

Distinctive and History of the EFCA

Introduction:

The name Free Church causes all sorts of speculation – No offerings, Free to do what you want, etc. For the early immigrants from Sweden, Norway and Denmark it meant free from control of the State church in the home countries which carries on a lot of religious formalities but had little or no spiritual life. Later the concept of “free” referred to a congregational form of church government in which clergy and laity actively participate in the governance and direction of an autonomous local church.

I want to share some about the free-church movement as a whole before talking about the EFCA.

Westin, the best known authority on the free church history, in his book *The Free Church Through the Ages* states “The primitive Christian Congregation in Jerusalem as well as similar congregation in Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome was a free church.” The term “free church” has reference to distinct groups within history who through the medium of preaching have accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ by faith and have separated from the life of paganism to bring forth fruits of righteousness. Rom. 10:17 (as translated from Swedish) says Faith comes by means of preaching, and preaching by means of the power of the Word of Christ. With these words Paul attached the life of faith and the inception of the church to a historic event which can recur whenever people met. The “accepted word” was the foundation for the church and without this there would have been no assemblies.

Westin says these congregations may be defined, therefore, as free churches because they won adherents and members who, when they freely accepted by word, turned away from the life of sin and voluntarily were baptized. In Acts 2:42 it says that “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

The primitive Christian assembly was a free church in that it had no relationship, whether subordinate or co-ordinate, with any constituted authority or the state. When the missionary advance following the apostolic period, AD 90 to 180, is traced it is evident that the original characteristics of the early churches were still maintained. New churches were established and the older congregation increased their membership, but the free church concept was still maintained. The method was still preaching, teaching, conversion, faith and baptism. At the end of the 2nd century the process of setting up a hierarchical system in certain churches began to take place and this included catholic and protestant church bodies.

Through succeeding centuries there were church bodies with priestly hierarchies that claimed to have the apostolic tradition, sacramental grace and the jurisdiction over the church. The free churches on the other hand, stressed voluntary fellowship patterned after the practice of the early church, the demand for holy living, and the absolute authority of the Bible. In the late 1300s John Wycliffe emphasized that every Christian had the responsibility to spread the knowledge of God’s Word, he was responsible for the term priesthood of believers. The idea is that every Christian has the responsibility to share and spread the Word of God. Free church leaders felt and still agree that the ideas and principles of the early church were not simply starting points for the historical development of the church, as some church scholars would maintain, but that they were ideals and patterns for all generations of the church. So the principles and practices of the early church included ideals and patterns for the church on into history, and not just the way to get started.

The reformation period produced two main streams of theology and polity -The Reformed and the

Lutheran. The Lutheran stream prevailed in Scandinavia and very early on the Lutheran became the State Church.

At no time in church history was the Free Church concept accepted by the church establishment which established a definite hierarchy. From the earliest times, however, there has been reformation like surges within the church. These involved men and movements crying out against ecclesiastical authorities who denied the authority of Scripture. They called for an uncompromised and regenerate church, made up of true believers, and pleaded for the right and responsibility of the laity to participate in Gospel proclamation.

When the free church movement made its initial modern advances during the 16th century the requirements for a free church were always present, the church should be free in its relationship with the state, free from any authoritative super-church control, and free in matters of personal commitment of faith which led a person into fellowship by means of baptism or by means of a covenant bound him together with others.

Arnold Olson, in his book *Believers Only*, states that the first Free Evangelical church came into being in Geneva, Switzerland around 1850.

Now we will shift to consider the Evangelical Free Church of America – Its distinctives and History. In 1950 two Evangelical Free Church groups merged to form the Evangelical Free Church of America. They were the Norwegian and Danish Swedish group officially began in 1884 and in the same year two Norwegian Danish groups began to worship and fellowship together. By 1912 both the Swedish EFC and the N-D EFC Association had been formed. This was the way both churches continued until the merger in 1950. Both groups had Bible training schools at that time. Later the Bible school of the N-D group was closed. There was an attempt for a merger in 1939 but it didn't succeed but by 1950 the main differences between the two groups had disappeared and after three years of merger negotiations the merger was completed. The doctrinal statement was one of the areas that took a lot of time. The Swedish group only had a paragraph declaring faith in the scriptures and the N-D group had a 12 point statement adopted in 1909. The Swedish approach was due to the state church in Sweden having many statements but the church accepted many who weren't believers into its membership. A twelve point doctrinal statement was adopted and the statement on baptism was made stronger than what the N-D group had. The one passed makes it clear that there is no room for a view of accepting regeneration through the act of baptism.

At the time of the merger in 1950 there were a total of 275 local congregations. Today there are 1,250 local EFCs in the USA. Five men have served as Presidents of the EFCA since the merger.

The EFCA is an association of 1250 autonomous churches united by a mutual commitment to serve our Lord JC with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Word of God. The churches are committed to cooperate with each other in ministry and fellowship as they seek to fulfil the Great Commission which Christ entrusted to His Church. The EFCA, from the beginning, has had a strong emphasis on world-wide missions and today has mission work in over 45 countries of the world. The Free church had been established only 4 years when it sent out its first missionary to China. Von Qualen, with the assistance of two Chinese brothers he met in Chicago opened the Free Church mission work in China.

Today, unlike in the early days of the EFCA, the membership and constituency of the EFCA includes

a wide range of ethnic groups beyond the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish people who, for many years, were the main groups in the Free Church.

The term Evangelical refers to our commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel and to the Authority of Scripture as being inerrant in the original writings (autographs) and only safe and sufficient guide to faith and practice.

Free refers to the congregational form of church government. With the congregational form of church government the church is not subject to the control of a church hierarchy, a State church or any other type of outside control. EFCs depend on the active participation of lay people in the decision and directions that their church takes. This means that vested authority rests with the congregation and not with a board of professional staff. I heard my mother, whose parents came from Sweden, say repeatedly that in the Free Church they were free from the control of the spiritually dead state-churches as had been the case in the State Church her parents attended in Sweden.

Believers Only but Only Believers captures one of the distinctives of the EFCA. This is the conviction that the church is to be composed of individuals who freely and sincerely confess personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and that no one who meets this basic criterion is to be excluded from the church.

Three characteristics of the EFCA are:

1. Inclusive but not exclusive – Its churches will include all who have a genuine faith in Christ but will not exclude some who have different practices that are still in line with the teaching of the Word of God, i.e. Mode of baptism.
2. Evangelical but not Separatistic – the EFCM shares in Evangelistic Crusade with other Evangelical groups that may differ from us in some aspects of church practice (Graham Crusades). Not practice a policy of not sharing in work or fellowship with those of other denominations. HK Evangelical Fellowship, some individuals from some more separatistic missions could join but not the mission. Some churches won't let their members have a meal in a home of someone from another church.
3. Ecumenical in spirit but not in structure – Will cooperate in certain areas with churches with different doctrine but not join into their organizational structure. Some distinctive of the EFCA include the followings:
 - A. Inerrancy – The EFCA is strongly committed to the utter and absolute infallibility of the Scriptures as being without error, not only in matters of faith and practice but also in matters of history and science. This may be one of the strongest distinctives of the EFCA. TEDS has become known as a strong defender of inerrancy, not only in the US but in the whole world. "Where stands it written" is a common and very important statement in the EFCA. In the early days the immigrants were known to challenge the words from the pulpit to see if what was being preached is really from the Word of God. "Where stands it written?" is important today as it has been through the years.
 - B. Baptism – The EFCA doctrinal statement says that we believe water baptism is an ordinance to be observed by the church in this present age but is not be considered as a means of salvation. The issue of baptism caused a great struggle for early free church pioneers in Scandinavia where the Lutheran State churches practice of

baptizing babies made them members of the church. The state church considered baptism as a means of salvation which is very clearly rejected by the EFCA.

It is significant that the EFCA doctrinal statement is silent on mode of baptism. In spite of this by far the most used mode is immersion. The Swedish free churches and Norwegian free churches had been open to varying practices as far as mode of baptism. The doctrinal statement by its silence doesn't forbid sprinkling or even infant baptism but it is clear that baptism isn't a means of salvation.

In the EFCA baptism is not a prerequisite for church membership. There is no necessary relationship between water baptism and church membership. Membership in the EFCA is contingent on demonstrating personal faith in Jesus Christ and subscribing to the doctrinal statement but it is possible to be a member of an EFCA church without having been baptized. Some churches tie water baptism with church membership but most don't. Cal Hanson writes that some think this practice is a weakness but most do not. This clearly is a Free Church distinctive. I personally believe that it is a very reasonable practice in Hong Kong to tie baptism together with church membership.

- C. The Lord's supper – As with baptism, observance of the Lord's Supper is to be observed by the church in the present age but is not to be regarded as a means of salvation. Free Church people have always highly valued the practice of communion. The issue is that it is for believers only, not for those not yet saved. The matter of observing the Lord's Supper was an important issue in giving birth to the Free Churches in Scandinavia. In the state churches being a true believer was not a requirement for partaking in communion.
- D. Eternal Security – Many denominations identify themselves as Calvinist or Arminian. The EFCA is silent on this which means that the denomination is open to both views. Whatever the personal preferences, this is not seen as a matter of great importance. Therefore the silence on the issue in the statement of faith. Such words as predestination, foreknowledge, election and eternal security are not there. Even words such as grace and law are not mentioned. Through the years there have been great differences expressed between individuals on this issue. In 1930 the annual conference of the Nor. Danish EFC adopted a resolution which affirmed the right of believers to have membership in the local church and the right to freedom of conscience in doctrine not essential to salvation. This resolution states clearly what remains today one of the outstanding distinctives of the EFCA, that is, freedom of conscience in doctrine not essential to salvation. (Johnson family arguments)
- E. Eschatology – Two words distinguish the eschatological beliefs of the EFCA – Premillennial and imminent. Free church people believe that the personal return of Jesus will be prior to the millennium. The blessed hope is that Jesus will one day return to earth to establish His Kingdom for a 1000 year reign, but prior to that he will gather the church to himself. This is the rapture. The second word IMMINENT, captures the spirit and content of EFC eschatology. The early church people had a deep conviction that the Lord could return at any time. The fact that Jesus may return at any time was the driving force which caused EFC members to missionary activity at home and abroad and also caused them to examine their walk and conduct that they may be ready to at any time be ready to meet the Lord. The doctrinal statement is silent on the tribulation and now pastors in the EFC may hold a pre, mid or

post-tribulation view of the rapture.

- F. Spiritual Gifts – The statement of faith is silent on the subject of gifts of the Holy Spirit, the infilling of the Holy Spirit or signs and wonders. The Holy Spirit is alluded to in six of the twelve articles of the statement of faith speaking of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the transforming work of the HS. It is possible for Christians in the Free Church to hold different views on minor areas of doctrine to worship together in harmony. There are however some practices such as speaking in tongues that are permitted in one's devotional life but not practiced in the public life of the church.
- G. Since the earliest days the EFC has professed to be concerned for how believers live as for what they believe. It is held that the Christian life powerfully demonstrates to fiends and the community a noticeable difference so that, even apart from verbal or other overt witness, the lifestyle of the believer will in and of itself be a strong testimony to others. A EFC leader wrote "The EFC desires to preserve our freedom in Christ, but wishes its people to be responsible, godly men, women and young people who want to live in obedience to the principles and precepts of God's word and live in harmony with God's will for life as revealed in the Scriptures." Through the years the EFC, at its annual conferences, has passed resolutions spelling out concern for Godly lifestyle in every area of life such as abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs, also issues of pornography, abortion, apartheid, poverty and hunger and more recently for care of divorced people.

The EFC is evangelical and the organization of the church is congregational. We believe, according to the scripture, in the regeneration of man through a personal faith in Christ and that alone is necessary for becoming a member of the local church. The mode of baptism is left to individual conscience. The Lord's supper is celebrated in remembrance of Christ and the communion service is open to all believers.

In conclusion I would say that the EFC has never wavered in its commitment to the essentials:

- The authority and inerrancy of scripture
- Salvation by grace through the shed blood of Jesus Christ
- A commitment to godly living
- An inclusive rather than exclusive mindset
- A desire to be salt and light to a needy world

May God bless each of us together in our life and ministry.

John Neir

October 2000

Reference:

Arnold T. Olson – *"Believers Only"*

Arnold T. Olson – *"This We Believe"*

Calvin B. Hanson – *"What it Means to be Free"*

Westin – *"The Free Church Through the Ages"*

