

1 **RIVERS OF LIFE OVERTURE**

2 *From the Rivers of Life Presbytery meeting at First Presbyterian Church, Waynesburg PA, May 13, 2017*
3 *To the Synod of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians*
4 *Meeting in Houston TX, January 23-25, 2018*

5
6 **Motion #1:**

7 **We move to designate seven documents to comprise The Confessional Standards of ECO: The Apostles' Creed, The**
8 **Nicene Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, and The Westminster Standards including The**
9 **Westminster Confession of Faith, The Longer Catechism, and The Shorter Catechism.**

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11 **Concise Rationale for Motion #1:**

12 *After thoughtful consideration we are pleased to endorse and move for approval the recommendation of the National*
13 *Theological Task Force. We appreciate the simplicity of the proposal and believe that these documents are an*
14 *appropriate foundation for our reformed and evangelical denomination. These documents uniformly hold to an*
15 *orthodox view of the faith and a high view of Scripture, both of which are necessary and essential to the future*
16 *flourishing of our movement. The three twentieth century documents currently in our Book of Confessions, while*
17 *having significant value in some areas, have been set aside due to a variety of concerns spoken to in Considering the*
18 *Confessions and in our Detailed Rationale.*

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20 **Motion #2:**

21 **We move that a new confession be written under the direction of the National Theological Task Force and the**
22 **Synod Executive Council for potential inclusion in The Confessional Standards of ECO and request this document be**
23 **prepared for consideration at the next Synod Business Meeting to be known as "Synod Four," likely to be held in**
24 **January of 2020.**

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26 **Concise Rationale for Motion #2:**

27 *A conviction not to include the twentieth century confessions in the Confessional Standards of ECO leaves us with an*
28 *opportunity to address important matters of faith and practice that were spoken to in those confessions. The topics*
29 *of justice, reconciliation, women in ministry, evangelism and others are not addressed adequately in the patristic*
30 *creeds or the reformation documents. Therefore it would be of great value to the church to have these topics and*
31 *more addressed in a manner consistent with ECO Essential Tenets and Core Values. We commend the writing of this*
32 *document to be of great assistance in contemporary study, teaching, and corporate worship.*

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34 **Detailed Rationale:**

35 *The Rivers of Life Presbytery Theological Task Force has prepared a Detailed Rationale for these proposals that also*
36 *serves to educate and stimulate further discussion regarding our confessional standards. The Detailed Rationale can*
37 *be found on the national website and at www.ecoriversoflife.org*

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40 **Rationale for Including the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds**
41 **in the ECO Book of Confessions**
42 *Rev. Dr. Van Campbell*
43 *Grove City College, Grove City, PA*

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2 The Nicene Creed and Apostle’s Creed articulate the early church’s considered understanding of the essential
3 elements of Christian faith. Including them in our Book of Confessions demonstrates our continuity with the historic
4 Christian faith as it has been understood since the beginning, and also unites us with Christians throughout history
5 and the contemporary world who affirm “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). These creeds
6 provide a unity of faith among all Christians that transcends denominations, sects and traditions.
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8 **Rationale for Including the Scots’ Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism,**
9 **and the Westminster Standards in the ECO Book of Confessions**

10 *Rev. Dr. Van Campbell and Dr. Paul Schaefer*
11 *Grove City College, Grove City, PA*

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13 The Scots Confession of 1560 is the first of the great Reformation Confessions. “It is a lively and warm
14 document, thoroughly Biblical in its phraseology and expressing clearly Calvinistic theology which impressively
15 emphasizes the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Considering the Confessions*, p. 10, citing R. Tudor Jones, *The*
16 *Great Reformation* [IVP, 1985]). It was written by John Knox, founder of Presbyterianism, and five other ministers, to
17 reflect the Reformed theology characteristic of John Calvin rather than the distinctives articulated by Martin Luther.
18 Its strengths include its Trinitarian focus, definition of the marks of a true church (regarding preaching the Word of
19 God, sacraments, and discipline), and its clarity regarding sin, the need for rebirth by faith, and the importance of
20 good works as a reflection of true faith.
21

22 The Confession also has its shortcomings. These include the denial that women are allowed to administer the
23 sacraments (Article XXII), harsh language regarding Anabaptists and others (Article XXIII), and denial of separation of
24 church and state (Article XXIV), all of which were common beliefs or practices at the time but which do not reflect the
25 attitudes or practices of ECO. Yet none of these flaws places it outside historic orthodoxy or the Reformed tradition.
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27 The fact that ECO’s Book of Confessions is a reference for study and teaching and not a subscription
28 document is the reason the Scots Confession can be adopted in spite of the weaknesses that often attend historic
29 documents.
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33 The Heidelberg Catechism is a rich, beautiful expression of vital Biblical faith. It was written by a team of 16 in
34 Germany and published in 1563 out of a desire to foster Biblical maturity among God’s people. Its aim was use in
35 personal study, devotional reading and Biblical preaching. It is organized into 129 questions, arranged in 52 groups,
36 one for each Sunday of the year, and following a threefold outline: sin, salvation and thankful living—or “guilt, grace,
37 and gratitude,” or “sin, salvation, and service”. It provides clear, concise Biblical explanations under these three
38 heads of the lost condition of humans and of redemption through

39 Page 3

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41 faith. It continues the ancient church’s way of training converts by succinctly expounding the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten
42 Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. It also devotes attention to the Father, Son and Spirit,
43 expounds the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and emphasizes along the way the importance of prayer
44 and of good works. The Catechism has a practical and personal feel: the first question asks, “What is your only
45 comfort in life and in death?” This pastoral tone makes it more attractive to read and study than many other
46 confessional documents.
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48 While the Scots Confession associates ECO with British Presbyterianism, the Heidelberg Catechism aligns us
49 with the wider Reformed movement in Europe, as well as the ancient church. It also exudes a Biblical spirit while
50 avoiding a polemic tone. It will make a solid, rich resource for the ECO Book of Confessions.
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The Westminster Standards (the Confession and the Longer and Shorter Catechisms) need little introduction, serving as they did as the sole Reformed standard for numerous Reformed bodies since their creation in the 1640s. Adopting the Westminster Standards connects ECO with historic American Presbyterianism (which adopted Westminster in 1729), with British Reformed bodies (which produced the Standards), and with contemporary Presbyterian denominations around the world who own them as their confession of faith.

The Westminster Standards incorporate the Trinitarian and Christological commitments of the ancient creeds, and is a clear, detailed and robust presentation of Reformed theology. The influence of the Westminster Standards is clearly reflected in ECO's Essential Tenets when the Essential Tenets declare in its opening section, "The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" (see the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1). Westminster also articulates the view of Scripture affirmed in the Essential Tenets. When ECO's Essential Tenets state (Section I), "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," it echoes Westminster's "full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority" of "Holy Scripture" (Westminster Confession 6.005).

For these reasons adopting the Westminster Standards as part of the ECO Book of Confessions as a tool for study and instruction is imminently appropriate.

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| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Rationale for Excluding the Second Helvetic Confession, Barmen Declaration, Confession of 1967, and the Brief Statement of Faith from the ECO Book of Confessions</b><br/> <i>Rev. Dr. Van Campbell</i><br/> <i>Grove City College, Grove City, PA</i></p> |
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While we are grateful for the content of the Second Helvetic Confession, we believe its content is well represented in the confessions we are recommending. There are available many confessions of excellent quality that we would commend for study. However, our belief is that a smaller collection will be more useful to the Church.

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The Theological Declaration of Barmen is an inspiring declaration of love for Jesus and loyalty to Him. It boldly affirms the Lordship of Christ over all areas of life and declares opposition to idolatry in all its forms. It denies all political and cultural allegiances competing with our loyalty to Christ and Scripture, and staunchly defends the separation of church and state. In all of these it is a strong endorsement of Reformed distinctives.

1 While its merits are substantial, there are reasons to refrain from adopting it into the ECO Book of
2 Confessions at the present time and to devote more time to prayerful discussion of its merits and limitations.
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4 One limitation is that it is very difficult to understand, situated as it was in a particular time and
5 circumstance. Without some sort of preface or explanation, it is opaque to most readers. More than other
6 documents, adoption would seem to require appending such helps for the reader, and such explanation would
7 require some time to prepare. Thus, postponing adoption for the present would seem wise.
8

9 The foremost issue which would require deliberation is its apparent endorsement of a neo-orthodox view of
10 Scripture. Written by neo-orthodox authors, it characteristically names Jesus as the “Word of God”—a thoroughly
11 orthodox statement—without affirming the same thing about Scripture, suggesting that the Bible is not viewed as
12 the Word of God, even though it often refers to and cites Scripture. Such a position would be contrary to ECO’s
13 Essential Tenets.
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15 However, some might argue that the document is not denying that Scripture is the Word of God. If so,
16 Barmen could be considered for adoption into the ECO Book of Confessions. But clarifying this issue is a prerequisite
17 to adoption since it relates to ECO’s high view of Scripture, a matter of preeminent importance which we dare not
18 treat lightly or quickly. Such due diligence will require time and appropriate discussion to produce a consensus.
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20 For these reasons, we urge that the Theological Declaration of Barmen not be adopted into ECO’s Book of
21 Confessions at this time.

22 Page 5
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24 The Confession of 1967 (“C67”) has a series of strengths. It reaffirms many historic Christian convictions, such
25 as Trinitarianism and the reconciling work of Christ. It also addresses contemporary ethical issues as earlier
26 confessions do not.
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28 However, several things about it have been controversial from the beginning. The most significant issue is its
29 approach to Scripture. C67 reconceives the inspiration of Scripture in a way that is inconsistent with the creeds in the
30 Book of Confessions which came before it. Indeed, the conscious intention behind adopting C67 was to create
31 confessional status for a new and different way of viewing Scripture, as Presbyterian theologian and historian, Dr.
32 Jack Rogers, relates in his book, Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions (Westminster Press, 1985).
33 He says that the defining insight of this new approach to Scripture “was that God did not reveal information in an
34 inspired book. God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible was a human, fallible, but unique and
35 authoritative witness to the one revelation of God in Christ. . . . Doctrinal affirmations could be drawn from Scripture
36 without denying its literary flaws” (p. 209). This is how C67 states this view of inspiration: “The one sufficient
37 revelation of God is Jesus Christ. . . . The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the
38 words of men, conditioned by the . . . times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the
39 cosmos which were then current” (para 9.27-29).
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41 It is clear that C67 is incompatible with ECO’s Essential Tenets, in the following ways.
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- 43 1. Rogers says that C67 views Scripture as “fallible,” while the Essential Tenets speak of “the infallible Scriptures of
44 the Old and New Testaments”.
- 45 2. The term “fallible” means “capable of making mistakes.” This is precisely what C67 affirms when it says that “The
46 Scriptures . . . are nevertheless the words of men. . . . They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were
47

1 then current". This is precisely the argument that Dr. Jack Rogers, 2001 Moderator of the General Assembly, used to
2 affirm homosexual practice in his book, Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality (Westminster/John Knox, 2006). He
3 argued that the Bible clearly condemns homosexual practice, but that was the view then current and so we are not
4 bound by what Scripture says about this.

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6 3. C67 says that "The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate . . ." (para. 9.27). The
7 ECO Essential Tenets says, "The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written."
8 These statements are affirming different things and are incompatible.

9
10 4. C67 says further that the Holy Spirit bears witness to "Jesus Christ, the Word of God", "through the Holy
11 Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written." Note that while Jesus is the "Word of God"
12 (capital "W"), Scripture is only the "word of God" (with a small "w"). This spelling was intentional¹,
13 because Scripture is demoted by C67 to a "witness" of the Holy Spirit to Jesus, rather than a revelation of God on the
14 same level as God's revelation in Jesus, as Christians traditionally held, and as the former confessions affirm. For
15 example, the Westminster Confession says, "Under the name of the Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are
16 now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments . . ." (para 6.002). The ECO Essential Tenets say, "since in
17 the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The
18 written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ . . ." (note the capital "W" for
19 Scripture and for Jesus). C67 puts Scripture below Jesus while the ECO Essential Tenets, in line with the historic
20 confessions, puts them on the same level

21 Page 6

22
23 as revelations of God. Again C67 is incompatible with both the Essential Tenets and the pre-20th century confessions.

24
25 5. C67 is incompatible with the Essential Tenets in another way. Rogers is explaining the view of Scripture in C67
26 when he says that the defining insight of this new approach to Scripture "was that God did not reveal information in
27 an inspired book. God was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ" (Rogers, 209). So
28 what is the function of Scripture? C67 says, "The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as
29 prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God" (para. 9.27). That is, believers hear a subjective,
30 personal word from God when the Holy Spirit helps them learn from Scripture. Scripture is not a revelation from God,
31 but a human word about God through which the Holy Spirit sometimes speaks to our hearts.

32 The Essential Tenets affirm a different view, that God does reveal information in a book: "We glorify God by
33 recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New
34 Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son" (page 1). The view expressed in the Essential Tenets is the
35 view expressed in the pre-20th century confessions, and by Augustine in the 4th century AD: "What Scripture says,
36 God says" (see his The Forged Marriage of Pollentius, 1b). Thus, C67 is incompatible with the Essential Tenets.

37
38 6. C67 is a document created by the PCUSA which they have given us permission to use but not permission to modify.
39 Could it ever really be "our document" when we use it by permission and cannot alter it (as, for example, Reformed
40 churches have done with the Westminster Confession)? It seems odd for us to adopt from the denomination we have
41 left the very document which established a view of Scripture which granted permission to ignore the statements of
42 Scripture about homosexuality because they were interpreted as simply reflecting the biased views of people at the
43 time (as noted in 2. above).

44
45 In all of these ways, the view of Scripture affirmed in C67 is inconsistent with the ECO Essential Tenets, which
46 argues against it being included in ECO's Book of Confessions.

47
48 But excluding C67 at this time does not prevent us from incorporating its strengths. It is possible that with
49 time and deliberation, those who affirm C67 might convince a majority in ECO that the arguments above are
50 inaccurate. This could open the door for C67 to be incorporated when there was a consensus that it is not
51 incompatible with ECO's Essential Tenets. It is also possible to write a new ECO confession which would incorporate

1 the strengths of C67 while avoiding its controversial portions. In other words, excluding C67 for the time being does
2 not close the door to future deliberations, but it does avoid adopting something that is currently divisive.

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5 **1** The drafting committee planned to leave Scripture out of the sentence about revelation altogether. The original
6 draft said, “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit
7 bears witness in many ways.” It added that the Bible is “the normative witness to this revelation”. When some
8 objected, the compromise was to add a reference to the Bible thus: “Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to
9 whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and
10 obeyed as the word of God written” (9.27). But it was “received and obeyed” in a new way: the Scriptures “are
11 nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and
12 times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The
13 church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding” (9.29).
14 (See Rogers, Presbyterian Creeds, 216-17.)

Page 7

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17 The Brief Statement of Faith was created in 1983 after the merger of the southern (PCUS) and Northern
18 (UPCUSA) Presbyterian Churches, in that year.

19
20 The Brief Statement has several strengths. It is clearer than the Confession of 1967 in affirming the Bible as
21 the Word of God. It clearly affirms historic orthodoxy regarding the Person and work of Jesus Christ, human sin, and
22 the need of all people for redemption by grace through faith. Its Trinitarian structure emphasizing trust in each
23 member of the Godhead and in living holy and faithful lives is wholesome. Its call for Christians to steward Creation
24 and to work with all people toward justice, freedom and peace while we pray for Christ’s return is wholly
25 appropriate.

26
27 Finally, the Brief Statement alone affirms some things that ECO supports. It alone in the present Book of
28 Confessions overtly affirms the equal status of women and men in Christian ministry. It alone affirms that election is
29 for the blessing of all the nations, not just for personal salvation.

30
31 However, there are complications with considering including this Statement in the ECO Book of Confessions.
32 First, like the Confession of 1967, it is a distinctly PCUSA statement of faith. Is it wise, or even appropriate, for ECO to
33 adopt another denomination’s statement—from which it has separated—as its own?

34
35 Second, there is a potential theological issue in the Statement that demands scrutiny. As “Considering the
36 Confessions” points out (p. 18), the Statement proposes the image of God in all humans as the ground of an ideal
37 universal community of humanity (under the discussion of “We trust in God”). While this was technically
38 theologically correct regarding God’s ideal for the creation before the Fall, that potential has been eclipsed by human
39 sin, leaving redemption as the only actual grounding for human unity. “This is no small matter,” as “Considering the
40 Confessions” states, “because by placing human unity in creation and not in reconciliation, this document potentially
41 diminishes the role of Jesus Christ as the true image of God and the only source of true unity” (page 18).

42
43 Because of these issues, we recommend refraining from incorporating the Brief Statement of Faith into the
44 ECO Book of Confessions. Excluding it for the time being does not close the door to future deliberations, but it does
45 avoid adopting something that will prove controversial, and opens the door for a consensus to develop, which is
46 impossible if we push for adoption at the present time. It is also possible to write a new ECO confession which could
47 incorporate the strengths of the brief Statement while avoiding its controversial portions.

The Essential Tenets and Our Confessions

Rev. Dr. Jim Bibza

Grove City College, Grove City, PA

Pastor, Center Presbyterian Church, New Castle

Five years ago, as the National Theological Task Force reminds us, ECO adopted the Confessions of the PCUSA as a working model for our new denomination. We also accepted a document entitled the Essential Tenets, not as a new confession, but as “indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do.” The hope was that, as ECO matured, we would revisit the confessions, with an eye toward determining which of the PCUSA confessions we wanted to continue to use, as well as the possibility of adding either other existing confessions or adding a new confession of our own.

As we have begun this process of re-examining the confessions, other questions, such as the relationship between the Essential Tenets and the Confessions, and whether the Confessions should be considered constitutional, have arisen.

It should be clear by what is affirmed by both the Essential Tenets and by confessions such as the Westminster Confession that adherence to Scripture is the most important criteria for our theological beliefs. While the Essential Tenets are thought to reflect the Biblical teaching found in the Confessions, it is the Bible, and not the confessions, which is ultimate. Thus, for example, it is because we believe that the Scriptures, correctly interpreted, affirm an equal role in ministry for both men and women, that our polity reflects this truth, not because it is found in any particular confession.

The questions concerning ordination make clear that the Essential Tenets have a higher place in our doctrinal affirmations than do the Confessions. We do not have to be “bound” by the Confessions, as we do to the Essential Tenets. We are to be “guided” by the Confessions, as we are by the Essential Tenets, but we are not to “receive, adopt, and be bound” by the Confessions. This is a crucial distinction, since few could affirm the same allegiance to the entirety of the Confessions, given the controversial and often time bound statements of several of them. Elevating the Confessions, whatever ones we adopt, to the level of the Essential Tenets, would require a similar binding to all that the Confessions affirm, since we do not allow any “scruples” in our adherence to the Essential Tenets.

As far as whether every aspect of the Essential Tenets should require a specific statement in one of our Confessions, it would certainly be preferable for that to be the case. However, as long as Scripture affirms the teaching, that should be acceptable. It does, however, raise a legitimate concern which may point ECO in the direction of writing a confession which reflects our historical context and which speaks to certain issues which were not a concern hundreds of years ago, or which were expressed more recently in a way which was not consistent with the view of the Scripture reflected in our Essential Tenets.

There is often a tendency to make more changes than are necessary at the time, and then have to deal with the unintended consequences. By adopting the Nicene and the Apostles Creed, along with the three historic confessions, as the national Theological Task Force as recommended, ECO would take a significant step forward in

1 building a valuable confessional model. However, it would be unwise to elevate these confessions to the status of
2 the Essential Tenets, as it would also be unwise to adopt a confession

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5 primarily because it affirmed something that we wanted to say, even though it did so in an awkward manner. We
6 can do better than that if we take this process one step at a time.
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8 ***The Rivers of Life Presbytery Theological Task Force***
9 ***Comments on Overtures Being Considered in Other Presbyteries***
10 *Rev. Justin Amsler*
11 *Pastor, McDonald Presbyterian Church, McDonald, PA*

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13 Our team respectfully gives the following guidance regarding other proposals in the national conversation regarding
14 the makeup of our future Confessional Standards.

15
16 **1) An interest in updating the modern English translations of our confessions.** We would be in support of an effort
17 to make our confessions as accessible as possible through updated versions.
18

19 **2) An interest in considering a Book of Worship to be added to our approved resources as a church.** If anyone is
20 doing work on this we are interested in what they might be considering.
21

22 **3) A recommendation against adding any documents to our Confessional Standards that are not part of the current**
23 **collection at this time.** While there are some excellent documents available such as Lausanne I, II, or III we believe
24 that these documents are largely unfamiliar to the ECO family and it would be presumptive to attempt to elevate
25 them to the status of a confession in January of 2018. Our preference would be to embark on the project of writing a
26 new confession and then consider if other documents would be helpful upon the completion of that project.
27

28 **4) A recommendation against elevating the confessions to constitutional status.** While some may view this break
29 with our PC(USA) heritage as a weakness, we view it as one of our greatest strengths. If our confessions are on the
30 same plane as the Essential Tenets then the tenets could lose their unique place as our full subscription document.
31 Elevating the confessions has the possibility of being an assault on freedom of conscience and unity in our ECO
32 family. We believe that the present structure is well conceived and will serve to maintain our theological position in
33 the decades ahead.
34

35 **5) A recommendation against adding additional sections to the Essential Tenets.** We believe that such a project
36 would place an undue burden upon the church. To add material to the Essential Tenets that could not be scrupled
37 carries the very great risk of forcing some existing members into a form of passive concurrence, which should not
38 occur, or perhaps even separation. We believe that the Essential Tenets may continue to be clarified but that the
39 topics it covers are adequate for the unity and integrity of the church.
40

41 **6) A recommendation against adding qualifying footnotes to certain sections of the Confessions.** While there are
42 particular statements in the historic confessions that do not represent well our common understanding of Scripture
43 from a 21st century context, we should not attempt to mark or qualify those sections beyond what has already been
44 included in those texts. The Essential Tenets does the work of highlighting what beliefs are necessary from among
45 the confessions. Material that might be put into a footnote is appropriate for a study guide but is not necessary or
46 desirable for inclusion into the confession itself.