ECO Essential Tenets

2026

Building flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Essential Tenets

Presbyterians have been of two minds about essential tenets. We recognize that just as there are some central and foundational truths of the gospel affirmed by Christians everywhere, so too there are particular understandings of the gospel that define the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. All Christians must affirm the central mysteries of the faith, and all those who are called to ordered ministries in a Presbyterian church must also affirm the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry.

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 not as a new confession but 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.

The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Each member of the church glorifies God by recognizing and naming His glory, which is the manifestation and revelation of His own nature. Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity. So we confess our faith not as a matter of dispassionate intellectual assent, but rather as an act by which we give God glory and announce our membership in the body of Christ. We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.

I. God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. **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.** We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our

conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we affirm the secondary authority of the following *ECO Confessional Standards* as faithful expositions of the Word of God*: Nicene Creed, Apostles' Creed, Heidelberg Catechism, Westminster Confession, Westminster Shorter Catechism, Westminster Larger Catechism and the Theological Declaration of Barmen.*

II. Trinity and Incarnation: The Two Central Christian Mysteries

A. Trinity

The triune nature of God is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. **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. He cannot be divided against Himself, nor is He becoming more than He has been, since there is no potential or becoming in Him. He is the source of all goodness, all truth and all beauty, of all love and all life, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The three persons are consubstantial with one another, being both coeternal, and coequal, such that there are not three gods, nor are there three parts of God, but rather three persons within the one Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. All three persons are worthy of worship and praise.

God has no need of anyone or anything beyond Himself. Yet in grace this Triune God is the one Creator of all things. 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. He is the Holy One, the ground of all being, whose glory is so great that for us to see Him is to die. Yet He has made the creation to reflect His glory, and He has made human beings in His own image, with a unique desire to know Him and capacity for relationship with Him. Since our God is a consuming fire whom we in our sin cannot safely approach, He has approached us by entering into our humanity in Jesus Christ.

B. Incarnation

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians everywhere: that **Jesus 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.

We confess the mystery of His two natures, divine and human, in one person. We reject any understanding of the communication of attributes that must result in a blending of the two natures such that Jesus Christ is neither truly God nor truly human. We insist upon sufficient distinction between the two natures to preserve the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely

been sent from God. Rather, in His coming we have seen God's glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being and in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. **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.** This is a mystery that we cannot explain, but we affirm it with joy and confidence.

This mystery of the incarnation is ongoing, for the risen **Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human.** He is bodily present at the right hand of the Father. When we are promised that one day we will see Him face to face, we acknowledge that it is the face of Jesus of Nazareth we will someday see. The one who, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, died at Calvary, and walked with disciples to Emmaus is 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.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless when He ascended into heaven, but would ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit as a comforter and advocate. **We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit.** He comes to us as He came to the gathered disciples at Pentecost: to kindle our faith, to embolden our witness, and to accompany us in mission.

III. Essentials of the Reformed Tradition

A. God's grace in Christ

God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. **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.** God created human beings from the dust of the earth and His own breath, to be His images and representatives, conduits of God's grace to the creation. Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness. God also created human beings to speak His grace and truth to one another, to be helpers who are fit for one another, so that our social relationships would strengthen our ability to serve and obey Him. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice with one another, in which power is used not to protect and serve but to demean. God further created human beings with the capacity for relationship with Him, with His law written on our hearts so that we had the ability to worship Him in love and obey Him by living holy lives. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to hate God and our neighbor, to worship idols of our own devising rather than the one true God.

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.

This grace does not end when we turn to sin. Although we are each deserving of God's eternal condemnation, the eternal Son assumed our human nature, joining us in our misery and offering Himself on the cross in order to free us from slavery to death and sin. Jesus takes our place both in bearing the weight of condemnation against our sin on the cross and in offering to God the perfect obedience that humanity owes to Him but is no longer able to give. All humanity participates in the fall into sin. Those who are united through faith with Jesus Christ are fully forgiven from all our sin, so that there is indeed a new creation. We are declared justified, not because of any good that we have done, but only because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. **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, 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. Only Jesus Christ is the new Life that is offered, for He is the bread from heaven and the fountain of living water, the one by whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together. The exclusivity of these claims establishes that God's love is not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious; that God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.

B. Election for salvation and service

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 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 our 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.

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. **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. The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world. Christ sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded us. We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

C. Covenant life in the church

We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. **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.** Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.

Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, and so we both pray and work for the union of the church throughout the world. Even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation bringing the treasures of their kingdoms into the new city of God.

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. First, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word proclaimed may indeed become God's address to us. The Spirit's illuminating work is necessary both for the one who preaches and for those who listen. Second, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus. In the Baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God's gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit; in the Baptism of adults, we confess our confidence that God's grace can make us new creations at any stage of our lives. Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, a mark of entrance into the visible church, and it is the Holy Spirit who makes this sacrament efficacious in God's time to those whom God has called. In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen, and transform us. Third, the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.

D. Faithful stewardship of all of life

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.

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. We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us. Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.

E. Living in obedience to the Word of God

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. The first response of gratitude is prayer, and the daily discipline of prayer – both individually and together – should mark the Christian life. The life of prayer includes praise to God for His nature and works, sincere confession of our sin, and intercession for the needs of those we know and for the needs of the world. 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.