## Basic beliefs and viewpoints of three reformed denominations: Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)

ISSUE	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
When did the denomination come into existence in its current structure / form?	1983	2012	1980
Does the denomination list what it considers to be "essential tenets" of the faith" required to be held by all ordained leaders?	No <sup>1</sup>	Yes (attached)	Yes (attached)
Is "Sola Scriptura," the teaching that the Bible is the only inspired, perfect, sufficient, and authoritative word of God and the only source for Christian doctrine, upheld?	Yes and No <sup>2 &amp; 3</sup> While upheld by many leaders, there are a wide variety of views on scripture and its authority.	Yes It is one of their essential tenets	Yes It is one of their essential tenets
Do significant numbers of elders and pastors question that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and the singular way of salvation?	Yes <sup>4</sup>	No	No
Is the incarnation (that Jesus is fully God and fully man) upheld	Yes and No <sup>2 &amp; 3</sup> While official statements of the PCUSA uphold this belief, different beliefs are allowed to be held and taught by ordained leaders	Yes It is one of their essential tenets	Yes It is one of their essential tenets
Is substitutionary atonement by Jesus upheld	Yes and No <sup>2 &amp; 3</sup> While official statements of the PCUSA uphold this belief, different beliefs are allowed to be held and taught by ordained leaders	Yes It is one of their essential tenets	Yes It is one of their essential tenets
Confessions / Creeds	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms (same as PCUSA)	Westminster Confession of Faith
Are women ordained into leadership positions?	Yes Affirmed and required by their constitution	Yes Affirmed and required by their constitution	Yes and No While a majority of presbyteries and congregations ordain women, it is not seen as an essential belief.
Affirms the view that marriage is between one man and one woman	Yes and No This is their official position but some leaders are not abiding by it, and others are trying to change it and most agree they will succeed soon.	Yes And not being challenged	Yes And not being challenged
Are ordained leaders expected to live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness?	No	Yes	Yes
View on Abortion	Pro-choice <sup>5</sup>	Pro-life	Pro-life
Per Capita (request for funds to help pay for administrative costs of denomination)	Yes Currently \$29 per member and is not mandatory, though some believe it may become mandatory)	Yes 1% of church budget and is mandatory.)	Yes \$17 per member and can not become mandatory, per polity.
Ownership of congregation's property	Denomination hold property in trust	Congregation owns property	Congregation owns property

1. In the PCUSA there is an ordination vow for pastors and officers which asks, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable exposition of what Scripture leads us to believe and do?" But the PCUSA has no listing of the "Essential Tenets". Rev. Dr. Ben Lacy Rose (former professor at Union Theological Seminary and former moderator of General Assembly) famously wrote, "If you asked 10 (PCUSA) pastors or seminary professors to make a list (of essential tenets) you would have 10 different lists." (Presbyterian Survey, June 1987). Both the EPC and ECO have defined the essential tenets and all ordained officers are required to uphold those core beliefs.

There is an ancient, wise statement: In essentials---unity
In non-essentials---liberty
In all things---charity

The refusal of the PCUSA to declare what it considers to be the few, core essentials of the faith which all ordained leaders must uphold has resulted in what could be stated as a different take on that ancient statement:

In essentials and non-essentials---liberty (a call to accept all views)

In all things---charity

Both the ECO and EPC Presbyterian denominations clearly identify a handful of foundational / essential and Biblical beliefs all ordained leaders must uphold.

2. When determining what a denomination's beliefs are, you need to consider more than official statements by the denomination. Dr. Carl Trueman, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, states "You can tell a church's real confessional standards, theological and moral, by looking at the minutes of disciplinary proceedings and seeing what the church disciplines people for teaching or doing." That is, besides official statements approved by a denomination you can tell what a denomination believes by considering what it knowingly allows to be taught without seeking to correct / discipline. If a denomination knows there are those who are openly teaching "x" and does nothing to correct that teaching, then "x" is at the very least an acceptable view in that denomination.

Here is an example of this on a local level and outside the realm of theology. A church has a trailer and the official policy set by Session is only members may borrow it and a member must be the driver of any vehicle using it. Suppose non-members started using the trailer and the Session knew about it but didn't take any corrective action / discipline. The 'official policy' didn't change but the actual policy has changed.

When PCUSA presbytery or denominational officials know of ordained leaders who are openly teaching that which is contrary to official denominational doctrinal views but they do nothing to correct or discipline those who are teaching those contrary views, then there is an approval of those views, deeming them 'acceptable' even though the official statements have not be changed.

For more on Dr. Trueman's brief presentation on this topic you may do an internet search for "Dr. Carl Trueman, No Country For Old Men" or go to this link <a href="http://www.reformation21.org/articles/no-country-for-old-men.php">http://www.reformation21.org/articles/no-country-for-old-men.php</a>

3. In the PCUSA's Worship section of the Book of Order there is a strong ordination vow concerning scriptural authority; "Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?" However, in recent years, a significant number of pastors in the PCUSA have deemphasized, if not *de-facto* discarded, the historic principle that the Bible is THE authoritative Word of God written. A recent update to the Book of Order (G-2.0104-b) suggests regarding ordination examinations that Scripture be used as guidance, saying nothing about authority.

The booklet "Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture" underscores that there are at least five different perspectives in the PCUSA on the nature of divine inspiration of scripture, ranging from "inerrancy" to "the Bible is merely a record of moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians." No preference is pressed for any of the five positions and one can find all five positions described in the booklet being held by ordained leaders in the PCUSA.

Since there are no essential tenets declared by the PCUSA and there is no established standard about how one should view scripture, it is impossible to correct / discipline errant teaching. On May 1, 2012, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission issued a ruling that greatly impacts this area. The GAPJC ruled that "a vast diversity of interpretation of scripture and the confessions regarding human sexuality" exists within the PCUSA and represents "thoughtful disagreement among reasonable and faithful Presbyterians." The decision regarding doctrinal orthodoxy in any given case can be made only by the ordaining body, and the GAPJC claims it is not in a position to choose one interpretation and impose it upon all ordaining bodies as an essential of Reformed faith and polity. Implications of this decision: If Presbyterians, using questionable methods of interpretation, promote views contrary to historical teachings of the church and go unchallenged by their own presbyteries, they are shielded from wider church discipline. Is it possible, then, that our foundational doctrines (incarnation, atonement, bodily resurrection, Jesus as the sole / unique Savior, etc.) are now optional? In a word, "yes," as you can find ordained leaders in the PCUSA who deny those very things with impunity. (See John Shuck and others who are part of the liberal progressive Christianity group.)

Reformed tradition declares that scripture is our primary / foundational authority for faith and life. Thus, being able to rightly interpret scripture is essential. A Reformed way to read scripture is: Pray for illumination by the Holy Spirit; read the Biblical text; seek to understand the plain meaning of the text; use "scripture interprets scripture" method where a particular passage of the Bible is to be understood in the light of the whole counsel of Scripture so that unclear passages are understood in light of clearer passages; consider context, history, literary genre; consider the historical teachings of the church (e.g. confessions) for guidance and help.

Throughout the PCUSA there are more and more using different methods to interpret scripture. There are those who prioritize one's perceptions of faith above the propositional truths of Scripture. Scripture then is only "authoritative" if it melds with the preconceptions one brings to it. One liberal / progress way of reading the Bible is to start with a principle (e.g., "justice" or "equality" or "liberation"), each with its own predetermined definition, and then interpret a passage of Scripture through the lens of that predetermined principle. The result of this method is the words of Scripture are recast into meanings that, at times, defy what Scripture actually says. This is how some can claim to uphold authority of scripture yet come up with understandings completely foreign to what scripture clearly states and contradictory to what the Church universal has held for 2,000 years. This interpretation method leads to disregarding **what Scripture says** in favor of what a theologian **says that Scripture means**. One often hears the statement, "We all agree that Scripture

is authoritative, but we have different ways of interpreting it." Yes, there are different ways of interpreting scripture but not all of them are of equal value or lead to right understanding.

In the recent GA Permanent Judicial Commission Parnell case (in the PCUSA this is similar to a ruling by the Supreme Court), those who sought to reference the authority of Scripture to support their view were told that since there are different ways of interpreting the Bible, than scripture cannot be used to prove any one position. One can find differing interpretations of any essential belief of the church because there are some methods of interpretation which allow the reader to shape God's word instead of God's word shaping / transforming how we think (see Romans 12:2). A person who views the Bible as a collection of myths or not of Divine inspiration will have very different methods of interpretation yielding different results.

It is no wonder when you consider the above that in 2010 Landon Whitsitt, vice-moderator of the PCUSA, declared, "Sola Scriptura is dead in most places (in the PCUSA) and rapidly dying in others."

- 4. The ordination vows for officers in the PCUSA still have a strong statement about this; "Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" However, among ordained leadership in the PCUSA there is no consensus regarding whether faith in Christ is necessary for salvation, as shown by a survey from the Research Services of the PCUSA (Presbyterian Panel Survey on Religious and Demographic Profile of Presbyterians) which found that less than half of PCUSA pastors agree that only followers of Jesus can be saved. At the 2001 GA a resolution was introduced to declare "Jesus is the singular saving Lord", but the language failed to pass and instead that GA only could affirm "Jesus is unique." At the 2006 GA, before modifying a proposed resolution to say Jesus was "uniquely Savoir", a group of commissioners (all ordained leaders in the PCUSA) stated their belief that Christ is only one among many paths to eternal life, a view held by many theological liberal ordained leaders in the PCUSA.
- 5. While some will say the PC(USA) affirms both sides of the abortion debate, it would be difficult to support that claim. The PC(USA) has two agencies who are members of an abortion rights lobbying group in Washington, DC but does not belong to a lobby group supporting a pro-life viewpoint. The General Assembly voted in 2002 to affirm late-term abortions like partial-birth abortion, something both houses of Congress overwhelming rejected in a bi-partisan fashion. The medical insurance provided through the PC(USA) Board of Pensions pays for any abortion procedure regardless of the reason for the abortion (e.g. Was the abortion done to save the life of a mother? To abort a child with an identified pre-existing condition? For gender selection? For convenience as a form of birth control? Member of Washington lobby group for abortion rights, see <a href="http://www.rcrc.org/about/members.cfm">http://www.rcrc.org/about/members.cfm</a>

Approves abortion of babies who can live outside the womb, see

http://www.ppl.org/old/PPLNews Fall2002 I.html

Abortion plan pays for any abortion, see <a href="http://www.ppl.org/index.php/publications/presbyterian-church-usa-abortion-policy/67-abortion-coverage-by-pcusa-medical-plan/314-2008-updated-ppl-booklet-on-pcusa-medical-benefits-plan-coverage-of-abortion Including late term abortion's like partial birth, see

http://www.ppl.org/index.php/publications/presbyterian-church-usa-abortion-policy/66-pcusa-policy-on-abortion/132-bop-medical-benefits-plan-covers-late-term-abortions

## Evangelical Presbyterian Church's Essentials of Our Faith

All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks. On this sure foundation we affirm these additional Essentials of our faith:

We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all honor, glory and praise forever!

Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven, where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He now is our High Priest and Mediator.

The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior. Indwelling our hearts, He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth, and seals us for the day of redemption.

Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, thereby justifies them in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.

The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible, yet imperfect, expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity; where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting, she awaits the return of her Lord.

Jesus Christ will come again to the earth-personally, visibly, and bodily-to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." (Rev. 22:20)

The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to "Him who loved us and gave Himself for us." He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph. 2:10)

These Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

## The 19 key points of Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterian's essential tenets

(to read the entire page statement go to <a href="http://www.fellowship-pres.org/wp-content/uploads/Theology10.pdf">http://www.fellowship-pres.org/wp-content/uploads/Theology10.pdf</a> (pages 5-8)

- 1. The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever
- 2. We glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son.
- 3. With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- who is both one essence and three persons.
- 4. Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human.
- 5. The divinity of the Son is in no way impaired, limited, or changed by His gracious act of assuming a human nature, and that His true humanity is in no way undermined by His continued divinity.
- 6. The risen Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human.
- 7. The same Jesus Christ who is now ascended and who will one day return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead.
- 8. We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit
- 9. The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will.
- 10. No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design.
- 11. In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children. Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God,
- 12. Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy.
- 13. Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God's gracious presence to those who are lost.
- 14. In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father
- 15. Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline.
- 16. The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest and king reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders.
- 17. Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God.
- 18. Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, which is initiated, sustained and fulfilled by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.
- 19. As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments.