



Selected Points of Comparison in Theology and Practice among the PC(USA), ECO, EPC

1. The Nature and Understanding of Scripture

- PC(USA)** The booklet “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture” (1983) underscores that there are at least five different perspectives in the PC(USA) on the nature of divine inspiration ranging from “inerrancy” to “the Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians.” No preference is expressed for any of the five positions.
- ECO** 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. (Essential Tenets)
- EPC** All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God...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. (Essentials)

2. The Nature of and Language for God

- PC(USA)** The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. (F-01.01)
- ECO** With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who is both one essence and three persons. God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, and ineffable. The ongoing act of creation is further manifested in God's gracious sovereignty and providence, maintaining the existence of the world and all living creatures for the sake of His own glory. (Essential Tenets)
- EPC** 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. (Essentials)

3. Theological Pluralism/Universalism

- PC(USA)** The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. (F-1.0403)
- The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. (F-1.01)
- ECO** 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 irrespective of ethnicity, gender, or cultural/sexual orientation. Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God, for he is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with him that a believer is able to know God as Father. Only in Jesus Christ is the truth about the Triune God fully and perfectly revealed, for only he is the Truth, only he has seen the Father, and only he can make the Father known. (Essential Tenets)
- EPC** Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life. (Essentials)

4. The Confessions and Their Authority

PC(USA) Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed, Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Confession, Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, Theological Declaration of Barmen, Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith.

[The Confessions] guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines.

These confessional statements are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. The church is prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. (F-2.01-02)

ECO Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed, Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Confession, Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, Theological Declaration of Barmen, Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith.

The confessions are not final authorities; Scripture is the authority that measures all doctrinal, confessional, and theological expression. The Reformed Tradition has always understood that, while confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The ordination vows made by (officers) commit us to receive and adopt their essential tenets, and to be instructed, led, and guided by them. Because confessional seriousness includes mutual responsibility and accountability, the church must be prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even discipline one ordained who rejects the faith expressed in the confessions. (Confessional Standards)

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core. This document is thus intended...as a guide to the corporate exploration of and commitment to the great themes of Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions that set forth those themes. (Essential Tenets)

EPC The Westminster Confession of Faith is a confessional statement of orthodox Presbyterianism. The Westminster Confession of Faith is our standard of doctrine as found in Scripture. It is a positive statement of the Reformed Faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith constitutes a system of biblical truth that an officer of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is required to believe, acknowledging that each individual court has the freedom to allow exceptions which do not infringe upon the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

"Essentials of Our Faith" is an irenic statement of historic evangelicalism. The purpose of "Essentials of Our Faith" is to define core beliefs of the Christian Faith. It expresses historic Christian beliefs common to all true believers and churches throughout the world. "Essentials of Our Faith" is not intended to be the exclusive test of orthodoxy for ordination. It is not intended to be used as an explicit standard for minimal core beliefs for candidates, ordination or ministerial examinations. It is not to be construed as a substitute for the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Both the Westminster Confession of Faith and "Essentials of Our Faith" are important documents in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The Westminster Confession of Faith and "Essentials of Our Faith" are not alternative statements of truth, nor are they competitive statements of truth. They each serve important and harmonious purposes within the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The Westminster Confession of Faith preserves our commitment to the historic orthodoxy of the Reformed Faith. "Essentials of Our Faith" preserves our commitment to historic evangelicalism. (Essentials)

5. Salvation by Grace Alone

PC(USA) The Protestant watchwords – grace alone—embody principles of understanding that continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith. (F-2.04)

Note: the PC(USA) does not define its essential tenets over and above what the Confessions say we believe. Because of this one needs to go to the Book of Confessions to find the PC(USA)'s particular understanding of salvation by grace alone.

ECO As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. 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. We are not merely wounded in our sin; we are dead, unable to save ourselves. Apart from God's initiative, salvation is not possible for us. Our only hope is God's grace. We discover in Scripture that this is a great hope, for our God is the One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. 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. Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see his glory. We who receive him and believe in his name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because his glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward him. By his enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of his glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with his perfect humanity and transforming us by his divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others. (Essential Tenets)

EPC 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. (Essentials of our Faith)

3.3 By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

3.4 These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

3.5 Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

3.6 As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other deemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

3.7 The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice. (EPC Westminster Confession of Faith)

6. The Person of Jesus Christ

PC(USA) By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised to new life. (F-1.01)

ECO Christ is both truly God and truly human. As to his divinity, he is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, being of one substance with the Father; as to his humanity, he is like us in every way but sin, of one substance with us, like us in having both a human soul and a human body. As to his divinity, he is eternally begotten of the Father; as to his humanity, he is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. As to his divinity, his glory fills heaven and earth; as to his humanity, his glory is shown in the form of a suffering servant, most clearly when he is lifted up on the cross in our place. (Essential Tenets)

EPC 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. (Essentials of our Faith)

7. Ordination Standards

PC(USA) Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. The council responsible for ordination and/or installation shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation. Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates. (G-2.0104b)

ECO 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. As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments. We therefore hold one another accountable to:

1. worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments;
3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;
4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;
5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;
6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death;
7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;
8. practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;
9. pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;
10. resist the pull of envy, greed, and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.

In Jesus Christ we see the perfect expression of God's holy will for human beings offered to God in our place. His holy life must now become our holy life. In Christ, God's will is now written on our hearts, and we look forward to the day when we will be so confirmed in holiness that we will no longer be able to sin. As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus leads us along the path of life toward that goal, bringing us into ever deeper intimacy with the Triune God, in whose presence is fullness of joy.

EPC **Ministers** should, according to the Scripture, have certain qualifications. They should be sound in the faith and have an aptitude for teaching. Their lives should reflect holiness and discipline which brings honor to Christ and which causes them to be well thought of by those outside the Church. They should have wisdom and discretion and should have adequate training to equip them for their task. (EPC *Book of Order* G10-2)

Ruling Elders should exhibit certain characteristics of life. This includes being blameless in life, sound in the faith, wise in the things of God, and discreet in all things. Persons who fill this office should exhibit a lifestyle that is an example to all, both in and outside the Church. A congregation preparing to elect persons to this holy office should carefully study appropriate passages of Scripture relating to the Ruling Elder and be very prayerful in selecting persons to this office. (G10-5)

Deacons should exhibit especially those spiritual qualities of the Christian, and should be earnest and whole-hearted followers of Christ. They should be persons who are steady and reliable, well thought of by all. They should not be new in the faith and should be tested for faithfulness before election. (G10-8)

8. Abortion

PC(USA) “Problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and insolvable circumstances that we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation.” Moral judgments are a matter of each woman's individual interpretation of right or wrong in her particular crisis situation, acknowledging “...circumstances in a sinful world that may make abortion the least objectionable of difficult options.” Further, “...no law or administrative decision should limit access to abortion; limit information and counseling concerning abortions; or limit or prohibit public funding for necessary abortions for the socially and economically disadvantaged.” *Report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion*, adopted by the 1992 General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

ECO I will honor the sanctity of human life above the claims of human freedom. (Fellowship Covenant)

EPC The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is convinced that the Bible strongly affirms the dignity and value of every human life. (Position Paper on Abortion)

9. Ordination of Practicing Homosexuals

PC(USA) Yes

ECO No

EPC No

10. Extension of Health Care Benefits to Same-Gender Partners

PC(USA) Yes

ECO No

EPC No

11. Affirmation of God’s Equal Call on Women and Men to Leadership in the Church

PC(USA) Christ alone rules, calls, teaches, and uses the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of God’s new creation. (G.2.0101)

ECO 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. We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ’s offices within the world beyond the church. Every Christian is called to a prophetic life, proclaiming the good news to the world and enacting that good news. Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ’s priestly, mediatorial work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God’s blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world. We are equipped to share in these offices by the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to the pattern of Christ’s life. (Essential Tenets)

EPC The Evangelical Presbyterian Church does not believe that the issue of the ordination of women is an essential of the faith. The historic Reformed position on the scriptural doctrine of government by elders is believed to be that form needed for the perfecting of the order of the visible church, but has never been considered to be essential to its existence....

Thus, while some churches may ordain women and some may decline to do so, neither position is essential to the existence of the church. since people of good faith who equally love the Lord and hold to the infallibility of Scripture differ on this issue, and since uniformity of view and practice is not essential to the existence of the visible church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has chosen to leave this decision to the Spirit-guided consciences of particular congregations concerning the ordination of women as elders and deacons, and to the presbyteries concerning the ordination of women as ministers. (Position Paper on the Ordination of Women)

12. Missional Ministry

PC(USA) The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission. (F-1.01)

ECO We aspire to reclaim a sense of covenanted biblical community, where unity is derived from a shared mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ, rather than by structural mandate.... Congregations will gather together not to debate process or policy, but to collaborate, share best practices, encourage a Jesus way of life, and spur one another on to love and good deeds. These structures and policies are intended to serve the ministry and mission of Christ's Church, rather than the other way around. (Introductory Letter to ECO Polity Paper)

The congregation is composed of members of the body of Christ who have covenanted together to engage in the mission of God in their particular context, with Jesus Christ as Head. Each congregation should strive to be a tangible, if provisional, demonstration of the Kingdom of God. Congregations exist in a variety of forms yet have these ends in common: sharing the Good News of reconciliation to God in and through Jesus Christ, gathering people for divine worship and nurturing relationships for spiritual accountability and mutual ministry, all the while preparing disciples to be the sent people of God in the world. (Polity 1.0101)

Pastors and ministries are healthier when there are opportunities for mutually supportive relationships. Therefore, pastors shall participate in a peer review with other pastors. The purpose of this review is to coach, encourage, and pray for one another as they strive for greater missional effectiveness. This peer review shall:

- a. Explore the health of each other's current ministry.
- b. Explore the future objectives for each other's ministry.
- c. Address challenges and obstacles to meeting those objectives.
- d. Share best practices and insights.
- e. Explore each other's physical, spiritual, relational and emotional health. (Polity 2.0402)

EPC Our denomination wants to clarify for its member churches who we are and what we do as the United States and many other nations become mission fields that are larger, more spiritually diverse, and more antagonistic to the Gospel than ever before. The term "missional" has become common and therefore highly nuanced. We desire to define missional in a simple and specific way so that each EPC church can commit to a unified, obedient pursuit of the expansion of the Kingdom of God. A missional denomination:

1. Believes ministry begins with the local church.
2. Is made up of local congregations committed to being missional.
3. Believes that the Presbyteries and General Assembly, being expressions of the larger church, have an important role to play in identifying, equipping, and supporting leaders and churches. They are a key link in the principle of mutual accountability toward missional ministry and Biblical standards.
4. Constantly examines whether its polity, structures and programs are supporting or inhibiting that missional commitment..." (From "Missional Church and Denomination", EPC website)

For More Information:

Visit our website (www.fellowship-pres.org) for more detailed information on ECO's theology and polity. Contact us directly at fellowshippres@gmail.com.