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

ISSUE	PCUSA	ECO
When did the denomination come into existence in its current structure / form?	1983	2012
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)
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
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
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
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
Confessions / Creeds	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms	8 Confessions plus 3 Catechisms (same as PCUSA)
Are women ordained into leadership positions?	Yes Affirmed and required by their constitution	Yes Affirmed and required by their constitution
Affirms the view that marriage is between one man and one woman	No Early in 2015 the denomination officially changed the definition of marriage to be "a unique relationship between two people, traditionally a man and a woman."	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
View on Abortion	Pro-choice <sup>5</sup>	Pro-life

Per Capita (request for funds to help pay for administrative costs of denomination)	Yes Currently a per member expense and is not mandatory, though some believe it may become mandatory	Yes 1% of church budget and is mandatory.)
Ownership of congregation's property	Denomination hold property in trust	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