

## SESSION 2: *A COMMON COMMITMENT*

### *ESSENTIAL TENANTS OF THE ECO*

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**

1. 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.

2. We confess that God al
3. one 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. 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.

### B. Incarnation

1. 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.

2. **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.

**3. 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.

3. 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

1. 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.**

2. 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.

3. 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.**

4. **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**

1. 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.

2. 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.**

#### **C. Covenant life in the church**

1. 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.

2. **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.

#### **D. Faithful stewardship of all of life**

**1. 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.

**2. 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.

**THREE KINDS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

Episcopal: Ruled by Bishop or Overseer	
Hierarchy/Monarchy	Anglican Eastern Orthodox Episcopal Lutheran Methodist
Presbyterian: Ruled by Elders	
Republican/Representative	Assembly of God Presbyterian
<b>GOVERNING BODIES OF A COVENANT ORDER OF EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIANS (ECO)</b> <b>ECO PRESBYTERIES:</b> 22	
Congregational: Ruled by Governing Board with Congregational Affirmation	
Democracy/Democratic	Baptist Church of Christ Congregationalist Independent

**DISTINCTIVES OF PRESBYTERIANISM**

**DOCTRINE:** Scripture, Book of Confessions

**GOVERNING DISCIPLINE:** Book of Order

**GOVERNED BY ELDERS:** Session (12 Ruling Elders & 1 Teaching Elder)

**SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AND PRESENCE OF HUMAN SIN:** Acts in groups and bodies. Believing that God’s sovereign will is expressed by group decisions.

**GENERAL GUIDANCE:** Response to human sin, checks and balances (trust but verify.)

## THE ST. JOHNS STRUCTURE

Structure is like a skeleton—it holds the body together, but should not necessarily be seen. We want to structure to do ministry, not maintenance. We also want to structure for harmony, not conflict.

## THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH DETERMINES ITS STRUCTURE

### 1. The Church is a FELLOWSHIP.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42*

A top priority of a fellowship is love and unity.

*Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.*  
Ephesians 4:3

*So let us concentrate on the things that make for harmony and the growth of our fellowship together. Romans 14:19 (PH)*

One of the problems with any fellowship is loving one another. A lack of love can lead to disunity such as anger, lack of forgiveness and jealousy.

*When you are angry, do not sin, and be sure to stop being angry before the end of the day. Do not give the devil a way to defeat you. Ephesians 4:26-27 (NCV)*  
*The acts of the flesh are obvious...hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy...and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Adapted from Galatians 5: 19-23*

Colossians 3:15, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Timothy 2:4, Proverbs 17:14, II Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 2:2, Philippians 4:2, 1 Peter 3:8, 1 Corinthians 14:33, John 13:34-35, II Timothy 2:23, Romans 15:5-6, Romans 12:16-18, Colossians 3:13-14, Psalm 133

### 2. The Church is a FAMILY.

*You should be like one big happy family, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds. 1 Peter 3:8 (TLB)*

Galatians 6:10, Hebrews 2:10-12, 1 Peter 4:17

At St. Johns we have policies, but we operate basically on relationships not rules:

*Don't reprimand a senior member of the church, appeal to him as a father. Treat the young men as brothers, and the older women as mothers. Treat the younger women as sisters. 1 Timothy 5:1-2 (PH)*

*An elder must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his family, how can he take care of God's church? 1 Timothy 3:4-5*

### 3. **The Church is a BODY.**

*Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 1 Corinthians 12:27*

*And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. Ephesians 1:22-23*

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. Colossians 1:18*

*He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Colossians 2:19*

The church is a body not a business, an organism not an organization. Therefore, we function on the basis of spiritual giftedness. We want to **maximize ministry** and **minimize maintenance**.

*It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. Ephesians 4:11-12*

Therefore: The people are **the ministers**

The Pastors are **the shepherds and leaders**

### 4. **The Church is a FLOCK.**

Jesus' favorite description of the church: John 10:10, 30, Matthew 26:31, Matthew 25:33

Therefore, it is fed and led by **shepherds**.

*Again, Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep. The third*

*time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.' John 21:16-17*

**There are three different terms used in the New Testament to refer to the same church leaders:**

- *poimen* — pastor/shepherd
- *presbuteros* — elder (spiritually mature)
- *episcopos* — bishop/overseer church leaders

*To the elders I say... Be shepherds of God's flock, serving as overseers... 1 Peter 5:1-2*

*Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived he said to them... Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be pastors of the church of God... Acts 20:17-18, 28*

See also, Titus 1:5-7, 1 Timothy 5:17