

The SPU Statement of Faith: A Primer
Richard B. Steele, Ph.D., Professor of Moral and Historical Theology
Board of Trustees Meeting, Thursday, May 19, 2022

Good evening, everyone. It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you this evening, and I would first like to thank you for your steadfast service to Seattle Pacific University during these trying times. Please know that you have been in my thoughts and prayers many times over these past months, and never more often or more intensely than during this past week, when you are faced with decisions of such far-reaching consequence for what it means for our beloved university. What President Menjares has asked me to share with you tonight is surely germane to your deliberations, though perhaps somewhat indirectly. I will *not* be addressing the matters of human sexuality or gender identity, and I will *not* be addressing the hiring policy or the lawsuits pertaining to it, or the budget deficit. Rather, I will be speaking about the SPU Statement of Faith, its history, its contents, and its intended uses in the life of our campus.

Some twenty years ago, the Board of Trustees approved a new *Mission* Statement for the University. Shortly thereafter, President Philip Eaton announced his desire for a parallel document, a *Faith* Statement. In autumn 2002, Phil convened a task force to draft this statement. The task force met regularly over the next eighteen months and submitted a final draft in April 2004. The task force had nine members, representing various campus constituencies: trustees, administration, faculty, staff, and students. I am the only member of the committee still employed fulltime here at SPU, though Dr. Doug Downing, then Chair of the Faculty and Associate Professor of Economics, still teaches parttime in the School of Business, Government and Economics. I was appointed as the School of Theology representative to the task force, although two other theologians, Dr. Les Steele, Professor of Christian Formation and Vice President of Academic Affairs, as well as Dr. Mark Abbot, senior pastor of First Free Methodist Church, also served. Three other members of the School of Theology, though not on the task force, played significant roles in the drafting of the Statement: Drs. Rob Wall, Professor of Scripture, Kerry Dearborn, Professor of Theology, and Randy Maddox, Professor of Wesleyan Studies. But it was the entire task force, not just the theologians, who put the Statement of Faith into its final form. It was a collegial effort. Phil unveiled the Statement in a memo to faculty and staff on April 19, 2004, copies of which have been distributed to you. The Board of Trustees approved the Statement on May 21, 2004. It has appeared prominently on the University website ever since.¹

Phil's memo indicated that the Statement would be used in the hiring process and in other situations "when we need to get our theological bearings." He also insisted that he was "less interested in defining the boundaries than ... in being clear about the center." These are important framing remarks. The Statement is intended to guide Christ-centered conversations about our staffing, our institutional ethos, and our educational mission, but not to enforce conformity on doctrinal details. Put sharply, the Statement's purpose is to secure both our *commitment to Christ* and our *freedom in Christ*. I hardly need to tell you how difficult it is for the members of a Christian community to balance those values—and yet how critical. A community that cherishes commitment to Christ without granting a measure of spiritual freedom to its

members risks becoming cramped and oppressive. Conversely, a community which, in granting its members a large measure of personal freedom, fails to call them to obedient discipleship, may lose its spiritual cohesion and moral clarity. The task force sought to chart a path between the Scylla of religious rigidity and the Charybdis of secular anarchy.

But how to do that? Our strategy was to identify four markers of SPU's religious identity: First, we are "historically orthodox," insofar as we "affirm the historic Christian faith, as attested in the divinely inspired and authoritative Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as summarized, for example, in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds." Second, we are "clearly evangelical," insofar as we "joyfully accept the task of proclaiming the evangel—God's good news—to the world." Third, we are "distinctively Wesleyan," insofar as we "share [the Wesleys'] conviction that God's saving purpose is the renewal of human hearts and lives in true holiness through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit." And fourth, we are "genuinely ecumenical," insofar as "we believe that theological diversity, when grounded in a common and vital faith in Christ, enriches learning and bears witness to our Lord's call for unity within the church."

That is how they are listed on the published Statement, and that is how they are often viewed—as a kind of checklist of *institutional characteristics*, a series of discrete boxes that candidates for employment must mark before they are hired. Although this view is not incorrect, it is simplistic and misleading. The four markers are better understood as a set of *procedural rules* for organizing campus life and managing campus debate on policy proposals and controversial topics. They are organically integrated and reciprocally interpretive. Each marker qualifies and clarifies what the other three are supposed to mean, and what they are *not* supposed to mean. Conversely, each marker is, in turn, qualified and clarified by what each of the other three says. The four markers thus stand related to each other, not like tin soldiers in marching order, but like the participants in a square dance, bowing to each other and holding hands with each other. According to our Faith Statement, we are "historically orthodox." But we are orthodox in a "clearly evangelical," "distinctively Wesleyan," and "genuinely ecumenical" way. For there are many kinds of Christianity that are "historically orthodox," in the sense that they have a high view of scripture and affirm the articles of the ancient creeds, but that don't claim to be "evangelical" or "Wesleyan" or "ecumenical." So, too, we call ourselves "evangelical." But we recognize that not all self-described evangelicals are as deeply rooted in the heritage of the ancient church, or as thoroughly shaped by Wesleyan piety, or as open to other branches of the worldwide church, as we claim to be. And precisely as a Wesleyan institution, we blend creedal orthodoxy, evangelical missiology, and ecumenical hospitality. Finally, our ecumenical sensibilities are supposed to prevent our orthodoxy from becoming narrow and doctrinaire, our evangelicalism from becoming strident and pushy, and our Wesleyanism from becoming clannish or sanctimonious. To drop or downplay any of these markers would disrupt the delicate symmetry and dynamic balance of the Statement and radically change who we are and what we aspire to be.

It is important to note that although all employees of this institution must state in their application that they "agree with and support" the Faith Statement, no one is required to sign

it. What this means in practice is that faculty and staff must promise in good conscience to be contributing members of a *campus community* that describes itself by means of the four markers and conducts its business accordingly. But they are not required to use all four markers to describe *themselves* as individuals. True, all of us must be “orthodox.” The ancient creeds *do* set some doctrinal boundaries. One of the deans told me recently that an applicant who was a Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness would get no further in the hiring process. But the creedal boundaries are wide in scope, and at SPU they have always been mildly policed. Furthermore, no employee must explicitly self-identify as an “evangelical,” or as a “Wesleyan,” or as a devotee of “ecumenism.” So, to repeat, the university’s Faith Statement intends to secure both our commitment to Christ and our freedom in Christ. It invites us to keep our institutional “square dance” orderly, while allowing plenty of room for individuals to *allemande*, and *promenade*, and *sashay* as conscience dictates.

How well has the Statement of Faith served its purpose—or rather, how well have we, the trustees, administration, faculty, and staff of SPU *used* the Statement as Phil Eaton hoped, namely “in our hiring process” and in helping us “get our theological bearings” on controversial issues? In my judgment, we have used it pretty well as a criterion of employability but less well as a regulative mechanism for debate. I would like to speak briefly to each of these.

In the years after the promulgation of the Statement, I served two terms on the Faculty Status Committee. I remember how often the Committee would review a file and conclude that the applicant had not responded to the University Faith Statement with much depth of understanding—even though, by the time of an applicant’s pre-tenure review, he or she had been here for at least three years! So, over and over again, the Status Committee would exhort applicants to beef up their personal faith narratives with more robust engagement with our four institutional identity markers. Finally, I said to my colleagues: “Folks, we’re teachers! If we give a test, and one student flunks it, we assume he didn’t study for it. But if twenty students flunk it, we realize that we didn’t teach the material properly. The same logic applies here. The problem isn’t with our younger colleagues, but with our failure to provide them with adequate theological coaching.” The committee accepted my logic—and promptly assigned me to fix the problem. So, in 2010, I began offering annual workshops on writing faith journey narratives for younger faculty. In 2015, my colleague, Dr. Dave Nienhuis took over. He runs two sessions on the SPU Faith Statement for the New Faculty Seminar, leads semi-annual workshops on writing journey narratives, and offers individual consultations for those who request them. The Status Committee has informed us that the general quality of faculty faith journey narratives has improved markedly, and that the writers have been engaging much more deeply and authentically with the University Faith Statement. So, if I had to give a grade for our university’s performance on using the Faith Statement in the hiring and professional development of faculty and staff, I’d cheerfully give us a B+. I hope that these coaching opportunities continue, and that future inservices, forums, and retreats will feature rigorous discussion of the Statement and its implications for curriculum, instruction, and campus life.

But as for our use of the Statement in helping us get our “theological bearings” on controversial policy issues, I feel we’ve earned nothing above a C-. I need to be cautious here, as my own participation in faculty governance has been largely restricted in recent years to Seminary business and secondary accreditation. So, it’s quite likely I’ve missed a great deal. But from what I’ve seen, attempts to bring our identity as an orthodox, evangelical, Wesleyan, and ecumenical institution to bear on concrete issues have been rare and half-hearted. One major reason for this is that a growing number of faculty find the terms we use to define our religious identity deeply problematic or completely meaningless. Please understand me: I believe that most current faculty and staff at SPU remain committed to the *content* of the Faith Statement, as delineated with such symmetry, subtlety, balance, and nuance in the explanatory paragraphs. But we have become aware that there has been a great deal of slippage in the way the headline terms are used in contemporary public discourse, and are chary about using them of ourselves, either individually or as an academic community.

For example, the headline of the first marker states, “We are historically orthodox.” Now, the word “orthodoxy” used to mean a set of beliefs that a group of people held to be objectively true. But the word now often refers to the subjective disposition of those who hold those beliefs—and it is seldom meant as a compliment! It betokens a narrow-minded defensiveness and a suspicion of all new ideas and information. That is surely *not* what we at SPU mean by affirming our orthodoxy! Rather, what we mean by it is the trinitarian faith of the New Testament and the early Ecumenical Councils. Similarly, our Statement says that “we are clearly evangelical,” and explains that “we joyfully accept the task of proclaiming God’s good news to the world.” As we use it, the word “evangelical” indicates an exuberant, energetic, and outward-looking faith. But as used by the press, the word often connotes religious insularity and self-righteousness—the attitude of a beleaguered “us” against the increasingly hostile or indifferent “them” of contemporary American society. This is grossly unfair, of course, to many people who call themselves evangelicals, including many of us here at SPU. But if the people we hope to reach with God’s good news misunderstand our self-description, they may reject our overtures without understanding our intentions. The third headline, “we are distinctively Wesleyan,” is problematic in a different way. “Wesleyanism” doesn’t seem to have much meaning at all these days to the wider public, either pejorative or descriptive. So, we don’t need to drop it, for fear that its use will confuse people. But we do need to rehabilitate it as the clearest designation of our distinctive religious heritage—and to do so, we also need to reinvigorate the doctrine and piety of classical Methodism, which the term is meant to name. The fourth headline states that “we are genuinely ecumenical.” What that is supposed to mean is that we at SPU are committed to working for the visible unity among the diverse worldwide family of Christ-followers. But American Christians often use the word “ecumenism” to mean little more than a tepid religious chumminess, in which everybody agrees that nobody should expect anybody to believe much of anything. Surely that’s not who we are or how we want the world to think of us!

In short, the theological content of the explanatory paragraphs of the four identity markers in our University Faith Statement is not in question. But the headline terms seem increasingly problematic. Perhaps we might reword them something like this:

1. We are a *trinitarian* Christian community.
2. We are a *missional* Christian community.
3. We are a *Wesleyan* Christian community.
4. We are a *globally minded* Christian community.

Yet changing the terminology so that we don't miscommunicate to external audiences is not enough. We need to do a better job than we have been doing lately in using our religious identity, as stated in the explanatory paragraphs of the Faith Statement, to guide our internal deliberations on policy matters. We need to honor the delicate symmetry that is intentionally built into the Statement, and indeed, to capitalize on its dynamic tensions to forge spiritual unity amidst the wide diversity of beliefs and practices among the members of our campus community. When you call yourself orthodox, I mustn't assume that you are a narrow-minded bigot. And when I call myself ecumenical, you mustn't assume that I'm wishy-washy on matters of Christian doctrine. Thinking the worst of each other is no basis for fruitful negotiation. When you call yourself an evangelical, I must remember that what that means is that you are joyfully mission-minded, for that's a trait that I, myself, long to exhibit. And when I call myself a Wesleyan, you should understand that I'm not professing denominational brand loyalty; I'm affirming a biblical theme that gave life to the Methodist revival of the eighteenth century and that is no less relevant today, namely, the Holy Spirit's power to cleanse and heal human souls. Seeing the best in each other turns disputants into prayer partners. We can all do better at this.

Some years ago, the great Methodist theologian, Nels Ferré, called Christians to occupy what he called the "extreme center" in human affairs.² Ferré was cautioning Christians against identifying themselves too closely with the theological and political dogmas of the radical Left or the radical Right. He insisted that Christians should not define themselves or each other by their location on a spectrum of human opinions, but by their common loyalty to Jesus and their common duty to love their neighbors. That is just what the SPU Statement of Faith calls us to, as well. When the words we use to define our loyalty to Jesus and our love for our neighbors are invested by the surrounding culture with alien meanings, or stripped of any meaning at all, then out of loyalty to Jesus and love for neighbor, we may need to revise our vocabulary to preserve our message. What we *can't* do is water down our message for fear of being rejected by our neighbors. Being Christian *means* running the risk of being rejected by those with whom we want to share the message—and yet continuing to proclaim that message boldly and to embody it faithfully precisely *because* we love our Lord and precisely *because* we love our neighbors for our Lord's sake. The key thing is to strive as a community to keep Christ at the "extreme center" of our life together, while granting freedom of conscience and a measure of lifestyle diversity to those who join us. As I read it, that is what our Faith Statement invites, challenges, and enables us to do. Thank you.

¹ <https://spu.edu/about-spu/statement-of-faith>

² Nels Ferré, *The Extreme Center* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), especially Chapter 4, “Extremism Without Extremity,” pp. 36–45. It should be noted, however, the specific characteristics of the “reactionary right” and the “radical left” are somewhat different today than they were half a century ago, when Ferré was writing.