

**Comparison of basic beliefs and viewpoints
of three Presbyterian denominations:**

**Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA),
Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO),
and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)**

(updated 2/2015)

ISSUE	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
<i>When did the denomination come into existence in its current structure / form?</i>	1983	2012	1980
<i>Does the denomination express the “Essential Tenets of the Faith”? (Essential tenets are foundational beliefs.)</i>	No¹	Yes Their essential tenets are attached	Yes Their essential tenets are attached
<i>“Sola Scriptura” is the Reformed teaching that the Bible is the only inspired, perfect, sufficient, and authoritative word of God and the only source for Christian doctrine. Is this view upheld by the denomination?</i>	Yes and No^{2,3}	Yes	Yes
<i>Do significant numbers of elders and pastors question that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and the singular way of salvation?</i>	Yes⁴	No	No
<i>Is the incarnation (that Jesus is fully God and fully man) upheld?</i>	Yes and No^{2,3}	Yes	Yes
<i>Is substitutionary atonement by Jesus upheld (see 1 Cor. 15:3. See also 2 Cor.5:21, Rom. 4:25, 1 Pet. 2:24, Rom. 3:25, 1 John 2:2.)</i>	Yes and No^{2,3}	Yes	Yes
<i>Confessions / Creeds</i>	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms	Westminster Confession of Faith
<i>Are women ordained into leadership positions?</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes and No The ordination of women is considered a non-essential. Some churches and presbyteries ordain women and others do not.
<i>Affirms that marriage is between one man and one woman</i>	No In states where same-sex marriage is legal, PCUSA pastors can conduct such ceremonies. PCUSA presbyteries are currently voting on Amendment 14F, declaring marriage to be between “two people.” It is expected to be approved by 5/2015.	Yes	Yes

<i>Are ordained leaders expected to live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness?</i>	No The expectation of “fidelity and chastity” was removed from the PCUSA constitution through Amendment 10A, approved by a majority of presbyteries in 2011.	Yes	Yes
<i>View on Abortion</i>	Pro-choice⁵	Pro-life	Pro-life
<i>Per Capita (request for funds to help pay for administrative costs of the denomination)</i>	Yes GA per capita rates are voluntary at \$7.07/member in 2015. The national average for presbytery+ synod+GA per capita is \$40 although some presbyteries do not call it per capita but “a fair share” or “every member gift.	Yes (It is 1% of church budget and is mandatory.)	Yes (It is \$17 per member and cannot become mandatory, per polity.)
<i>Ownership of congregation’s property (This is an inherently complicated issue and depends largely on the particular facts of a specific church, presbytery, and the state in which the property is held. For a comprehensive examination, see “The Guide to Church Property Law, 2nd edition”)</i>	Denomination asserts a trust over all church property, real and financial In many states, the law favors the congregation’s claim to ownership and denies assertions of trust by the PCUSA.	Congregation owns property	Congregation owns property and this provision cannot be changed

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 ordained leaders must uphold has resulted in what could be stated as their 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. 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 leadership 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 been 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 <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/no-country-for-oldmen.php>

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 affirmation that the Bible is the only authoritative Word of God. 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. Since there are no essential tenets declared by the PCUSA, there is no established standard about how one should view scripture. Thus, one can find all five positions described in the booklet held by ordained leaders in the PCUSA.

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 Bible; seek to understand the plain meaning of the text; use scripture interprets scripture (read a particular passage of the Bible 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 (confessions) for input.

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. A 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 as being clearly taught in God's word. This interpretation method leads to disregarding *what Scripture says* in favor of what its theologians say *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 result in 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 were told that, since there are so many interpretations of the Bible, it cannot be used to prove any one position. One can find differing interpretations about 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).

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 Saviour", 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 PCUSA affirms both sides of the abortion debate, it would be difficult to support that claim. The PCUSA 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 overwhelmingly rejected in a bipartisan fashion. The medical insurance provided through the PCUSA 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](#)

[Approves abortion of babies who can live outside the womb](#)

[Abortion plan pays for any abortion](#)

[Including late term abortion's like partial birth](#)

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

([Read the entire page statement.](#))

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.