

Statement of Faith

by Scott Wakefield

Why a Statement of Faith? (Or, A Theological Argument for Why Ties Are Not Sacred)

In the Restoration Movement of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, where manmade creeds are historically repudiated, the question “Why a Statement of Faith?” is not as silly as it may sound to those outside our movement!

At its most basic, there is a quick and easy answer: Sin distracts us from our mission. The seminary answer: The mix of our sinful nature and our fundamental need to have meaningful relationship with God means that we create human-centered scales of spirituality that stray from the character and nature of God as revealed in Scripture. Put together a bunch of Christians and you can easily have a congregation that unwittingly establishes arbitrary and unbiblical guidelines for what it means to have vibrant relationship with God and how we work together to achieve His Kingdom goals.

So, while Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have long rejected manmade creeds, God-honoring churches who make a mark for the Kingdom are nonetheless intentional about their tightly held doctrinal beliefs. This clarity on doctrinal matters serves to achieve at least two goals that are important for churches: (a) It delineates clearly what is meant by meaningful involvement as a member of a local church and as a fitting participant in the Kingdom at large, and (b) it enables churches to discern and name well the places where there is room for theological freedom. Keeping the main thing the main thing—the centrality of the gospel—requires knowing... uh... exactly what is the main thing. Deep, huh?!

With this in mind, I will focus primarily on the “Essentials” in the vein of a well-known slogan used in the Restoration Movement: “in essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, love.”¹ Rice Haggard, the young preacher who first proposed simply going by the name “Christian” during the formation of Christian Churches, had this to say about undue focus on the non-essentials,

¹ However, we were certainly nowhere close to the first. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_necessariis_unitas,_in_dubiis_libertas,_in_omnibus_caritas, also <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/unitas/essrev.html>.

"One thing I know, that wherever non essentials are made terms of communion, it will never fail to have a tendency to disunite and scatter the church of Christ. It is certainly making the door of the church narrower than the gate of Heaven, and casting away those whom Jesus received."²

So, for example, a church culture allowing a diversity of styles of dress under the umbrella of a Biblical principle of modesty will, ironically, be more united in their mission than a church culture that insists that you can't serve Communion if you're not wearing a tie. The latter has made the mistake of holding human-centered scales of spirituality higher than Scripture's, i.e., narrower than the gate of Heaven.

The Essentials

Along with just about every other Christian Church who copies the "What We Believe" section on their website from Southeast Christian Church, I affirm the most basic orthodox Christian beliefs of the New Testament church.³

- Jesus Christ is the one and only Son of God who died for our sins and arose from the dead (1 Cor 15:1–8).
- The Bible is the inspired Word of God—a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (2 Tim 3:16).
- Every person has worth as a creation of God, but that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).
- Forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life are available to those who trust Christ as Savior and Lord (John 3:16).
- Those accepting Christ should repent of sin, confess their faith and be baptized into Him (Rom 10:9; Acts 2:38).
- The church is the body of Christ on earth, empowered by the Holy Spirit and exists to save the lost and edify the saved (Eph 4:1–16).
- God has ordained that elders are to exercise spiritual authority over the local congregation (1 Tim 3:1–7; 1 Peter 5:1–4).
- Jesus Christ will one day return to earth and reign forever as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (1 Thess 4:13–18).

I affirm, without any reservation at all, these "essentials." When churches begin implementing non-essentials as barriers of fellowship, they deviate from the spirit of the New Testament church and

² (Lexington: Joseph Charles, 1804), 17–18; reprinted 1954 as No. 4 in the series "Footnotes to Disciple History," with an introduction by John W. Neth. On Rice see especially R.L. Roberts, "Rice Haggard (1769–1819) 'A Name Rever'd,'" *Discipliana*, 54/3(Fall 1994), 67–81 and the literature cited there. Quote found at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/unitas/essrev.html>.

³ Taken from the website of the church I serve, <http://www.fccgreeneville.org/about-us/beliefs/>. Also, please note that these essentials are affirmed with a view to the local church, its essential nature and mission.

impose an unbiblical system that hinders healthy growth and keeps away those who might otherwise enjoy meaningful relationship with God.

The Essentials Plus – My Personal Convictions

At the same time, I also affirm the following list of beliefs that I have adapted from the Confessional Statement by The Gospel Coalition.⁴ Some of this list may be considered by some as non-essential. For example, I personally hold to critical inerrancy (because I think Jesus did⁵) while some Christian Churches and Bible scholars far smarter than I steer clear from such language as it is not a 'Bible word' and use instead words like "inspired" and "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Likewise, I hold to more traditional definitions of original sin while some Restorationists, especially early leaders, did not (for much the same reason as the aforementioned hesitation to hold to inerrancy.)⁶ This list is merely included to communicate where I'm coming from theologically.

Also, there are numerous doctrinal matters that are missing in the preceding list: The Trinity, more definition regarding the nature of God, clearer description of the nature of revelation/scripture, God's intent for marriage and sexual intimacy, men as elders, the nature of Christ's redemption and substitutionary atonement (a hot button theological issue today), exclusivity of Christ for salvation over against other gods, the nature of ministry in (but not of) the world, the nature of the Kingdom, and the role of baptism and the Lord's Supper as ordinances/ sacraments.

⁴ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents/confessional-statement> – Please note that I have used this document as it is very complete and biblical in its wording and affirmations. But, as it comes from a somewhat Reformed/Calvinistic perspective, I have altered some parts and put my own spin on it. Perhaps the majority of this wording (75%+, maybe?) is taken verbatim from the Gospel Coalition documents, but it is appropriately tweaked throughout its entirety so as to be a personal affirmation of faith.

⁵ See *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, by Carson and Woodbridge, the book that convinced me. See <http://www.atkinslightquest.com/Documents/Religion/Fundamentalism/Variations-of-Inerrancy.htm> for a decent shortlist of types of inerrancy, esp. "critical inerrancy" (#3).

⁶ I agree with J. I. Packer, "The assertion of original sin makes the point that we are not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we are sinners, born with a nature enslaved to sin." Packer, J. I. *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993, page unknown (ebook), from section titled "Original Sin: Depravity Infects Everyone". This assertion doesn't mean everything we do is 100% sinful, with no holy motives present, but that we are born into a fundamentally broken world and with an inherent tendency toward sin (1 Ki 8:46; Ps 51:5; Hos 6:7; Jer 17:9; Jn 2:24-25; Rom 3:9-23; 7:18; 8:7-8; Eph 2:1-3; Jam 2:10; 1 Jn 1:8-10; 3:4.) We cannot avoid breaking God's law. There are some who dispute the nuances of "original sin", as I've described it, for a few purported reasons: (a) It is not a phrase used in Scripture (probably coined by Tertullian and made popular by Augustine), (b) God can't condemn us for another's sin but our own sin (Deut 24:16, quoted in three other places; Ezek 18:4, 17b-18a, 20), (c) there is nothing inherently sinful about the birth process and God can't hold innocent babies culpable for sin (until the 'age of accountability'). Whatever the case about the specifics and timing, pretty much all Christians agree that every human deals with the consequences of Adam's sin (and everyone else's, including one's own) and that we inherit a tendency toward sin that the Bible says is lived out in the "flesh" (or, some say, by a "sinful nature") and must be regenerated by God's Spirit. And, hate to be frank, but most Restorationists have little idea how our views of whatever-you-want-to-call-an-inherent-tendency-to-sin are beyond the pale relative to historic Christian orthodoxy (which is not to be automatically eschewed) and are often perilously close to a form of Pelagianism (). Ok, enough about all that...

Please bear in mind that these are not intended to convey doctrinal matters I believe all churches and Christians should hold as normative essentials, but simply to show where I personally am theologically. In other words, even though I tend to believe that eldership in Scripture is reserved for men, I hold that belief in tension with some other, smarter-than-me Christians, who see it as an office available for women. It is an issue that falls into the category of non-essential, regardless of my personal convictions. If we are not open to being corrected from Scripture, we are lacking the humility required to get it right in the first place.

1. **The Triune God** – I believe in one God, eternally existing in three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another in perfect community. This one true and living God is infinitely perfect both in his love and in his holiness. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration. Immortal and eternal, he perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning, sustains and sovereignly rules over all things, and, while he has created humanity with free will and personal moral responsibility, he nonetheless providentially brings about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation, to the praise of his glorious grace.⁷ Despite history's attempts to clearly delineate and understand this interaction between God's providence and human freedom, the details are a paradoxical mystery.⁸ I look forward to greater understanding while sitting in a lecture with Jesus and Paul someday.
2. **Revelation** – God has graciously disclosed his existence and power in the created order, and has supremely revealed himself to fallen human beings in the person of his Son, the incarnate Word. Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: I believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of his saving work in the world. These writings alone constitute the verbally inspired Word of God, which is utterly authoritative and without error in the original writings, complete in its revelation of his will for salvation, sufficient for all that God requires us to believe and do, and final in its authority over every domain of knowledge to which it speaks. Both our finitude and our sinfulness preclude the possibility of knowing God's truth exhaustively, but we must still affirm that, enlightened by the Spirit of God,

⁷ Do I know exactly how this works?! No. And don't believe anyone who says they do because they're blowing smoke. I've read TONS of books and articles on all manner of subjects related to this conundrum and I've concluded that it's a paradox. It's interesting how many scriptures lay both God's sovereignty and human responsibility side by side in the same context. Something like a combination of "compatibilistic" freedom (http://www.theopedia.com/Compatibilist_freedom) and/or "libertarian free will" (http://www.theopedia.com/Libertarian_free_will) must exist.

⁸ A paradox is not one untrue statement, but simply two truths, seemingly contradictory, that are both true. More on this paradox in item #5, "The Plan of God".

God's revealed truth can be truly known. The Bible is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it teaches; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; and trusted, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. As God's people hear, believe, and do the Word, they are equipped as disciples of Christ and witnesses to the gospel.

3. **Creation of Humanity** – I believe that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image. Adam and Eve belonged to the created order that God himself declared to be very good, serving as God's agents to care for, manage, and govern creation, living in holy and devoted fellowship with their Maker. Men and women, equally made in the image of God, enjoy equal access to God by faith in Christ Jesus and are both called to move beyond passive self-indulgence to significant private and public engagement in family, church, and civic life. Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. In God's wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays serve-first humility and that is motivated by a caring and sacrificial love of Christ, and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role of elder within the church is given to qualified men, though this does not preclude in the least the church's responsibility to equip women to use the full measure of their giftedness.
4. **The Fall** – I believe that Adam, made in the image of God, distorted that image and forfeited his original blessedness—for himself and all his progeny—by falling into sin through Satan's temptation. As a result, all human beings are alienated from God, corrupted in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually) and condemned finally and irrevocably to death—apart from God's own gracious intervention. The supreme need of all human beings is to be reconciled to the God under whose just and holy wrath we stand; the only hope of all human beings is the undeserved love of this same God, who alone can rescue us and restore us to himself.
5. **The Plan of God** – I believe that from all eternity God had a plan that determined in grace to save a great multitude of guilty sinners from every tribe and language and people and nation. To this

end God 'chose' people in that he created a way of access to his plan by Jesus Christ.⁹ I believe this plan was to accomplish for all humanity atonement for sin by the gracious and vicarious death of Christ. This atoning work of Christ, as God's ordained Redeemer, is only applied to those who by faith freely 'choose' Christ. I believe that God justifies and sanctifies those who by grace have faith in Jesus, and that he will one day glorify them—all to the praise of his glorious grace. In love God commands and implores all people to repent and believe, having set his saving love on those he has 'chosen' and who have 'chosen' him.

6. **The Gospel** – I believe that the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ—God's very wisdom. Utter folly to the world, even though it is the power of God to those who are being saved, this good news is christological, centering on the cross and resurrection: the gospel is not proclaimed if Christ is not proclaimed, and the authentic Christ has not been proclaimed if his death and resurrection are not central (the message is "Christ died for our sins . . . [and] was raised"). This good news is biblical (his death and resurrection are according to the Scriptures), theological and salvific (Christ died for our sins, to reconcile us to God), historical (if the saving events did not happen, our faith is worthless, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all others), apostolic (the message was entrusted to and transmitted by the apostles, who were witnesses of these saving events), and intensely personal (where it is received, believed, and held firmly, individual persons are saved). Note: This biblical, theological and salvific, historical, apostolic, and personal gospel can be effectively proclaimed and preached regardless of what anyone thinks about any particular systematic theological scheme or categories. This gospel is at the heart of the Restoration plea for unity around mission.
7. **The Redemption of Christ** – I believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father, the eternal Son became human: the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary. He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven. As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God's sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate. I believe that by his incarnation,

⁹ Despite the hesitation by many in the Restoration Movement (RM) to use this language of God's people as "chosen" or "elect", it is explicitly Scriptural. The question is, of course, the nature of this choice by God. Ironically, the RM did not in its infancy use Trinitarian theology/terms because they weren't explicitly used in Scripture ("Bible words for Bible things") while at the same time rejecting particular terms like "choice" or "election", and did so merely because they did not fit their own systematic categories of theology, which were exactly the manmade creeds/systems they were eschewing.

life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God: on the cross he canceled sin, propitiated God, and, by bearing the full penalty of our sins, reconciled to God all those who believe. By his resurrection Christ Jesus was vindicated by his Father, broke the power of death and defeated Satan who once had power over it, and brought everlasting life to all his people; by his ascension he has been forever exalted as Lord and has prepared a place for us to be with him. I believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

8. **The Justification of Sinners** – I believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything deserving in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners. I believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.
9. **The Power of the Holy Spirit** – I believe that this salvation, attested in all Scripture and secured by Jesus Christ, is applied to his people by the Holy Spirit. Sent by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as the "other" Paraclete, is present with and in believers. He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and by his powerful and mysterious work regenerates spiritually dead sinners, awakening them to repentance and faith, baptizing them into union with the Lord Jesus, such that they are justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. By the Spirit's agency, believers are renewed, sanctified, and adopted into God's family; they participate in the divine nature and receive his sovereignly distributed gifts. The Holy Spirit is himself the down payment of the promised inheritance, and in this age indwells, guides, instructs, equips, revives, and empowers believers for Christlike living and service.
10. **The Kingdom of God** – I believe that those who have been saved by the grace of God through union with Christ by faith and through regeneration by the Holy Spirit enter the kingdom of God

and delight in the blessings of the new covenant: the forgiveness of sins, the inward transformation that awakens a desire to glorify, trust, and obey God, and the prospect of the glory yet to be revealed. Good works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace. Living as salt in a world that is decaying and light in a world that is dark, believers should neither withdraw into seclusion from the world, nor become indistinguishable from it: rather, we are to do good to the city, for all the glory and honor of the nations is to be offered up to the living God. Recognizing whose created order this is, and because we are citizens of God's kingdom, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God. The kingdom of God, already present but not fully realized, is the exercise of God's sovereignty in the world toward the eventual redemption of all creation. The kingdom of God is an invasive power that plunders Satan's dark kingdom and regenerates and renovates through repentance and faith the lives of individuals rescued from that kingdom. It therefore inevitably establishes a new community of human life together under God.

11. **God's New People** – I believe that God's new covenant people have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem; they are already seated with Christ in the heavenlies. This universal church is manifest in local churches of which Christ is the only Head; thus each "local church" is, in fact, the church, the household of God, the assembly of the living God, and the pillar and foundation of the truth. The church is the body of Christ, the apple of his eye, graven on his hands, and he has pledged himself to her forever. The church is distinguished by her gospel message, her sacred ordinances, her discipline, her great mission, and, above all, by her love for God, and by her members' love for one another and for the world. Crucially, this gospel we cherish has both personal and corporate dimensions, neither of which may properly be overlooked. Christ Jesus is our peace: he has not only brought about peace with God, but also peace between alienated peoples. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both Jew and Gentile to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. The church serves as a sign of God's future new world when its members live for the service of one another and their neighbors, rather than for self-focus. The church is the corporate dwelling place of God's Spirit, and the continuing witness to God in the world.
12. **Baptism and the Lord's Supper** – I believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by the Lord Jesus himself. The former is connected with entrance into the new covenant community, the latter with ongoing covenant renewal. Together they are simultaneously God's pledge to us,

divinely ordained means of grace, our public vows of submission to the once crucified and now resurrected Christ, and anticipations of his return and of the consummation of all things.¹⁰

13. **The Restoration of All Things** – I believe in the personal, glorious, and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ with his holy angels, when he will exercise his role as final Judge, and his kingdom will be consummated. I believe in the bodily resurrection of both the just and the unjust—the unjust to judgment and eternal conscious punishment in hell, as our Lord himself taught, and the just to eternal blessedness in the presence of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. On that day the church will be presented faultless before God by the obedience, suffering and triumph of Christ, all sin purged and its wretched effects forever banished. God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.

¹⁰ For more detail about baptism, see this brochure I compiled on behalf of our elders at First Christian Church of Greeneville, TN: https://docs.google.com/a/fccgreeneville.org/file/d/0B6yi-fg_GomOR0tJbkIHREQwTUU/edit?pli=1.