

COMMENTARY ON PROPOSED STATEMENT OF FAITH

Submitted to the Westmont College Board of Trustees

by

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The following commentary has been reviewed by the members of the Articles of Faith Task Force and approved by them as a representation of our deliberations and intentions.

For clarity and historical accuracy, the proposed Statement of Faith is inserted here:

STATEMENT OF FAITH WESTMONT COLLEGE

Westmont College is a liberal arts college committed to Jesus Christ and belonging to the worldwide evangelical Protestant tradition. In that tradition, the college's trustees, administrators, and faculty participate in many different churches and with them confess such historic statements of the church as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. In faithfulness to God, who is the source of truth, and under the authority of Scripture, we joyfully and humbly affirm the following articles of faith, which guide our learning, teaching, and living.

ARTICLES OF FAITH

We believe in God

- The Lord our God alone is God, holy and loving, revealing in creation and in Jesus Christ God's own power and glory, grace and mercy. The Lord our God alone is God, just and true, perfect in being and trustworthy in action.
- The Lord our God is infinite and beyond imagination; our minds can never fully know God nor our hearts completely grasp his ways. The Lord our God is faithful and steadfast, unfailing in word and deed.
- The Lord our God is Triune—one being in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in co-equal, co-eternal communion. The Lord our God, Creator and Sustainer of all that is, redeems the world from its fallenness and consummates his saving work in a new heaven and a new earth.

. . . the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

- God the Father is the source of all that is good. He is Father to his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, and to all who are adopted as his sons and daughters through faith in Jesus Christ. He has sovereignty over us, affection toward us, and glory for us.
- God the Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ—one person in two natures, fully human and fully divine—who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. In his life and in his death on the cross he conquered the powers of darkness, paid the penalty for our sin, and demonstrated God's love for the world. In his bodily resurrection his life and death are vindicated, and he is revealed to be the only judge and redeemer of the world. He intercedes for us now before the Father and will return in glory.
- God the Holy Spirit is Lord and Life-Giver, the one who empowered Jesus Christ and who empowers his people to continue God's work today. God the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, brings us to faith in Jesus Christ, and conforms us to the image of Christ. The Spirit inspired the authors of

Scripture and guides the church in faithful translation and interpretation. The Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, is God-breathed and true, without error in all that it teaches; it is the supreme authority and only infallible guide for Christian faith and conduct—teaching, rebuking, and training us in righteousness.

... the Author of our salvation

- God created humankind for unbroken relationship with God, one another, and the rest of creation. Through Adam's disobedience, we fell into sin and now suffer alienation and brokenness. The effects of sin are so pervasive that apart from God's grace we are lost and dead. Only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ are we saved and made alive.
- In bringing us to faith in Jesus Christ, the Spirit incorporates us into the body of Christ, his church, the community of all believers in heaven and on earth. The church is called to bear witness to Christ among the nations by praising God, preaching the good news, discipling believers, healing the sick, serving the poor, setting free the oppressed, and caring for creation. The gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit empower the church for this mission.
- Jesus Christ will return one day in his glorified body to judge the living and the dead. Those who do not believe in him will be raised to suffer forever a just punishment. Those who believe in him will be transformed, their bodies raised imperishable and incorruptible, to live and reign with him forever in a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be all that is good and true and beautiful, but no sorrow, no tears, and no evil thing.

And so we pray: Come, Lord Jesus.

COMMENTARY

The commentary follows the structure of the Articles.

The introductory paragraph is an integral part of the Statement of Faith and an indispensable context for the Articles of Faith. Our "joyful and humble affirmation" is meant to commit us as a community and as individuals who sign the document.

The phrase "belonging to the worldwide evangelical Protestant tradition" produced significant discussion. The task force talked at great length about the wording that relates us to that tradition. We agree that there is much in the evangelical tradition to be thankful for and much to regret. There will be disagreement among us on the specifics and on the relative weight to be placed on thankfulness and regret. But the evangelical Protestant tradition is a developing tradition, always seeking to be true to Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in new and challenging circumstances. Thus, when we confess that we "belong to the worldwide evangelical Protestant tradition," we seek to honor that tradition critically and appreciatively.

This phrase also provides a tradition within which to interpret the document. If questions arise about the interpretation of a particular phrase, a good guide to interpretation is to ask how the evangelical Protestant tradition would understand that phrase. In particular, the evangelical Protestant tradition understands the Old and New Testament to comprise 66 books as delineated, for example, by the Westminster Confession.

The phrase "In that tradition" indicates that although we expect our faculty and staff to be evangelicals, the churches in which they participate will not always be unambiguously

evangelical. This has historically been the case for many evangelicals who have worked for faithfulness to the gospel within many different churches.

Our confession of "the authority of Scripture" in the preamble underscores the centrality of biblical authority in the evangelical tradition, which then gets fully developed in relation to the Holy Spirit, whose work Scripture is.

Three-fold Structure

The profession of faith begins with three foundational bullets that identify the existence, nature, and character of God, the basis and limits of our knowledge, and the essential Christian conviction that God is Triune.

The next three bullets develop our belief in the Triune God, identifying the appropriate work of each "person" of the Trinity, even as we recognize that none works alone.

The final three bullets witness to God's work of salvation. These rehearse the same identity and work that we profess in bullets 3-6, this time as the history of salvation.

Bullets 1-3

This section provoked no significant discussion; it is relatively straightforward. We might note that we intend "perfect in being and trustworthy in action" to comprise the fuller confession of God's nature and attributes found in the evangelical Protestant tradition. We did not include a longer list because we noted that other creeds are limited in their lists and we desired to be clear without being wordy.

Bullets 4-6

Under bullet 4, the last sentence is regarded by some to be unnecessary and inappropriate for Articles of Faith. The task force recommends it as a way of expanding what we confess about the Father, which in other statements is often very brief and often lacking in power. In that last sentence we use the word "affection" to avoid repeating the word "love" from bullet 1, and to draw on the warmth of Jesus' relationship to the Father to which he also invites us. The phrase "glory for us" has caused some comment. We believe that it is good for us to recover this widespread and central concept of Scripture—that we are destined by God for glory.

Bullet 5 has been very well received. I should note that we have added belief in the virgin birth of Jesus, which is absent from our current statement.

Bullet 6 produced significant comment on the use of "Lord and Life-Giver" for the Holy Spirit. Many evangelicals question whether Lord should be used of anyone other than Jesus Christ. In using "Lord and Life-Giver," the task force is simply adopting the language of the Nicene Creed. At Constantinople (A.D. 381) the original Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) was revised to make clear the full divinity of the Holy Spirit with the Father

and the Son. One way the creed did that was by applying the terms "Lord" and "Life-Giver" to the Holy Spirit. While the NT witness to "Lord" as a reference to the Holy Spirit is scant, the early church adopted this phrase quite deliberately in order to settle debates about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The task force has adopted this same language to signal our commitment to the church's great tradition.

Bullet 6 also identifies Scripture as the work of the Holy Spirit. Our proposal acknowledges the work of the Spirit in the writing, translation, and interpretation of Scripture. It also acknowledges the truth and authority of the Bible that we have today by adopting the language of the Bible ("God-breathed" and "true"). This language describes all of Scripture and is used to encompass what the terms "verbal and plenary" reference in the current statement. We continue to be committed to a Bible "without error," but in the proposal we connect this assertion to the text that we have (not the original autographs) and to the Bible's teaching, which then commits us to the task of faithful interpretation. While the language of the current statement drew on the debates and positions then at stake, we seek to remain faithful to that tradition by drawing on the Bible's own language in relation to current debates and positions. This bullet concludes by drawing on 2 Timothy 3:16 to confess the power of the Bible.

Bullets 7-9

Bullet 7 produced some discussion about the reference to Adam. This reference is carried over from our current statement and is rooted in Paul's use of "Adam" in Romans 5. Certainly, it is compatible with a variety of Christian interpretations of human creation. What is required by Scripture and this article is the belief that creation was originally good and exists in its fallen state as a result of an original act of human disobedience.

Bullet 8 seeks to emphasize the importance of the church by emphasizing that if we are in Christ we are in the church and by listing many activities through which the church carries out its mission. This list is not meant to be exhaustive nor is it meant to suggest the church always does these things perfectly.

Bullet 9 produced the most discussion among the faculty and staff and the lengthiest deliberations by the task force. What we have proposed seeks to remain faithful to the position of the current statement. We believe that the proposal neither contracts nor expands our boundaries. It places us squarely within the present evangelical community. While we rejoice in the coming of God's justice and submit to the teaching of Scripture on the last judgment, the task force does not expect anyone to be "gleeful" about hell.

The task force has sought to produce a statement that celebrates the **good news** that comes to us in Jesus Christ and guides us as evangelicals. We believe that we have accomplished that purpose. So it is appropriate that the Statement concludes with the prayer for the return of the One who is the good news of God: "Come, Lord Jesus."

In addition to the introductory paragraph, the task force believes that the statement following the Articles in our catalog very helpfully describes the kind of community that we seek to be and locates the role of the Statement of Faith within that community.

From the College Catalog, 2001-2002, p. 19, following the current Articles of Faith:

Even these declarations of faith do not define in detail what an individual Christian might believe in many important areas of doctrine and theology. Moreover, as a college seeking to serve evangelical Christians from many denominations, we feel less of an obligation to decide these various points in detail than we do to celebrate not only our unity in Jesus Christ but also our freedom to disagree, and to continue grappling in the many non-essential elements of our faith.

Although this statement does not fit as part of the Statement of Faith, we do think that it is an important and helpful addendum to the Statement that should not be lost by the College.