

## Community of Faith

### Our Statement of Faith

*What Do We Believe?*

June 27, 2010

The constitution committee suggested that a teaching message be given on The Statement of Faith (that is, on the Statement of Faith that our new constitution requires all those wanting to become a voting member of our congregation to sign).

The leadership team has ever so *graciously* given me the privilege of teaching on this topic.

[Because we do not have a place to meet here at the Stafford Center right after the service for a congregational meeting, it was decided that this teaching should be done during a Sunday morning worship service.]

Before we get started on the actual Statement of Faith a few preliminary comments:

As you will see, our Statement of Faith contains basic essentials of the Christian faith. Many of the statements are direct quotes from scripture. Others are direct quotes from the Apostles' Creed.

Remember, the Apostles' Creed dates back to the early 3rd century. The Apostles' Creed is derived directly from Scripture and is a clear and concise statement of the bare essentials of what all Christians have believed from the very beginning.

Question: Why do we need a Statement of Faith? Why does the new constitution require the signing of the Statement of Faith in order to become a voting member of our congregation?

The best way to answer this question is by explaining the problem this Statement of Faith is supposed to address.

Here is the problem this Statement of Faith was created to solve:

In most congregations once a person becomes a voting member she/he is then eligible for all leadership positions in that church. If the process by which people are allowed to become members is too loose (i.e., the standards too low), this can lead to potential problems.

For example:

I know of a situation in which a member of a congregation I attended was teaching elementary Sunday School and on the Church Council even though this person did not believe a number of central, very basic tenants of the Christian faith. For example, this person (from here on I

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will refer to this person as 'he') did not believe that we are saved by faith alone through grace alone. Instead, he believed that our good works played a central role in our salvation.

That a person is saved by faith alone through grace alone is one of the most central tenants of the Christian faith, so central that all orthodox\* Christians since the Reformation have embraced this teaching as biblical and true.

In the meantime, even the Catholic Church has adjusted their official doctrine on this issue.

The official Catholic position today is in agreement with Martin Luther and most all Protestant Christians: we are saved by faith alone through grace alone, not by works.

Even after the lead pastor talked with him, this person refused to change his position on the issue.

This created a very awkward situation – does the lead pastor then ask this person to quit teaching Sunday School and to step down from the Church Council?

We need to understand that this is not just some theoretical problem of some isolated congregation long ago and far away. Similar problems were actually a very concrete part of our reality at Our Savior's, the church that many of us attended for many years.

Wouldn't it be better to avoid such an awkward situation altogether long before it arises?

As a solution to this problem, the leadership of our congregation (that includes not only the present interim leadership team, but also the constitution and vision committees)... the leadership of our congregation decided to instate two different check points:

- 1) We decided that we needed to raise the standards for becoming a voting member of our congregation by requiring all those wanting to become a voting member to sign a Statement of Faith and
- 2) We also decided to raise the standards for those taking on key leadership positions in our congregation.

Many churches in our area and around the US require those who want to become voting members to sign a Statement of Faith: Rolling Hills, Imago Dei here in PDX and The Rock in San Diego are a few examples. Many of these churches are some of the fastest growing congregations; others have become some of the largest.

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And times are changing. Gone are the days in which we can casually accept transfer members from other Lutheran congregations under the assumption that they will believe just what we believe.

We can no longer assume that all transfer members will agree to the basic essentials regarding the Christian faith, particularly not if these Lutherans are coming from ELCA churches which, we hope, many of them will be...

The Statement of Faith that you are about to see was initially developed and approved by the vision committee. It was then presented to and approved by the interim leadership team.

In both situations we discussed the concept and the content of the Statement of Faith. Questions were asked, hard questions, good questions. We wrestled with the issues, content and wording of each statement. Some statements were discarded as unnecessary, others were reworded and improved.

After much prayer and consideration we have now all agreed that this is a good thing to do. We have also all agreed that the Statement of Faith is an accurate and clear expression of what we believe as a congregation and what we feel any voting member ought to believe as a minimum.

And as mentioned, This Statement of Faith is not something we've come up with "out of the blue", but rather it is based on scripture and the Apostles' Creed.

Actually, for the most part, it is a minimum statement of what all orthodox Christians have believed throughout the centuries. Anyone who signs the Statement of Faith is simply confirming: "Yes, I am a Christian and I believe what Christians believe."

So now let us turn to the actual Statement of Faith and take a look at it, one statement at a time. The document is all on one page, 15 statements, each with footnotes at the bottom giving supporting scriptures... and with space for your name, signature and date as well as a place for the pastor to sign.

The Statement of Faith will be up on our website for the rest of June and July. Go to the Member's page to find a pdf document that you can print out for yourself, read, study and if you so chose, sign and turn in at any worship service or constitution meeting.

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BTW, we will also be putting a written copy of my message this morning up on our website also on the Member's page for anyone wanting to take a closer look at what I've said.

Statement of Faith (as you go through each statement, mention if quote from Bible or Apostles' Creed)

- I believe the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, the inerrant Word of God and the final authority in all matters of Christian faith, thought, life and conduct.<sup>1</sup>

As you can see the key passages are:

2 Timothy 3:14-17 The key verse is 16.

<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...

Hebrews 4:12 <sup>12</sup> For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

John 17:17 <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

Comments:

I want to focus a moment on the word inerrant: this is a complex word, but very important.

By definition *biblical inerrancy* means that the Bible is considered accurate and totally free of error, at least in the original writings.

However, we don't have the original letters of Paul, Peter, etc. All we have is copies of those letters, etc. What does it mean to say the Bible is inerrant "in its original writings"?

Well, most scholars agree that even though some passages in the NT are in question for whatever reason, the careful examination of all the manuscripts leads to the following conclusion: We can be confident that we are able to reconstruct at least 7/8 of the original writings. And in that 7/8, all important Christian doctrines upon which the church has been built are present.

In other words, the fact that we don't have the original writings is not an insurmountable problem – what we have is close enough to the original writings so that we can still consider the Bible authoritative.

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Another issue regarding inerrancy:

We need to realize that the Bible is the final authority on all matters of Christian life, faith and thought. However, it is not the final authority on how to build a diesel engine or how to engineer an automobile and so on... It is the final authority on all matters of Christian life and thought, not the final authority on everything imaginable.

Another question: Does inerrant mean literal – no! There are many different forms of literature in the Bible: history, legal statutes, commandments, parables, poetry, wisdom writings, Psalms, etc. Each one should be interpreted according to the rules for interpreting that form of literature: we interpret poetry differently than a legal passage, a parable differently than a historical document, etc.

I personally believe that the Bible is without error in all that it teaches (in all its doctrinal statements) and in all that it relays with regard to salvation history. And I know of no other errors in scripture that have been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Yes, there are problems, difficulties, apparent discrepancies, apparent contradictions. One by one though, these difficulties have been resolved by leading conservative scholars. Those difficulties that are left, I've put in an abstract box. I don't view them as errors or mistakes, but rather apparent difficulties/contradictions. And I look forward to the day they will be resolved either by good scholars here on earth or by God once I get to heaven.

Here is the main reason why, in spite of all the problems in the Bible, I still embrace inerrancy: I believe the Word of God is without error because that is what Jesus believed.

And I think Christ's view of Scripture *should* be every Christian's view of Scripture.

The biblical evidence supporting the position that Christ had a very high view of scripture and considered scripture inerrant is compelling (see John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*).

And if we Christians confess Christ not only as Savior, but also as *Lord* then it logically follows that Christ should take leadership in every area of our lives including our thinking.

It follows further that what Christ thinks about Scripture should be what we Christians think about Scripture. That means: if Jesus had a high view of Scripture then we should also have a high view of scripture.

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What is Jesus' view of Scripture?

Jesus' attitude toward all Scripture was that it is the teaching of God his Father, and therefore to be regarded as *wholly authoritative, inspired, true and trustworthy*. I cannot imagine that Jesus would ever consider anything his Father said to be in error.

- I believe there is one God, eternally existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>
- I believe God is the Creator of heaven and earth and continues to sustain all of His creation.<sup>3</sup>
- I believe Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, is the Savior of the world.<sup>4</sup>
- I believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.<sup>5</sup>
- I believe all have sinned against God and are in need of Jesus Christ as their Savior.<sup>6</sup>
- I believe that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no one comes to the Father except through Him.<sup>7</sup>

This statement is saying “no” universalism! The Bible as our final authority has always taught that there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ alone. Scripture is very clear on this:

John 14:6 <sup>6</sup> Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Acts 4:10-12 <sup>12</sup> “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” ...that is in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

- I believe Jesus Christ was raised bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven.<sup>8</sup>
- I believe Jesus Christ will return in power and glory to judge the living and the dead.<sup>9</sup>
- I believe Jesus Christ promises eternal life to all who trust and believe in Him.<sup>10</sup>

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- I believe that salvation is a free gift of God, not merited by any work and received by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

The Bible is very clear: there is no such thing as works salvation!

- I believe and confess the gospel as the power of God to create and sustain the church for God's mission in the world as it (the gospel) is recorded in Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds\*\* and Lutheran confessional writings in the Book of Concord.<sup>12</sup>

Here you are not being asked if you believe everything in the Lutheran Confessions as recorded in the Book of Concord. You're just being asked if you believe the gospel as the power of God unto salvation... *as it is recorded in Scriptures and confessed in the creeds and Book of Concord.*

You may ask: How do I know the gospel is confessed in the confessional writings of the Book of Concord if I've never read the Book of Concord? Very good question!

If this is an issue for you, go to our website and click *Members* to find an article with two quotes which are both considered by scholars to be representative for the Lutheran confessional writings as they are recorded in the Book of Concord.

- I believe God the Holy Spirit gives me daily guidance, convicts me of sin, intercedes in my prayers, and enables me to live a godly life in my personal faith journey and in my marriage, family, and community relationships.<sup>13</sup>
- I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to create and strengthen the Church and to provide spiritual unity.<sup>14</sup>
- I believe through faith, baptism and communion the believer is united with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection.<sup>15</sup>

Well, that covers each of the 15 statements on our Statement of Faith.

In conclusion, just a couple of closing comments:

1) Please take this process seriously. Read the Statement of Faith carefully, prayerfully, thoughtfully.

Take your time, read the scripture passages in the footnotes, particularly if you come across a statement you have questions about.

If there's something you don't understand or have an issue with, please make note of your questions/issues and bring them to one of the three

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meetings scheduled for the constitution. Or even before that, come and talk with someone on the leadership team. All of us are available for questions. Email us, call us... we can correspond online, on the phone, over coffee face to face, whatever you prefer.

Again, I would like to encourage all of you to examine all the scriptures to see if what this Statement of Faith says is true. We put the supporting scriptures in footnotes for that purpose. Read them as a part of your devotional or personal Bible study time.

To make that less time consuming, we've put up a 5 page document on our website, again on the Member's page. This document contains all of the passages for each footnote all printed out so you don't have to look up each passage. You can either read it online or print it out.

This concludes our teaching on the Statement of Faith.

Let us close in prayer:

Father God, we come to you now in prayer and ask for your leadership in this process. We want to surrender our minds and hearts to you and your Word. Fill us with your Spirit, take leadership in our lives and give each one of us your wisdom as we prayerfully consider becoming a member of this Community of Faith. In the strong Name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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\*Orthodox:

Etymology:  $\text{ὀρθός}$  (orthos: "straight") +  $\text{δόξα}$  (doxa: "opinion")

Definition: Conforming to the established, accepted or traditional faith

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12; John 17:17

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:1; Genesis 1:27-28; Colossians 1:15-17

<sup>4</sup> Luke 3:22; John 3:16-17; Luke 1:35; John 1:29

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 2:14; Colossians 1:19-20; 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 1:8-10; Romans 3:22b-23; Romans 6:22-23

<sup>7</sup> John 14:6; Acts 4:10b-12

<sup>8</sup> Luke 24:5-7; Acts 1:1-11

<sup>9</sup> Mt 24:44; Hebr 9:27-28; 1 Thess 4:16; Acts 10:42; Hebr 10:30

<sup>10</sup> Romans 10:9,13; John 3:16; John 17:2-3; 1 John 5:11-12

<sup>11</sup> John 17:3; Ephesians 1:1-10, 2:8-9; 1 John 5:11

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17; \*\*the Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 3:16, 5:18-21; Galatians 5:22; John 16:5-15; 1 Cor 2:6-16; Romans 8:1-17, 26-27

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 26:26-29; Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 6:1-11