areas where we have some vested interest. The support of slavery by White Christians in the South is a shameful example.

On a superficial level, then, much of what Critical Race Theory espouses sounds reasonable and could be helpful. But at a deeper level, it contains ideas that a Christian must reject (1 Tim. 1:10b-11; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4:1-5). In the end, we are confronted with two contrasting views of the world, with different assessments both of the problem and of the solution, resulting in two eternal destinies: the way of life and the way of death (Ps. 1; Jn. 3:36; 5:24).

In denying the reality of God and condemning the biblical story as an oppressive “meta-narrative,” Critical Race Theory has created its own counter narrative. In contrastive parallel to the Bible’s redemptive story (creation, fall, redemption, transformation, and consummation), Critical Theory’s story consists of oppression, activism, revolution, and liberation. Through this framework, society is reduced to two ever-opposing groups—the oppressors and the oppressed, and the one is evil and the other good. In so doing, they have negated both individual responsibility (cf. Dt. 24:16; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 18:20) and anything that unites all humanity (Acts 17:26), either in Adam or in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22).

In contrast, the Bible affirms that all human beings are created in God’s image (Gen. 1:26-27) and are worthy of respect, and that all human beings have turned from God (Isa. 53:6) and are sinful (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:1-3) and in need of redemption in Christ (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Heb. 9:12). And each of us is a responsible moral agent, under the judgement of God (Rom. 1:18; 3:19-20; 14:10-12).

Critical Theory’s insistence on various group identities also denies the possibility of a new identity in Christ (Jn. 3:3, 5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:14-16) where “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Gal. 3:28).

We can acknowledge that structural racism exists, in the sense that social structures can reinforce and perpetuate the effects of racism, but Critical Theory must see all present inequities between White and Black populations through the single lens of racism, and, therefore, as evidence of present racism. This is reductionistic, denying the complexity of human society. Some of the real racial inequalities may be the result of blatant racism, while some may be the legacy of past racism, some may be the result of unconscious bias that is common in all social groupings, some may be the result of racially neutral economic policies that disproportionately affect the poor, and some may be the result of negative values within non-majority communities. To label all Whites as racists and all instances of inequality as evidence of racism is untrue and thus unhelpful.

It is important to listen to a variety of voices and experiences, but respecting those voices must not mean that those voices can’t be challenged, for God establishes norms for human behavior that apply to all (Ex. 20; Dt. 5; Matt. 5-7; Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Critical Theory fails to address the root of the human problem—our own sin in turning from God (Eph. 2:1-3). It tries to deal with symptoms without addressing the cause—the deadly cancer within all our hearts (Jer. 17:9; Ezek. 36:26-27). All it offers is a never-ending conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed, for some group will always and necessarily use their power in oppressive ways.

² Known as “Mile’s Law,” this was first used with reference to perspectives within government bureaucracy.

In contrast, Jesus says those who abide in his Word “will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32; Jn. 14:6). The gospel offers the hope of forgiveness (Ps. 130:4; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; Eph. 1:7), the hope of moral transformation (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:20-21), and ultimately the hope of a divine renewal and reconciliation (Rom. 5:11; 2 Cor. 5:18-21), in which God’s just kingdom (cf. Isa. 29:20-21; Jer. 22:15-16; Isa. 11:1-9; Rev. 15:3; 16:5, 7; 19:2) will be found on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10; Lk. 11:2). Critical Theory points to some real dynamics in our fallen world. But the partial truths of Critical Theory become untruths when they are perceived as the whole truth.

#4—We are *not* “Christian Nationalists” who believe the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation or who believe that Americans are “God’s chosen people,” *but* we do believe that a patriotic love of one’s nation is appropriate and that Christians should be good citizens who may freely advocate for God-honoring public policies.

Commentary

Christ calls his Church to live as salt and light, a city on a hill, so that others “may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:13-16). Peter called us sojourners and exiles, brought out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light and called to do good (1Pet. 2:9-12), using language tied to God’s message through the prophet Jeremiah to God’s people exiled in Babylon, when God called them to invest into the place of their exile and seek its *shalom*—its goodness, wholeness, and welfare (Jer. 29:4-7).

We affirm that advocating for God-honoring public policies is one way for us, as Christians, to seek the common good and welfare of all people. As citizens of Christ’s Kingdom, we have the freedom to do so, while submitting to the governing authorities and honoring them (Rom. 13:1-7; 1Pet. 2:13-17). It is appropriate for Christians to exercise rights as citizens of earthly kingdoms (e.g., Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-29), and to have a love of our own people or nation (e.g., Rom. 9:1-5). We also must affirm that Christ’s Kingdom is not bound to earthly borders or nations but is multi-national, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual, transcending these divides (Rev. 7:9-12).

We recognize that “Christian Nationalism” has become a buzzword that is used in a variety of ways, losing any common meaning. In this statement, we have sought to provide a brief definition of what we mean by that term in this context. The “Christian Nationalism” we deny includes the belief that the United States of America is a “Christian Nation,” not only as a sociological description, but also as a prescriptive mandate, or that Americans are “God’s chosen people.” This often stems from a conflation of the United States with the role and calling of Israel as God’s chosen people, a theocratic nation in the Old Testament, neglecting the application of the terminology in 1 Peter 2:9 that Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for [God’s] own possession.”

“Christian Nationalism” labors to bring the kingdom of God through human political means, neglecting the truth that Jesus is the King of all kings and no national or partisan platform fully conforms to or reflects the fullness of his Kingdom (cf. Josh. 5:13-15). In light of the glorious truths of the gospel in Christ’s Kingdom, we must not hesitate to say that “Christian Nationalism,” so defined, is wrong and idolatrous. Through history, the alignment of the Church with political power has only diluted the Church’s witness to Christ’s Kingdom. To lift up any nation over another as a “Christian Nation” or an earthly citizenship as “God’s chosen people” is to deny the sovereignty and reach of the gospel through Christ’s Kingdom (Acts 1:8; Rev. 5:9-10).

We must not forget that, in his incarnation, Christ did not reach for political power because his Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), but he associated with the lowest, least, lost, and leprous. Even up to the moment of His ascension, his disciples looked for political conquest, but Jesus did not succumb to their expectations. Instead, he ascended to a higher throne as the King over all kings and Lord over all (Acts 1:6-11). So, we are free to engage in political

work for the common good, but never to neglect, diminish, or limit our witness to Christ's sovereignty over every nation.

#5—We do *not* believe that political means can establish the kingdom of God, *but* we do believe that God has appointed governing authorities to do good and that, for citizens in Christ's kingdom, King Jesus' rule and reign transcends all other citizenships and partisan ideologies and transforms how we live in the world.

Commentary

Jesus Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (1Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). He conquered death by his resurrection (1Cor. 15:54-57) and ascended to the right hand of the Father where he now rules and reigns over all things (cf. e.g., Matt. 28:18; Heb. 2:8). When Jesus returns, he will vanquish all his enemies, including even death itself (1Cor. 15:25-26; Heb. 10:13), and he will finally be fully recognized in sovereignty and glory as at his name "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-10) and he will be crowned with glory as Lord of all (Rev. 11:15).

All who follow Christ are citizens of his Kingdom (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20). God's people are sojourners and exiles, living in a world that is not our ultimate home and in nations that are not our ultimate citizenship or allegiance. Still we are called to seek the good and the welfare (Jer. 29:4-7; 1Pet. 2:9-11) of wherever God has placed us (Acts 17:26). Our citizenship in Christ's Kingdom transcends all others and unites those who otherwise are divided by walls of hostility (Eph. 2:14).

God has appointed governing authorities (Rom. 13:1), and there are no kingdoms or rulers outside of his sovereignty (Dan. 4:17). Governing authorities have a God-given calling to serve for the good of all and as an instrument of justice (Rom. 13:4-7). As citizens of Christ's Kingdom, Christians are still called to submit to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1; Tit. 3:1; 1Pet. 2:13), to honor and respect them (Rom. 13:7; 1Pet. 2:17), and to pray for those in authority over us (1Tim. 2:1-4). While recognizing human authorities, we must not forget our ultimate allegiance or the means of the coming of Christ's Kingdom. Christ's Kingdom will appear when the Son of Man, with all his angels, comes in glory and assumes his throne as King and Judge (2Tim. 4:1; Matt. 25:31-32; Acts 17:31; 2Cor. 5:10).

It is worth noting that, in addressing Simon Peter, Christ gave the Church the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt. 16:19), while government has been given the sword (Rom. 13:4). When Peter tried to take up the sword and protect Christ, people got hurt and using the sword did not honor Christ as King (Jn. 18:10-11). Still today, when the Church reaches for the power of earthly kingdoms, we see that political power is not the pathway of Christ's Kingdom and people get hurt. No human political ideology, party, or power can establish Christ's Kingdom and equating any nation, ideology, or party as *the* outworking of his Kingdom can only minimize the truth of the gospel and the witness of the Church.

History shows us the dangers of diminishing the gospel by making it a mere tool to achieve political ends or by trusting political means to establish the Kingdom. We must not put our trust or our hope in princes or human authorities (Ps. 118:9; 146:3-4), nor in the structures and means of earthly power (Ps. 20:7). From Constantine's questionable motives to the politicization of the papacy through the ages, to state churches in Europe, which our EFCA forbears rejected, to instances of forced conversion in some colonial regimes, the alignment of the Church with earthly political power has resulted in ugly consequences.

This, however, does not mean that we advocate separatism as the only right pathway. While the Church must be clear on its alignment with Christ's Kingdom alone, as individual Christians, our citizenship in Christ's Kingdom and submission to him as our King transforms the way we engage in the public sphere, including political involvement. We are free to see the

weaknesses and strengths of varying political perspectives, with the freedom not to be bound to toe the party line.

#6—We do *not* believe that a person’s biological sex should be separated from their self-perception as a man or a woman nor that the body should be altered when it does not conform to that self-perception, *but* we do believe that some people experience a distressing struggle between these two and that we must treat those who struggle in this way with love and compassion as we seek to help them, with the truth and power of the gospel, toward the wholeness of a biologically-sexed identity grounded in God’s “very good” design in creation as male and female.

Commentary

Scripture teaches that human beings are embodied creatures—a unity of soul and body. This holistic view of humanity is described in the creation account in which “the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). It is demonstrated most clearly in the fact that to become a human being the Son of God had to assume a human soul and a human body (cf. Heb. 2:14-16).³

Moreover, the book of Genesis affirms, and our Lord Jesus reaffirmed, that in the beginning, God created human beings as male and female (Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:4). This provides a biologically-sexed identity grounded in God’s good design. This sexual difference ought to be properly recognized. Scripture prohibits deliberately denying this distinction in one’s dress, for example, by purposely appearing as the opposite sex.⁴

Because we live in a world marred by sin that leaves no one and nothing untouched (Rom. 3:9-18), we acknowledge that we may experience desires toward others and feelings about ourselves that do not accord with the goodness of God’s purpose in creating human beings as male and female (Rom. 7:14-20). Because our sexuality and its social expression are so integral to human identity, we should also expect that these desires and feelings may seem deeply ingrained. Nevertheless, Scripture teaches that we honor God’s gift of sexed difference and experience true freedom by seeking to conform our desires and feelings to God’s purpose (Rom. 12:1-2). In submitting to the means of grace God has given, such as meditation on Scripture, patient prayer, and life together in the church, he sustains his people even in the struggles of this life (Heb. 2:18; 4:14-16).

Our affirmation of God’s design in creating us male and female means that we cannot support or affirm attempts to resolve the tension between a person’s biological sex and their feelings by trying to promote a sense of self discordant with their biological sex, nor can we support or affirm the use of pharmacology or surgery to manipulate sexual characteristics to create the outward impression of the opposite sex or of an indeterminate appearance.⁵

³ The full humanity of Jesus Christ as body and soul is affirmed in The Chalcedonian Creed [AD 451]: Jesus Christ is “at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body.”

⁴ Cf. Deut. 22:5—“A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.” And in 1 Cor. 11:1-16, however one understands the “covering,” Paul maintains that gender distinction ought to be clear in the context of worship.

⁵ We recognize that intersex conditions (or disorders of sexual development) exist in which the development of phenotypic and genotypic sex characteristics deviate from standard biological development. While statistically rare, we also recognize the importance of carefully considering them. Treatment (including non-intervention) of these disorders differs categorically from transgender interventions, which are performed on persons with no inherent variability in sex organ development, function, or fertility.

At the same time, the Bible demands that we extend love and compassion to those whose sexual self-understanding is shaped by a distressing conflict between the givenness of their biological sex and the confusion of their feelings about sexual identity.⁶ This conflict can create immense pain which calls for sensitive pastoral care. The gospel offers us the hope of transformation (Rom. 12:1) but not the promise that this transformation will be fully resolved until our bodies are transformed through resurrection when Christ returns (Ro. 8:22-25; 1 John 3:2).

In the meantime, we must not minimize the inestimable value of knowing what is real and good and the vital importance of submitting our lives to the truth revealed in Scripture, even when doing so will be and feel costly (Matt. 16:24-25; Col. 3:5-7). And we must seek ways to minister to and support those who struggle with gender confusion, and those who have family members or others close to them who identify as LGBTQ+ (Col. 3:12).

#7—We are *not* egalitarian in our understanding of the roles and functions of men and women in the church, *but* we do believe that the gifts and ministries of women are essential to the health and fruitfulness of churches and ought to be sought out and multiplied in ways that arise from and are consistent with our complementarian convictions, as reflected in our EFCA ordination policy.

Commentary

God, in his wisdom, created human beings in his image as male and female (Gen. 1:27). There is sameness in essence or being (ontology), since both are in the image of God, and there is distinction, since they are male and female. We believe this distinction in creation ought not to be ignored, but is significant and ought to be appreciated and valued.

The distinction between men and women can have no bearing on their oneness in Christ (Gal. 3:16-19) or on husbands and wives as "fellow heirs of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). Both men and women are equally valuable as persons created in the image of God and as recipients of the grace of God in Christ (1 Cor. 11:11-12; Gal. 3:28).

Within the context of marriage, the Bible teaches that the husband has a role of headship, analogous to that of Christ toward the church. This role calls the husband to self-giving, sacrificial love toward his wife, in which he is to seek her welfare, and especially her spiritual well-being before God (Eph. 5:25-30; Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7). The appropriate response by the wife, and her responsibility, is submission to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; cf. also 1 Pet. 3:1; Tit. 2:3-5).

Submission is not in any way degrading for the Christian (cf. 2 Cor. 9:13; 1 Tim. 2:11; 1 Tim. 3:4), for all believers are called to submit to others in various contexts (Eph. 5:21), including to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13,14) and to leaders within the church (Heb. 13:17). Jesus himself was submissive to his earthly parents (Luke 2:51), to the earthly authorities (John 19:10,11), and to his heavenly Father (Matt. 26:39; John 5:30; 6:38; Phil. 2:8).

It is challenging today to hear the word submission without negative connotations. At times submission has been hurtful, and forced submission is always destructive. However, our understanding and application of submission must be grounded in and guided by Scripture. God's divine design and order are "very good" (Gen. 1:31), and for all to submit joyfully to this truth is the God-ordained means by which we all flourish. It is the gospel alone that enables us to see this and empowers us to live it.

Submission in this larger context refers to a woman's worshipful learning in the context of the local church and under the authority of the elders/pastors, not to every man nor in every context (1 Tim. 2:11). One translation captures this notion: "Let a woman receive training in a quiet demeanor with complete respect for order." Even though this requires further explanation, it conveys submission to the biblical order of God's design for men and women that was universal in the churches (1 Cor. 14:33, 40).

⁶ This human condition is described psychiatrically as gender dysphoria, i.e., gender distress.

The local church operates as a community modeled in some sense on the extended family household (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15; 5:1,2,16). The office of elder/pastor reflects that of the husband/father in the family unit (cf. 1 Tim. 3:4-5). As shepherds of God's flock, these men have the primary responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the church family, including the proper teaching of the Word of God and protection from false doctrine. In the EFCA, ordination is the recognition by the broader church of a man's calling, character, and competence to fulfill this pastoral office and function.

Both women and men have important contributions to make to the church in corporate worship (1 Cor. 11:4; 14:26), and in teaching and theological training (Acts 18:26; Tit. 2:1-15). The biblical limitation of women from "teaching or having authority over a man" in the context of instructions for Christian worship (1 Tim. 2:11,12) is not simply a cultural necessity limited in application to the particular circumstances of the church in Ephesus. Rather, this provision is grounded in the created order (2:13,14; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2-16) and assigns to the elders of the church the responsibility for doctrinal fidelity (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9), reflecting the notion of male "headship" in the household. This principle is reflected in the EFCA policy of reserving ordination to qualified men, while qualified women are eligible for other ministerial credentials.

Women have always had a very important role in the life of the church as evidenced by the many references to women as fellow-workers in the gospel in the letters of Paul (cf., e.g., Rom. 16:1-15; Phil. 4:2-3; Acts 18:26), and in the history of the Free Church women have served in prominent roles as evangelists and missionaries. The contribution of women to the work of the church today cannot be overstated. We need all the gifts to be exercised according to God's divinely-given order in the church (1 Cor. 12; 14:40; 1 Pet. 4:10). Therefore, women as well as men need to be equipped and trained for gospel work, and the ministry of women in the church ought to be encouraged and appreciated.

#8—We do *not* believe in the annihilation of those who die apart from Christ, *but* in their eternal conscious punishment. Among the kinds of suffering we ought to seek to alleviate, this is the most grievous, and it is our urgent duty and God-given privilege to seek to alleviate it by proclaiming the gospel and calling all people to believe the gospel by repenting and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Commentary

Although this point addresses doctrine which we affirm in our Statement of Faith, it is important to address because with the Statement of Faith revision, concerns have been raised that "eternal conscious punishment" will be the next doctrine to be changed. Indeed, it is also a doctrine that is being questioned, undermined, and/or denied in broader evangelicalism.

Throughout history, the church has held that Scripture affirms that the destinies of believers and unbelievers, though very different, stand in parallel, and both will continue to experience the consequences of their choice through eternity.

Jesus himself most clearly established this connection when he spoke of the Son of Man separating human beings on the day of judgment as sheep and goats, saying to the goats on his left hand, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:41,46).

The "eternal fire" prepared for the devil and his angels will be the place of "eternal punishment"—a punishment that mirrors the blessing of "eternal life" of the righteous. Because this verse uses precisely the same word to describe both the blessedness of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked, it is best to affirm that both enter into an unending conscious state.

The apostolic witness of the New Testament echoes Jesus' weighty words on this topic. Paul speaks of a time of "wrath and anger" awaiting those who reject the truth (Rom. 2:8). Those who do not obey the gospel "will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess. 1:9). Jude offers the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah "as an

example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1:7). Finally, the Book of Revelation speaks in these harrowing tones:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever (Rev. 14:9-11).

They will join the beast and the false prophet who "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

Both Testaments affirm God's holiness (Ex. 15:11; Isa. 6:3; 57:15; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 4:24; 1 Pet. 1:16) and God's love (Neh. 9:17; Zeph. 3:17-18; Jn. 3:16, 35; 17:24; 1 Jn. 4:8,16). These two divine attributes, love and holiness, are not contradictory but complementary and culminate in the cross of Christ (Ex. 34:6-7; Rom. 3:21-26; 5:5-11). Because God is one and infinitively perfect (Dt. 32:4; Job 1:7-10; Ps. 18:30; 50:2; 90:2; 145:3; Matt. 5:48), his love is always perfectly holy, and his holiness is always perfectly loving. It is perhaps this notion of God's awesome holiness, and his wrath that flows from it, that we most need to grasp in our world today. Without it the gospel makes no sense—we have no conviction of our sin and no need of a Savior. And without it we have no understanding of the new life to which we are called and the final goal of our salvation—that we might share in the character of God himself (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Jn. 3:2). For the Lord says, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16). Our prayer ought always to be, "Our Father in heaven, may your name be holy" (cf. Matt. 6:9; Lk. 11:2).

The gospel is not a self-help strategy for finding peace and happiness in this life. The Bible presents the gospel as a matter of eternal significance. In fact, it is a matter of heaven and hell, for our eternal destiny hinges on our response to Jesus Christ (cf. John 3:36; 5:24; 8:24), with the unbeliever experiencing condemnation and eternal conscious punishment (Matt. 25:46; Lk. 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:11; 21:6,8; 22:14,15), and the believer experiencing eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord (Matt. 25:34, 46; Jn. 14:2; Rev. 21:1-3).

The Bible offers images to seek to convey something of the nature of hell's terror. First, *hell is pictured as a place of burning fire*, emphasizing its physical torment (Mark 9:43,48; Jude 7; cf. Rev. 21:8—"the fiery lake of burning sulfur"). In hell, the wrath of God is poured out as a punishment for sin. Second, *hell is described as a place of darkness*—"outer darkness" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) or "blackest darkness" (2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13), emphasizing a banishment from God's presence (2 Thess. 1:9). Finally, *hell is characterized by death and destruction*. John, in the Revelation, refers to the lake of fire as "the second death" (Rev. 20:14; 21:8; cf. 2:11; 20:6). Destruction is where the wide road leads (Matt. 7:13); it is what happens to the house built on sand (Luke 6:49); it is what is prepared for the objects of God's wrath (Rom. 9:22); and it is the destiny of the enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:19).

The language of destruction does not entail annihilation so much as ruin and corruption. In contrast to those who inherit the blessing of "eternal life" and so share in the life of God, the condemned are cut off from the goodness and common grace of God and are given over to their sin. In their eternal unrepentant state, their hardened hearts become harder still.⁷ The ungodly in hell become so corrupted by sin that they almost cease to function as human beings created in the image of God. They become nothing more than embodied versions of the devil and his angels, no longer objects of compassion or pity.

Hell, then, is the culmination of the effects of sin and the confirmation of God's opposition to it. It is both the inexorable result of human choice and the active and deliberate judgment of God.

Eternal conscious punishment is a sobering subject, but faithfulness to our Lord Jesus obliges us to speak of it, for he certainly did. God is just, and the Judge of all the earth shall do what is right (Gen. 18:25)—of that we can be absolutely certain. One day his glory will be

⁷ This is illustrated in the hardening of unrepentant hearts in the midst of divine judgement found in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 6:15-17; 9:6, 20-21; 16:8-11, 21).

wonderfully displayed even in his judgment (Ex. 34:6-7; Rev. 19:1-4). Until then, compassion toward those traveling on that road to destruction, cf., the compassion of both Jesus (Lk. 19:41-44; 23:28-31) and Paul (Rom. 9:2-3; 10:1), must compel us to reach out in love with the good news of God's means of rescue and new life in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Addendum

When the EFCA Conference adopted our 2008 Statement of Faith, the EFCA Board of Directors affirmed a “process for safeguarding our spiritual heritage.” One aspect of this process was to conduct a doctrinal survey every five years. This is an important way the board sought intentionally to value and safeguard the vital role of the Bible, theology, and doctrine in the Christian life for those in the EFCA.

In the fall of 2023, we completed our third doctrinal survey. As with the previous surveys, it was sent to all sr./lead pastors (not all are credentialed in the EFCA) and all those credentialed in the EFCA (not all are in EFCA ministries). The commentaries above are expositions of biblical truth applied to the contemporary issues addressed in the declaration, Where We Stand in the EFCA. God and his Word are foundational and fundamental for truth and life, what we believe (truth/doctrine) and how we live (morals/ethics).

The survey consists of individual responses that provide important information about what is believed regarding certain issues. The survey results do not carry the same weight as the biblical-theological exposition since truth is not determined by a majority perspective. But they do reflect that the great majority of EFCA sr./lead pastors and those credentialed in the EFCA confirm what is written in the declaration.

Although not all the bulleted items are included in the doctrinal survey, two of the bulleted items are specifically addressed.

- In bullet 5, “We do *not* believe that political means can establish the kingdom of God . . .,” 98% of respondents strongly agree or agree.
- In bullet 6, “We do *not* believe that a person’s biological sex should be separated from their self-perception as a man or a woman nor that the body should be altered when it does not conform to that self-perception . . .,” 98% of respondents strongly agree or agree.

Additionally, there were several questions that reflected some aspect of the bulleted items (the exceptions are bullets 3 and 4). Consider the following:

- In bullet 1, “we do believe that biblical justice has social implications, particularly in protecting those who are most vulnerable and marginalized,” 92% of survey respondents affirm that “compassion and justice are not the gospel but are a necessary outworking of the gospel.”
- In bullet 2, “we do see the need to be awakened to the global and indeed cosmic impacts of sin, including racial injustice, and to be attuned to the biblical call for gospel-driven efforts toward reconciliation and restoration, 92% of respondents believe it is very or somewhat important, and for the congregation it is 83%, “for your local church to reflect the racial/ethnic diversity of your community.”
- In bullet 7, “we do believe that the gifts and ministries of women are essential to the health and fruitfulness of churches and ought to be sought out and multiplied in ways that arise from and are consistent with our complementarian convictions, as reflected in our EFCA ordination policy,” 90.4% affirm complementarianism, and 94% say it is very or somewhat important to “your overall theological framework.”
- In bullet 8, we do believe “in their eternal conscious punishment. Among the kinds of suffering we ought to seek to alleviate, this is the most grievous, and it is our urgent duty and God-given privilege to seek to alleviate it by proclaiming the gospel and calling all people to believe the gospel by repenting and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ,” 96% of

respondents consider “the doctrine of ‘eternal conscious punishment’ in your theological framework” to be very or somewhat important.

- Finally, in A few summary statements reflecting our EFCA convictions, which addresses our ethos, how we live out life and ministry together grounded in our doctrine, in response to the survey question, “The EFCA commitment to live and minister within the ‘significance of silence’ framework (we will debate but not divide over certain nonessential doctrinal matters) is a strength,” 95% of the respondents strongly agree or agree.

As noted above, and to reiterate, the results of the doctrinal survey reflect that the great majority of EFCA sr./lead pastors and those credentialed in the EFCA confirm what is written in the declaration, Where We Stand in the EFCA: Denials and Affirmations.