

### Summary of Part III: Reconsidering the Essentials

*The Essentials of Our Faith* (hereafter the Essentials) is a distinctive document to the EPC. It has been present in our church since its founding and took on constitutional status in 2002. It purports to be “an irenic statement of historical evangelicalism” that defines “core beliefs of the Christian Faith (sic).” It is not intended to be an “alternative statement of truth” from, or a “competitive statement of truth” with, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, nor is it to be “construed as a substitute” for these documents. Where the WCF preserves the EPC’s commitment to the “historic orthodoxy of the Reformed Faith (sic)” the Essentials allegedly preserves the EPC’s “commitment to historic evangelicalism.” Yet, the Essentials also simultaneously claim to be set out in “greater detail” in the WCF, with the two documents serving “harmonious purposes” in our church.<sup>1</sup>

All of these claims need to be evaluated. The EPC errs in presenting the Essentials as the core beliefs of the Christian faith “common to all true believers and churches throughout the world.” These statements are flatly incorrect and indefensible. This presentation of the Essentials has the additional effect of undermining the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine found in the scriptures. If the Essentials represent what is the true core of the Christian faith, then any additional claims of binding, authoritative truth have the appearance of legalism and man-made tradition. In a word, the Essentials subordinate our entire, biblical system of doctrine to their minimalistic content and undermines the confessional authority of the Westminster Standards. It then sows confusion about what the Essentials are: a summary of the essential teachings of the Westminster Standards?, essential doctrines of orthodox Christian belief?, essential of what must be believed in order to be a Christian?, essential requirements for ordination? All of these options by necessity imply that anything not included in the Essentials is non-essential in some way. While of course the EPC affirms that the authority of scripture requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life, not just the areas touched upon by the Essentials, the practical effect in our churches is to treat the things absent from the document as non-essential to which deference is owed.

The assertion that the Essentials is a summary of the WCF is something that should withstand scrutiny, and it is my contention here that the claims does not. Specifically, the Essentials is in fact a competing statement of Christian faith with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Ministers are not allowed to take exceptions to any part of the Essentials,<sup>2</sup> which absolutizes them in relationship to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. This means that in areas where the Essentials and the Westminster Standards disagree, the Essentials functionally has priority. The claim that the Essentials is set out in greater detail in the WCF then takes on greater importance: Can the Essentials be reasonably described as a summary of the details in the Westminster Standards? If yes, then the potential between confessional conflict is avoided. If no, however, then regardless of claims to the contrary, the Essentials and Westminster Standards are competing statements of the Christian faith.

Numerous doctrinal statements in the Essentials do not comport with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. While some of these doctrinal areas are significant in their own right (the

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in the summary are taken from the Essentials or the constitutional document “Explanatory Statement of ‘The Essentials of Our Faith.’”

<sup>2</sup> BOO 12-4.

atonement, justification, the mediation of Christ), the prohibition against any exception to the Essentials elevates every minor doctrinal point or poor wording to primary importance. What I will demonstrate is that these areas of difference are not insignificant, are not merely deficient or weak summaries of the Standards' teaching, but incompatible contradictions between the two statements of faith.

This matters for two reasons. First, the EPC is the only confessional and Reformed denomination in the world with the Essentials. Rather than being an irenic statement that furthers unity between denominations, it places the EPC out of alignment from the mainstream of confessionally Reformed churches. Its existence implies (or in some instances is used to explicitly state) that these sister, confessional churches are captive to non-essential doctrines and practices. Second, while the Westminster Confession and Catechisms remain the official doctrinal standards of our church, the Essentials, at best, produces confusion and disharmony in the confessional nature of the EPC. The confessional unity of the EPC is eroded when there are multiple, disjunctive statements of faith held by the church. Preserving the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as the confessional standard which provides theological unity to our church requires expunging the Essentials as it undercuts this theological and confessional unity.

The EPC Book of Order states that no part of it may be amended in such way as to be contrary to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.<sup>3</sup> Since the Essentials were added to our constitution by the process for constitutional amendment, and since the Essentials is contrary to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, it was illegitimately added to our constitution. The constitutional status of the Essentials should be revoked.

Without a doubt the claims of this section have the potential to be provocative. My intent is not to disrupt the unity, purity, and peace of the church. Rather, my goal is to uphold those very things. Unity and peace are not the same as uniform agreement and stillness, and urging potentially hard, disruptive conversations in order to bring our church into greater doctrinal (i.e. purity) harmony (i.e. unity and peace) is an obligation on all elders. In our ordination we vowed to pursue this purity and peace no matter the opposition that arises on that account. That opposition does not just include persecution, but the fear of pushback and confrontation. My timing in this is simple: I have vowed *ex animo* that I adopt the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine found in the scriptures. Since I believe that the Essentials *prima facie* contradict that system, I have a moral and pastoral duty to voice my concern for the bettering of the peace and purity of the EPC.

### Table of Contents

Part III Summary ...	...1
History of the Essentials and the EPC ...	...4
The Purpose of the Essentials ...	...8

---

<sup>3</sup> BOO 23-1.B.

The Relationship of the Essentials to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms ...	...16
The Fifth Ordination Vow: No Exceptions to the Essentials? ...	...25
Final Assessment and Conclusion ...	...28
Appendix III (What the OPC Believes) ...	...31

### History of the Essentials and the EPC

The Essentials was<sup>4</sup> the original, constituting document of the EPC.<sup>5</sup> At the EPC's first General Assembly the Essentials was adopted as a doctrinal statement for the church. The Essentials appeared to have two purposes: protection against theological liberalism and setting a minimum standard of what EPC elders must believe.<sup>6</sup>

In some ways the Essentials represented the triumph of the Fundamentalist movement from the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the fundamentalist-modernist controversy multiple summative statements of essential doctrines were articulated by orthodox Presbyterians against encroaching liberalism.<sup>7</sup> This began in 1892 when the PCUSA published the Portland Deliverance, a statement affirming biblical inerrancy and requiring the withdrawal of ministers who rejected that doctrine. In 1910 the PCUSA identified five fundamentals of the Christian faith that all of its ministers needed to affirm: the inspiration of scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the atoning death of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the historical reality of Christ's miracles. These five fundamentals gave the name to the conservative movement now known as Fundamentalism. These fundamentals and the requirement for ministers to subscribe to them were affirmed by the PCUSA in 1916 and 1923. But by 1927 the PCUSA had determined that additional doctrinal requirements beyond the Westminster Confession and Catechisms violated its constitution, and the requirement for ministers to hold to the fundamentals was repealed. While it may seem obvious to EPC elders that the Westminster Standards affirms the five fundamentals already, the Modernist argument against requiring affirmation of the fundamentals was that they inhibited ministerial freedom of conscience and interpretation by imposing a rigid interpretation of the Confession and Catechisms upon pastors.

---

<sup>4</sup> The "Essentials" is singular, not plural, since it refers to a single document, and EPC reports have always treated it as such.

<sup>5</sup> I will refer to minutes of the EPC's General Assemblies where necessary, but most of this information is either in the public domain or can be found in Fortson III, S. Donald, *Liberty in Non-Essentials: The Story of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Celebrating 35 Years of Ministry: 1981-2016*. Livonia, MI: Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Sources and summaries for this and the next two paragraphs include *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 20-25; D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, "Turning Points in American Presbyterian History — Part 8: Confessional Revision in 1903," *New Horizons*, August/September 2005 (found online here: [https://opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=17](https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=17)) and "Turning Points in American Presbyterian History — Part 9: The Special Commission of 1925," *New Horizons*, October/November 2005 (found online here: [https://opc.org/nh.html?article\\_id=4](https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=4)); Robert Godfrey's Ligonier article "Faithful Vigilance" which can be found online here: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/faithful-vigilance/>; and the Wikipedia article on the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy.

For more academic summaries of this, see Hart, Darryl G. "J Gresham Machen, Inerrancy, and Creedless Christianity." *Themelios* 25, no. 3 (June 2000): 20-34; Hart, Darryl G. "Somewhere between Denial and Conspiracy: Explaining What Happened to the Presbyterian Church, USA." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 247-68; and Hart, D. G., and John R. Muether. *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2007.

The efforts beginning with the Portland Deliverance signaled that fidelity to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms was waning. Modernists and liberal ecumenicists had begun arguing that the Standards were obsolete as an expression of Christian faith and needed to be replaced. These conservative efforts to emphasize certain doctrines as essential in the face of theological liberalism represented the end of true confessional fidelity, "...conservative Presbyterians sought to italicize certain doctrines as the Bible's truly nonnegotiables, rather than the Confession itself as containing the system of doctrine found in the Scriptures. In one sense, then, the progressives were right: the Confession was becoming obsolete for many Presbyterians, and confessional identity was vanishing, not only quickly on the left, but also gradually on the right."<sup>8</sup> What may surprise many EPC elders is that conservative figures like B. B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen saw the fundamentals as theological triage rather than a unifying, rallying point. Machen, for instance, saw the five fundamentals as "too individualistic, too reductionistic, and too unconcerned with history... True Christianity, as Dr. Machen knew it in the Reformed tradition, came to doctrinal expression in a full confession of faith."<sup>9</sup> The fundamentals expressed biblical truth, but in an anemic way. The fundamentals were only the result of losing a robust, confessional mooring. Reductionistic statements of the faith were useful in combatting liberalism, but were also simultaneously effective in eroding confessional fidelity. *Ex animo* subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms was no longer the standard of orthodoxy, having been replaced by holding to the fundamentals as the essential core of the faith. This was a problem, and resulted in conservatives, as much as liberals, losing the robust biblical theology of the Reformed tradition.

Whether a movement's disposition was liberal or fundamentalist, the reduction of Reformed confessionalism into a minimalistic statement held appeal. Upon the PCSUA merging with the UPCNA in the 1960s, the opportunity finally arose for the modernist movement to replace the WCF, which they did with the Confession of 1967, a liberal and neo-orthodox alternative to the WCF. The EPC, on the other hand, followed the fundamentalist movement by beginning its history with the Essentials.

The Essentials' dual intent to protect against liberalism and maintain orthodoxy arose from the founders of the EPC witnessing the corrosion of orthodoxy and ascendancy of liberalism in the PCUSA.<sup>10</sup> I once asked a former moderator of the EPC's GA why the Essentials was necessary for this if the EPC already had the Westminster Standards. He answered that it was because the PCUSA also had the Westminster Standards, and the EPC wanted to explain to the evangelical world that we "weren't that kind of Presbyterian." It is unclear why requiring subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms (something no longer compulsory in the PCUSA) was insufficient to these tasks.

This understanding of the Essentials' purpose goes back to the EPC's founding. About the EPC's founding in 1981, multiple commissioners present stated to reporters that the purpose of the Essentials was to protect against liberalism and neo-orthodoxy since the Westminster Confession

---

<sup>8</sup> "Turning Points, Part 8."

<sup>9</sup> "Faithful Vigilance."

<sup>10</sup> *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 64-65. The original version of the Essentials did include the line that the Essentials were set out in greater detail in the WCF. This indicates that the Essentials were at least conceived of as a summary of the WCF rather than an alternative, even if that is not how things have shaken out.

had failed to do so in the PCUSA. Some stated that the Essentials was intended to be the minimum acceptable doctrinal commitment of EPC elders.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in 1987, confusion and tension over the role of the Essentials became present in the EPC. The 2<sup>nd</sup> GA in 1982 adjusted the fourth ordination vow to read “if at any time you find yourself out of accord with the *essentials of the faith*... (emphasis added)” from the previous “fundamentals of the faith.” To avoid confusing the content of this vow with the Essentials document, the same GA altered its title from “Essentials of *the* Faith” to Essentials of *Our* Faith.” But in 1984, the printing of the BOO altered the formatting of the fourth ordination vow so that “*Essentials of the Faith*” was capitalized and italicized.<sup>12</sup> At this time there was also confusion and disagreement about whether the Essentials was actually part of the EPC’s constitution. Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> GAs (1987, 1988), it was concluded that the Essentials was not part of the EPC’s constitution despite it being treated that way by many presbyteries. The 8<sup>th</sup> GA produced an advisory letter which stated that the Essentials was a distillation of the Westminster Confession’s teaching. The letter proved too ambiguous about the relationship of the Essentials to confessional subscription, and so by the 13<sup>th</sup> GA in 1993 another report was produced which stated that 1) the Essentials is a concise statement of the Christian faith, 2) it was not part of the EPC’s constitution and should not be treated as such for the purpose of ordination or minimal standards of belief, 3) that no one could disagree with any part of the Essentials and still affirm the necessary doctrine of the Westminster Confession, and 4) therefore disagreeing with the Essentials would be unacceptable for an ordained officer of the EPC.<sup>13</sup>

This report produced more confusion on two counts. First, in its claim that the Essentials was not part of the EPC’s constitution, and second, when it additionally said that “the Essentials are to be subscribed to alongside the full WCF.”<sup>14</sup> This language of subscription to the “full” WCF caused conflict over the acceptability of exceptions, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> GA in 1996 more work on the issue was being done. Ed Davis, Stated Clerk at the time, reported that the fourth ordination vow should not have capitalized “essentials of the faith” and that this was an unauthorized printing error. He also reported that the vow was intended to reference the EPC’s motto, not the Essentials document.<sup>15</sup>

It is my view that there is a deep irony at this point. The Essentials was deemed necessary at the EPC’s founding precisely because the PCUSA was unwilling to enforce confessional subscription. The debate stoked over the Essentials was really a debate over whether or not the EPC would follow the PCUSA in lacking enforcement of confessional subscription, and if so, how the EPC would maintain orthodoxy when the church could not be confident its officers affirmed its doctrine.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 141-143. Fortson notes that a creed is only as good as fidelity to it is enforced, which underscore that the problem in the PCUSA was not the inadequacy of the Westminster Standards, but the church enforcing actual belief in them.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-147.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

There was still much debate over the role of the Essentials in relationship to the Westminster Standards and doctrinal subscription, revolving around whether the Essentials was adequate as the sole standard for ordination and whether the Westminster Standards went too far in demanding agreement in non-essential doctrines. The 18<sup>th</sup> GA in 1998 received and endorsed a report that stated that the Essentials was an inadequate minimal standard for ordination and that additional subscription the Westminster Standards was necessary for ordination.<sup>16</sup> An additional study was set up, and by the 22<sup>nd</sup> GA in 2002, the EPC's constitution had been amended to include the Essentials, revised the fourth ordination to delete any reference to "essentials of the faith", added a fifth ordination vow requiring full agreement with the Essentials, and added an explanatory statement of relationship of the Essentials to the WCF as preamble to the Essentials.<sup>17</sup> The explanatory statement affirms that the Essentials is "not intended to be an exclusive test of orthodoxy for ordination, nor as an explicit standard for minimal core beliefs for candidates, ordination, or ministerial examinations." These constitutional revisions from 2002 remain the current standard and position of the EPC. This timing created an interesting scenario, where EPC officers ordained before 2002 and remaining in the same call (which at the time of these changes was every officer in the EPC!) have never vowed full agreement with the Essentials.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-157. This report is examined in greater detail below.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164. The explanatory statement is based in large part on the reports issued at the 8<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> GAs.

### The Purpose of the Essentials

What is the purpose of the Essentials? While the goal of maintaining orthodoxy while allowing flexibility on secondary issues has been mentioned throughout the EPC's history as the document's purpose, there remains a litany of conflicting and competitive understandings of the Essentials' purpose. This can be illustrated by asking the following question: What are the Essentials actually essential of, exactly? And do the Essentials succeed as a fundamental distillation of whatever they do claim to represent?

### The Essentials of Being a Christian?

The full name of the document is *The Essentials of Our Faith*, which gives the impression that the Essentials is the core of what it means to be a Christian. Indeed, this is often how the Essentials is treated: as a summary statement of what Christians must believe. Currently, the EPC website states, "While we believe that all of our faith is important, some elements of that faith are absolutes... The EPC therefore has set forth these core beliefs [in the Essentials] of the Christian faith upon which there must be agreement, but permits latitude and (biblically based) differences of opinion on matters not considered essential to be a Christian."<sup>18</sup> This reflects the language of the 1993 report adopted by the 13<sup>th</sup> GA which states, "The purpose of the 'Essentials of Our Faith' is to provide an explicit and concise expression of the essentials of the Christian faith, but also leave room for Christians to disagree on non-essentials."<sup>19</sup>

This is an extraordinary claim. The EPC in this statement, and in common practice, treats the contents of the Essentials as essential for being a Christian, while simultaneously treating beliefs outside of the Essentials as unnecessary for being saved.

This claim is both too narrow and too broad. The Essentials contains many doctrines, that while true, surely are not necessary for someone to be saved. By way of example, the Essentials state: "The infallible Word of God—the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments..." The extent of scripture is, as affirmed by the WCF, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. But do we think that Christians who are Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, or in the Assyrian Church are not actually Christians because their versions of the biblical canon are different?

"What must I do to be saved?" "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and affirm the Protestant (albeit, the correct) understanding of the biblical canon, and you shall be saved." It doesn't quite work. While much of the Essentials does in fact fall under the category of "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," much of it clearly does not.

There is also a significant difference between the truth one must actively *affirm* in order to become a Christian and the truth one must not actively *deny* to be disqualified as a Christian. The sixth

---

<sup>18</sup> "Distinctives": (<https://epc.org/about/distinctives/>) retrieved on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Acts of Assembly 93-17, Minutes 13-38.



additional essential<sup>20</sup> states, “Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily...” Does someone need to actively believe this in order to *become* a Christian? Do they need to actively believe this in order to *remain* a Christian? Does their active *denial* of this indicate that they are not a Christian? This gets at the overly-broad nature of the Essentials if they refer to minimum belief for salvation.

But the Essentials is also too narrow if its purpose is to summarize what is essential for salvation. The Athanasian Creed, one of the four great ecumenical and catholic creeds of the faith, concludes with these words: “This is the catholic faith: one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.” Many of the doctrines listed in the Essentials (scripture, justification, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, the Great Commission, etc.) are not mentioned in the Athanasian Creed. What the creed does develop in great detail are the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. While the Essentials affirms both Trinity and incarnation, it hardly deals with them at the level of the Athanasian Creed. Absent from the Essentials, but present in the creed, are the subjects of the eternal begottenness of the Son, the eternal procession of the Spirit, the distinct and unblended persons of the Trinity, and the sharing of divine attributes between the persons. The creed concludes its trinitarian section by stating “Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity.” On the incarnation, the creed addresses Christ’s human soul and body, the unity of his person without the mixing of his natures, his descent into hell, and people giving an account of their deeds at his return, none of which are in the Essentials.

If the Essentials is the core of what is necessary to believe in order to be saved, the EPC needs to address why it is out of sync with the entirety of the orthodox, catholic, Christian tradition. Why the Essentials and not the Athanasian Creed? No one may become or remain a Christian who does not affirm the Trinity or incarnation in their orthodox categories, yet the Essentials is silent on much of salient factors in these doctrines.

Perhaps what the 1993 report meant, and what is meant by others who think the Essentials is essential to being Christian, is not that it is necessary for salvation, but for being an orthodox, catholic Christian. The language of orthodoxy and catholicity is not used by many in the EPC, and is not used at all in the 1993 report or on the EPC website to describe the Essentials, but it is possible that orthodoxy is what is really meant. For instance, perhaps a person who denies the inspiration of scripture could be saved (and therefore a Christian) but in denying this doctrine is considered out of line with the core of essential orthodoxy, and in that sense could not be considered a (orthodox, catholic) Christian.

This just raises further problems. If the Essentials is intended as a summary of orthodox belief, then why does it affirm doctrines not found in the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed, and Chalcedonian Formula? These creeds represent what the orthodox and catholic church believes; if the Essentials is a summary of orthodox doctrine, why are doctrines affirmed in the ecumenical creeds missing from the Essentials and additional doctrines present in it? Does any EPC pastor really believe that the Essentials is a better summary of the Christian faith than the Apostles’ Creed? If the Essentials is intended to proclaim what is essential to be an orthodox, catholic Christian, it is not up to the task, and other, more venerable documents, do a far better job.

---

<sup>20</sup> There are eight essential doctrines listed, but only doctrines 2-8 are numbered, and are numbered 1-7, because they are additionally affirmed to the first essential, which is about the nature of Scripture. This is confusing and an awkward way to format the Essentials.

This can be seen in a very practical manner: Sessions in the EPC may only deny membership to people on the grounds of profession of faith and obedience;<sup>21</sup> since the Essentials is not an adequate summary of either what is necessary to be saved or to be considered an orthodox, catholic Christian (the profession of faith), nor does it address all the areas where someone may refuse to repent and rather choose to live in heinous sin, the Essentials cannot be considered what is essential for church membership, and therefore cannot honestly be considered the essentials of what it means to be part of the orthodox church.

While the EPC states that the Essentials represent the beliefs essential for being a Christian, and many in the EPC treat the Essentials this way, the EPC has never explained what is actually meant by that claim.<sup>22</sup> However, whatever the interpretation of the Essentials' relationship to being a Christian, the Essentials is an inadequate summary of what is essential to being one.

### The Essentials for Being a Church Officer?

From the EPC's founding the Essentials was treated as the essential doctrines a candidate for ordination needed to affirm. As previously noted, this was at least the view and intent of many of the EPC's founders even if this purpose was not actually codified. The debate over the Essentials and confessional subscription from 1987-2002 oriented around this question: Are the Essentials the minimum standard of doctrinal orthodoxy necessary for ordination, and are other doctrinal topics therefore non-essential for being an EPC officer?

Again, the 1993 report states, "Theoretically, a person could affirm the 'Essentials', as all knowledgeable Christians would do, but disagree with the WCF. Such a person would be unacceptable as a Teaching or Ruling Elder in the EPC, being out of accord with its Constitution." It stated that the Essentials "is never to be used as an explicit standard for a minimal core of beliefs for candidates, ordination, or ministerial exams." This was the beginning of the EPC formally stating that the Essentials is insufficient as a minimum doctrinal standard for ordination.

The 1998 report approved by the 18<sup>th</sup> GA states that the Essentials

...is inadequate in its scope of Christian doctrine as it applies to ordination (i.e. 'Essentials of Our Faith' is silent on such issues as hell, covenant theology, assurance of salvation, freedom of conscience, Presbyterian polity, the bodily resurrection of believers, divorce and remarriage and the existence of Satan). By its silence on such doctrinal matters it shows that

---

<sup>21</sup> BoG 8-2.A.

<sup>22</sup> AoA 81-01, addressed below, says that the intent of the Essentials is to "give a clear and concise statement of the fundamentals of the Christian faith as embodied in the Westminster Confession." This language is also ambiguous, but indicates that at least initially the Essentials was conceived as summarizing the core of the Christian faith as reported in the WCF, not summarizing what it means to be a Christian or what must be believed to be saved. This initial purpose, while still unclear in its full meaning, was unfortunately made more convoluted by subsequent assemblies.

adherence to the ‘Essentials of Our Faith’ alone is not adequate for ordination to the office of pastor, elder or deacon.<sup>23</sup>

This report endorsed by the EPC makes it clear that the Essentials does not touch on all the essential doctrines for ordination. The “Explanatory Statement” added to the EPC’s constitution in 2002 also states, “[The Essentials] is not intended to be the exclusive test of orthodoxy for ordination. It is not intended to be used as an explicit standard for minimal core beliefs for candidates, ordination or ministerial examinations.” So, the EPC’s formal position, enshrined in the church’s constitution, is that the Essentials is not the essential core of what officers of the denomination need to believe.

### The Essentials of Being an Evangelical?

In many ways this perspective is the most pervasive in the EPC: The Westminster Standards means the EPC is Reformed, the Essentials that the EPC is evangelical. The 1998 report interpreted the intent of Essentials to be “evangelical and irenic” in spirit in relationship to the WCF.<sup>24</sup> The “Explanatory Statement” differentiates the Essentials from the WCF by noting that the confession “preserves our commitment to the historic orthodoxy of the Reformed Faith” while the Essentials “preserves our commitment to historic evangelicalism” of which it is “an irenic statement.”

The Essentials, then, represent a kind of mere evangelicalism. There is significant overlap between the Essentials and the statement of faith for the National Association of Evangelicals, to which the EPC belongs. However, the Essentials as a statement of core evangelical beliefs is presented as an evangelical distillation and summary of the WCF. If the Essentials is about fundamental evangelical beliefs, which is probably a fair summary of their content, they are intended as an evangelical summation of the Westminster Standards and therefore describing them as the essential core of evangelicalism is in adequate explanation of their de jure *purpose*.

### The Essential Teachings of the Westminster Standards?

From its founding, the EPC has presented the Essentials as a summary of the WCF’s teaching. “The Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith” is the concluding line of the Essentials and has been part of the document since it was first drafted. The 1996 Stated Clerk’s report on the history of the Essentials says, “Minutes of the First Assembly and the 1981-1982 minutes of the Steering Committee, reflect the purpose and intent of the ‘Essentials of the Faith’ to provide a short, brief explanation of the non-negotiable essentials which may found in fuller expression with the Confession.”<sup>25</sup> Acts of Assembly 81-01 (the first ever act of the EPC’s GA!) bears this out, stating, “The intent of the ‘Essentials of the Faith’ shall be to give a clear and concise statement of the fundamentals of the Christian faith as embodied in the Westminster

---

<sup>23</sup> *Minutes of the Eighteenth General Assembly*, report of the Permanent Theology Committee, 197. Cf. *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

Confession and professed by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.”<sup>26</sup> The 1988 report at the 8<sup>th</sup> GA affirmed that “‘The Essentials’ is a distillation for [sic] the Westminster Confession of Faith.”<sup>27</sup>

The Essentials was conceived as a summary of the WCF’s teachings and is treated as such by the churches of the EPC. For instance, the EPC website currently states that “Our ‘Essentials of the Faith’ [sic] statement is a summary affirmation of orthodox Christianity taken from the Westminster standards.”<sup>28</sup>

The Essentials is never presented as the essence of the WCF’s doctrine in the same the way it is commonly discussed in the EPC as the “core” of the Christian faith, but the language of “distillation” and “summary” still indicates that the Essentials is understood to be communicating the fundamental truth of the WCF. It is interesting that the Essentials is never stated to be a summary of the Westminster Catechisms (the EPC site notwithstanding), only the WCF, despite the fact that the Catechisms are as constitutional as the WCF and officers of the EPC are required to subscribe to them equally.

My conclusion is that the formal position of the EPC is that the Essentials is the summary of essential doctrines in the WCF, presented in an evangelical accent. While the 1993 statement does say the Essentials is an “expression of the essentials of the Christian faith”, the 1993 report should be understood in light of the 1<sup>st</sup> GA, which intended the Essentials to summarize the fundamentals of the Christian faith taught in the WCF.

“The Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.” These are the final words of the Essentials, present since its drafting in 1981. This states clearly what was reaffirmed throughout the EPC’s history: the Essentials is a summary of belief, with the WCF as the fuller account. For the Essentials to be set out in greater detail in the WCF implies that there is an agreement between the two documents, with the WCF’s meaning taking priority over and defining the meaning of the Essentials. The point of this quotation is to affirm that no matter how extensive the Essentials is, its full meaning is found in the WCF. In other words, the Essentials is not an expansion of the WCF that could be reasonably understood to contradict the WCF. Otherwise the WCF would be set out in greater in the Essentials! The Essentials is a summary, the true meaning of which is in the WCF. **The position of the EPC, then, is that the Essentials mean what the WCF says.**

### The Effectiveness of the Essentials

Does the Essentials in actuality effectively distill the core teachings of the WCF? Does it successfully present an irenic, evangelical summation of Westminsterian theology? The answer to that question cannot be an honest yes.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>28</sup> “Values”: <https://epc.org/about/values/>. Retrieved on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The debate of 1987-2002 was fueled in part by the sense that the Essentials presented a different perspective on essential Christian doctrine than the Westminster Standards. The 19<sup>th</sup> GA in 1999 fielded a number of different proposals about reconciling the Essentials and Westminster Standards, including an overture to create two distinct synods in the EPC, one's presbyteries holding to the Essentials, the other the Westminster Standards.<sup>29</sup> A survey done of EPC elders in 2000 found that the Essentials, along with the EPC's motto, were considered more important for ministerial adherence than the Westminster Standards. More elders were also familiar with the Essentials than the Westminster Standards.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the current arrangement reached in 2002, EPC elders understood that the Essentials did not do an adequate job of summarizing the WCF, which was exactly why there was tension in the denomination. While the inclusion of both in the EPC's constitution has relieved a significant amount of that tension, the reality of whether the Essentials truly distill the WCF has not changed.<sup>31</sup>

B. B. Warfield famously asserted, accurately, that covenant theology is the great “architectonic principle” of the WCF.<sup>32</sup> The theology of the WCF is a covenant theology, not as a discrete doctrinal category, but as the overarching organization principle by which the entire confession is laid out. Yet, as the 1998 report noted, the Essentials is silent on the subject, much less organize and present the essential beliefs of the faith in a recognizably covenantal way.

The OPC produced a document to acquaint people with their church and included in it a brief, one-page summary of their beliefs.<sup>33</sup> The OPC and EPC share the same doctrinal basis, yet you would never know that if you compared the content of the Essentials to the OPC's summary of their beliefs. Comparing the two documents to each other, and then to the WCF, should make it quite clear that the Essentials does not summarize the WCF in any meaningful sense. The OPC could honestly say that this summary of their beliefs is found in greater detail in the Westminster Standards; once compared to this summary, the claim of the EPC's Essentials to be laid out in greater detail in the WCF seems either ignorant or disingenuous. The Essentials is not found in greater detail in the WCF, but represent a different, minimalistic approach to scripture's teaching altogether.

The “Explanatory Statement” says that the Essentials and WCF are neither alternative nor competitive statements of truth, but serve harmonious purposes in the EPC. Perhaps that harmony has been found in the end of the EPC's debate of their roles, but my sense is that the denomination's value of the documents is roughly the same today as it was 20 years ago when the

---

<sup>29</sup> *Liberty in Non-Essentials*, 157-158.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>31</sup> Of the roughly 600 EPC congregations (as of June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020), 494 had useable websites. While 35% of those websites did not list any doctrinal belief at all, 60% either cited or published the Essentials. Of those, 31% had no reference to the WCF, 52% either cited it or used the “included in greater detail” line, and only 17% also published the WCF. Of those 494 websites, 29% cited or published the WCF. Of these, only 5% cited or published the WCF without any reference to the Essentials. While a survey of EPC websites does not indicate all that the denomination values, it does reveal that the Essentials occupy a much higher place of value in the life of our church than our actual doctrinal standards.

<sup>32</sup> *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York, Oxford, 1931) 56-57.

<sup>33</sup> *What is the OPC?*, 10-11. Found online here: [https://opc.org/books/eBooks/What\\_Is\\_OPc.pdf](https://opc.org/books/eBooks/What_Is_OPc.pdf). The summary of their beliefs has been included as Appendix III to this part.

survey was completed. The proposal to formally divide the EPC into different synods for each doctrinal standard did not come to pass, but functionally describes the reality of the church. An EPC pastor once told me that he was glad that we had the Essentials, because it gave him and other likeminded ministers the freedom to be evangelical rather than Reformed. By having a second doctrinal document that was not as detailed as the WCF, he felt that there was liberty to avoid practicing or believing the things taught in the Standards. The “harmonious purpose” achieved by the documents is the provision of parallel, constitutionally legitimate foundations for EPC congregations to be either evangelical or Reformed. The Essentials is a shield to protect against the imposition of the Westminster Standards upon evangelical congregations, and a useful tool to bypass telling seekers that the beliefs of the EPC can be summarized in the WCF.

The limitations of using the Essentials to share the beliefs of the EPC becomes evident as soon as anyone asks about any doctrine not found in them (for whom did Christ die, who should be baptized, is Christ present at the Lord’s Supper, is God in control of all things, is repentance necessary, is hell just, etc.), especially once ordination comes into view. The maxim “What attracts people to your church is what keeps them there” is especially true for doctrine. If the Essentials is used to publicly present a congregation’s belief, but then someone’s growth into church leadership brings them into contact with the Westminster Standards, they’re going to wonder where this doctrine was initially. Even presenting the Essentials as summarizing the WCF is unhelpful *if essential aspects of the Westminster Standards are absent from the Essentials*. This will inevitably happen since the Essentials does not touch on all of the doctrines necessary for someone’s ordination.

For instance, a number of congregants at my church experienced deep turmoil when the elders began teaching on God’s sovereignty. The conflict escalated when the Session determined that several candidates for ordination as ruling elders or deacons were not qualified because of their views. There was deep frustration and resentment among many congregants because this was not a subject found in the Essentials and they believed the church was pulling a bait-and-switch. Several frustrated people noted this, and were bewildered to find that we actually believed in the WCF, and that the Westminster Standards took priority over the Essentials. Perhaps there had been pastoral oversight prior to this, but this is a problem encouraged by the EPC’s current arrangement and culture.

The Essentials is intended and used to present the core beliefs of the EPC, but there remain additional, essential doctrines for our church not found in it! The EPC provides its congregations with a tool that does not accomplish its intent: to summarize the non-negotiables of our doctrine. The Essentials either have to be explained away (“It’s our essential beliefs until you want to grow in leadership”), immediately bypassed (“The Essentials is nice, but only summarize what we really believe, which is in the WCF, so let’s not bother with the Essentials”), or elevated at the expense of the EPC’s actual doctrine (ignore the Westminster Standards and use the Essentials instead). If you have to explain why your doctrinal statement is not really what you believe, then it is not an effective instrument.

I doubt very much that either my pastor friend or the situation in my congregation are unique. In fact, I think they are very representative of what many elders and members of the EPC believe. The Essentials and WCF do not serve harmonious purposes, but contradictory ones. The Essentials was crafted in order to communicate a different set of core values than the WCF, which is why the 1987-2002 debate over the Essentials and Westminster Standards was so animated. This difference in purpose is why so many EPC churches rely on the Essentials over the Westminsterian approach to

theology and practice. This difference was why the 1998 report concluded that the Essentials was inadequate for ordination. This difference is why congregants get frustrated when they realize they are expected to affirm the Westminster Standards to be in leadership. If the Essentials was deleted, the EPC's doctrine would remain the same, yet maintaining them was seen as necessary because they give something to the EPC. Rather than distill the WCF, the Essentials provide an alternative to it.

### The Relationship of the Essentials to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms

“The WCF and ‘Essentials of Our Faith’ are not alternative statements of truth, nor are they competitive statements of truth. They each serve important and harmonious purposes within the EPC.” These assertions from the “Explanatory Statement to ‘Essentials of Our Faith’” require examination. Within all the debates and reports between 1987-2002 over the relationship between the Essentials and the Westminster Standards, there was never examination of the claim that the Essentials teach what is affirmed by the Westminster Standards. It seems that this claim was assumed rather than demonstrated. Not a single report produces any level of comparison between the Essentials and the Westminster Standards.

As noted in previous sections, the EPC’s position is that the Essentials summarize what is in the WCF. This means that the EPC’s position is that, no matter what the contents of the Essentials actually say, its meaning is found in the WCF. This section will examine the Essentials on its own terms, in order to assess the level of compatibility between what the Essentials actually assert with the teaching of the Westminster Standards, particularly the WCF. The question is not only whether the Essentials contradict the WCF, but if its assertions can realistically be called a distillation of its teachings. What should become clear is that the Essentials, as written, do not faithfully represent the doctrine of the WCF. What follows are a number of areas where the teaching of the Essentials is not compatible with the WCF.

### The Marks, Members, and Mission of the Church

The EPC famously (notoriously?) took the traditional marks of the church and added a fourth. The Essentials state, “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.”<sup>34</sup> The maintenance of loving fellowship as a mark of the church is a distinct feature of the EPC, and is something well known as being unique to the denomination. Frequently, candidates for ordination are asked for the four marks of the church, with comments either from the examiner or candidates about loving fellowship being a specifically-EPC-stated mark.

What should be obvious is that “loving fellowship” is in the Essentials as a mark of the church, but not the WCF, and therefore cannot be affirmed as summarizing the WCF’s teaching. WCF 25.4 states, “This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” The WCF teaches that there are three marks of the church: the teaching and embrace of

---

<sup>34</sup> This is repeated in BoG 1.3-B, “The Visible Church, though more or less divided and obscured, is bound together in its essential unity where the Word is rightly proclaimed, where the sacraments are properly observed, where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. Such groups who demonstrate this fundamental integrity of the Church shall be recognized as true parts of the Church, the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ on earth.” This was famously edited in the 1990s to add loving fellowship in order to bring the BoG into line with the Essentials, and cites the Essentials as its basis. This change is of dubious constitutionality. BoG 23-1.B states, “No changes may be made to the **Book of Order** including any of its parts composed of the *Book of Government*, the *Book of Discipline*, and the *Book of Worship* that would be contrary to the **Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms** (emphasis original).” Since this addition contradicts the definitive list in WCF 25.4, the amendment fails to meet the criteria of the BoG.



the gospel, the administration of the ordinances (preaching of the word and sacraments)<sup>35</sup>, and the performance of public worship.

This means that there are multiple differences between the WCF and Essentials on the marks of the church. Both affirm the teaching of God's word and administration of the sacraments, but the Essentials add church discipline and loving fellowship, and neglects the performance of worship.<sup>36</sup> Typically church discipline, not worship, is understood as a mark of the church, but that comes from the Belgic Confession, not the WCF.<sup>37</sup> Part of the reason the WCF does not include discipline as a mark of the church is because church discipline is fundamentally about access to the preached word and administered sacraments; their faithful administration encompasses church discipline.<sup>38</sup>

Why is loving fellowship not a mark of the church? Because the church as an institution is distinguished by the objective gifts God has given it: word, sacrament, and worship. Conformity to those gifts (the "purity" of WCF) is what leads to particular churches being more or less visible. Loving fellowship is not a gift to the church, but should be a result of what the church is given. The marks of the church are designed to transform the people of God by granting them Christ; loving fellowship is a result of receiving Christ, not a means of encountering him. WCF 26, "Of the Communion of Saints", approaches this subject in exactly that way. Churches should possess people who practice loving fellowship, but a particular church does not become more or less visible according to the degree to which its members are sanctified. Woe to the EPC if we ever place our trust in the church's visibility in our morality rather than the ordinances of Christ.

I led this section with the subject of loving fellowship because it should be exceedingly clear that the Essentials presents the marks of the church in an obviously divergent way from the WCF. It cannot be honestly said the Essentials is a distillation of the WCF on this point, and it is widely acknowledged in the EPC that the Essentials not only differ from the WCF, but the broader Reformed tradition in this regard. And this is not merely the Essentials and the WCF saying things

---

<sup>35</sup> WCF 7.6 identifies the ordinances by which Christ as the substance of the gospel is exhibited being the preaching of the word and the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. WSC 88 and WLC 154 identify preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments as these ordinances, plus prayer as annexed to the word. It should be noted that teaching and holding the gospel, and preaching the word, while interrelated, are treated separately.

<sup>36</sup> I suspect that a majority of EPC elders would be very hesitant to acknowledge that the way in which God is to be worshipped is an essential of the faith.

<sup>37</sup> Belgic Confession 29 states, "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself." *Sola scriptura* essentially becomes the normative mark of the church. Calvin held to word and sacrament as the true marks of the church, and Bavinck followed the Belgic Confession's logic to state that only obedience to the word is a true mark of the church (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 320-325).

The Belgic Confession interestingly goes on in the same chapter to state that "the marks of Christians [are] by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof." The true Christian is characterized by faith and repentance (which includes belief), not doctrinal affirmations.

<sup>38</sup> WCF 29.8, WCF 30, WLC 173. Cf. Heidelberg 82-85.

in slightly different ways: if a candidate for ordination affirms three marks of the church by citing the WCF, and the examiner disagrees citing four from the Essentials, and neither wants to change their mind, it becomes obvious that there is an actual contradiction between the two. Hopefully what this illustrates is that in principle the Essentials cannot be trusted to present the fundamental teachings of the WCF, which should make it easier to see its shortcomings in other areas.

For instance, in the same section the Essentials says, “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.” Compare with WCF 25.2, “The visible church, which is also [with the invisible church] catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children... (emphasis added; cf. WLC 62).”<sup>39</sup>

Of whom is the true church composed? The WCF says believers and their children, the Essentials says believers. The Essentials is providing a definition of the church’s composition, not a single example of the kind of person who belongs to the church; its definition of the church’s composition rules out the unregenerate children of believers. Are kids part of the church or not? Not a small issue, not an unimportant doctrine, and there is contradiction between the Westminster Standards and the Essentials on this point.

The eighth essential reads, “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.’” This is sloppily written. Jesus nowhere in scripture commands all believers to go throughout the world to make disciples of all nations.<sup>40</sup> If the first “all” were dropped from this sentence it would read much more intelligibly.

Leaving aside those who actually believe that all Christians need to go everywhere in the world, the intent of this statement (probably, and then again, not what it actually says!) is that believers are to go out from their normal arenas of life to make disciples of the nations.<sup>41</sup> But even this says too much: nowhere in scripture are individual believers commanded to do this. Parents are commanded to instruct their children, pastors commanded to preach the gospel, Timothy commanded to do the

---

<sup>39</sup> It may be objected that the Essentials is describing those who are part of the “true church”, and therefore those who are saved, rather than the visible church, which is the aim of the WCF. If this was the case, the Essentials would be exercising a tautology: those that are saved are those that are saved. The Essentials also place this claim of membership right before it describes the marks of the church visible, just as the WCF does. WLC 61 also frames this issue in a way to disarm this objection. “Q. Are all they saved who hear the gospel, and live in the church? A. All that hear the gospel, and live in the visible church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the church invisible.” The church visible and invisible are equally true, but those who are saved are the true members of the church invisible.

<sup>40</sup> While the focus of this critique is the “all” going, it is also true that discipleship is primarily, though of course not exclusively, to be done by pastors. Unpopular in our democratic age, but biblical. Discipleship is teaching followers to observe all that Christ commanded his apostles by his word. This teaching is to be done by qualified and called ministers: WCF 7.6, 21.5, 29.3, 30.2, WLC 35, 154-160, 169. While the Essentials speak of proclaiming the gospel, scripture and the Westminster Standards speak of preaching the word, something to which God calls his ministers for his church.

<sup>41</sup> It is bewilderingly common in the EPC to hear pastors talk about “the nations coming us”, referring to the large international and immigrant population in the United States. Bewildering, because surely Americans are part of “the nations”, and not just foreigners! “The nations” have always been in America because Americans are people.

work of an evangelist,<sup>42</sup> believers commanded to exhibit their faith by their conduct, people like Paul and Phillip ordained for sharing the gospel, and others like Priscilla and Aquilla commended for sharing the gospel. But no command is given to individual believers to leave their place in life or seek out those different than them (the nations!) in order to make disciples.

This statement from the Essentials can find no corresponding section in the Westminster Standards. Even stipulating that this were a biblical statement, it is not a summary of something taught in the WCF. Even the EPC's addition of Chapter 35, "The Gospel of the Love of God and Missions", does not affirm the Essentials here.<sup>43</sup> WCF 35.4 says,

Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel, and since in the divinely established and ordinary method of grace faith comes by hearing the word of God, Christ has commissioned his church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established, and to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth.

The Essentials state that all believers are to go, the WCF says that all believers must support the church in its going. The Essentials teach that Christ commissioned all individual believers, the WCF that Christ commissioned the church as an institution. WLC 53 says that Christ was exalted in his ascension by giving to his apostles the commission to preach the gospel to all nations.<sup>44</sup> Certainly the church has a duty to share the gospel with those who don't believe, but the apostolic commission is an ecclesiological mandate, not an individualized commission. And yes, it is a good thing for individual Christians to share the gospel with non-believers, but the assertion from the Essentials contradicts the Westminster Standards by removing the mandate from its ecclesiological-institutional context and asserting a doctrine which cannot be found in the confession it purports to summarize.

This section of the Essentials is further complicated by its assertion that, "Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to 'Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.'" It is not really clear what this means. Obeying the great commission demands that the Christian give total commitment to Christ? You can only obey the great commission once you're totally committed to Jesus? Either way, this statement finds no basis in scripture or the Westminster Standards.

It also implies that the great commission occupies a special place in Christian obedience; change this to, "Obedience to the Moral Law requires total commitment to Jesus" and it should be clear that the Essentials is elevating obedience to the great commission to a unique place in Christian discipleship. It is placing this particular command to obey Jesus into a separate category from every other obligation to obey him. Surely, if obedience to the great commission requires "total commitment" to Jesus it is not the only good work that requires that commitment.

---

<sup>42</sup> See the discussion of this subject in Part II.

<sup>43</sup> See the discussion of this addition to the WCF in Part I.

<sup>44</sup> Historic Reformed theology has referred to Matthew 28:18-20 as the "apostolic commission" or "ascension commission". The term "Great Commission" was popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Baptist missionary Hudson Taylor. See this archived article of *Themelios* by Robbie Castleman for a summary: [http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/32.3\\_Castleman.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/journal-issues/32.3_Castleman.pdf).

“Obedience to Jesus requires total commitment to Jesus” is just an odd phrase, and it is unlikely that any Westminster-subscribing minister would ever utter it. Compare the logic of the Essentials to the Westminster Standards: “These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith” (WCF 16.2), “Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure” (WCF 16.3), “They who, in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do... and as [good works] are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.” (WCF 16.4-5), “Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprovable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections” (WCF 16.6).<sup>45</sup>

No Christian is able to ever totally commit to Christ in this life. Good works, done in obedience and gratitude to Jesus, are able to be performed by Christians and accepted by God because of Christ's total commitment to his people. The Essentials reverses this logic, and if followed to its natural conclusion present a form of legalism: a Christian is able to become totally committed to Jesus since that is what is necessary to fulfill the great commission.

### Justification

The Essentials' most egregious error is its doctrine of justification: “God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight.” The first issue is the language of “credits”.<sup>46</sup> This word is entirely absent from the Westminster Standards,<sup>47</sup> both in the original 17<sup>th</sup> century version and the modern language translations used by the EPC. The idea of crediting something is the transferal of it from one entity in order to ascribe it to another.<sup>48</sup> There is no corresponding term in the New Testament used to describe salvation.

Λογιζομα and its cognates are used throughout Romans 4 to describe God accounting Abraham righteous according to his faith in Christ (verses 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24), and is used in the rest of the epistle, as well as the NT, to communicate this idea. Throughout Romans 4, λογίζομα is

---

<sup>45</sup> Sanctification is imperfect in this life (WCF 13.2, WLC 77-78) and no man is able to perfectly keep God's law (WLC 149). Total commitment to Christ, whatever the totality of that commitment is from a human perspective, is impossible. Sanctification is definitive in this life, but not total.

<sup>46</sup> This same subject was dealt with extensively in Part II, though with different terms, so I will not repeat all of the same critiques. Suffice to say, it is embarrassing and frustrating that justification, the hinge of the gospel, is so badly articulated in the Essentials.

<sup>47</sup> WLC 145, on the ninth commandment, does teach that it is forbidden to take credit for someone else's accomplishments, but obviously this not the same context as the doctrine of justification.

<sup>48</sup> Merriam-Webster, Dictionary.com, Oxford English Dictionary.

translated as “account”, “count”, “impute”, or “reckon” by the ESV, KJV, NLT, and NRSV. This is consistent with the way it is translated in the rest of the NT. However, the CSB, NASB, and NIV translate it as “credit” in Romans 4, but only in Romans 4. They treat λογίζομαι as meaning “account” or “impute” in the rest of the NT. Translating it as “credit” in Romans 4 is inconsistent with the rest of their translations, and does not match its semantic meaning. For instance, BDAG takes λογίζομαι to mean “to determine by mathematical process, reckon, calculate...count, take into account” and uses multiples verses of Romans 4 as examples of this definition.

Here is why this matters: λογίζομαι is about God accounting his people righteous by making them righteous on the basis of Christ’s work, by uniting them with Jesus, God’s righteous one. They are accounted righteous (the terminology of the Westminster Standards), because God accepts his people in Christ. To credit (transfer) righteousness from God to sinners is inaccurate; rather, God gives his righteousness to sinners by giving them himself. The terminology of “credits” implies that grace and righteousness are kinds of pseudo-substances that God gives to his people. This has been a significant issue in the history of the church, and aligns with the language used in Roman Catholic soteriology where the treasury of grace/righteousness is dispensed for salvation. Reformed Protestants argued that salvation is by God providing Christ, who in turn provides benefits to his people, including justification, because they are united to the truly righteous one. The Essentials cannot honestly be described as accurately summarizing the WCF on the language of justification, and rather present an alternative understanding of what justification is.

The Essentials also get the basis of justification wrong: “God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight.” This is the language of effect from a cause: God justifies people because they put their faith in him. The “thereby” eliminates the possibility that the Essentials is merely describing who is justified, but addresses the how of justification.

To what does the “thereby” refer? The definition of “thereby” is “by that means; as a result of that.”<sup>49</sup> Syntactically it cannot refer exclusively to the crediting of righteousness since the modifying clause (“and thereby justifies...”) follows those who put their faith in God. Theologically this would be problematic too, since the provision of God’s righteousness to the sinner is the act of justification, not the basis of justification.<sup>50</sup> If the “thereby” refers to the entirety of the preceding clause this theological problem remains as well. It is entirely possible that the Essentials intend to say that God providing his righteousness is the basis of justification (along with faith), not the act of justification, which would result in the Essentials yet again getting the definition of justification wrong.

The “thereby” refers to sinners putting their faith in God since the modifying clause immediately follows this statement. But even if it refers to whole preceding segment it would still encompass those who put their faith in Christ. And it is here where the most severe problem with Essentials arises: the Essentials is stating that God justifies sinners as a result of their faith. The person has faith, and thereby God justifies them. Compare to WCF 11.1, “Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth... nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing... but by imputing the

---

<sup>49</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Merriam-Webster and Dictionary.com have essentially the same definition.

<sup>50</sup> WCF 11.1, WSC 33, WLC 70.

obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith.”

God does not justify people as a result of their faith, but by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness alone. Faith is the *receiving* of justification. Both WSC 33 and WLC 70 make this point very clear in their definitions of justification: Justification is the act of God providing his righteousness, which is *received* by faith alone. WCF 11.2 goes on to say, “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification.” Justification is by faith, not because faith is the basis that results in justification, but because faith is the lone mechanism of receiving justification. WLC 73 directly speaks to this:

Q. How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God? A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.

If the Essentials was rewritten to say, “God justifies those to whom he credits his righteousness, who receive him and his righteousness by faith alone” it would fit the Westminsterian logic of the relationship of justification to faith. This rewrite hopefully shows how clearly the Essentials in their current form teach a justification as a result of faith. Canons II-III of the Council of Trent teach that God justifies sinners by stimulating faith so that they cooperate with his grace. Faith is a basis of salvation, it initiates salvation. Decree VIII of Trent on justification states, “And whereas the Apostle saith, that man is justified by faith and freely, those words are to be understood in that sense which the perpetual consent of the Catholic Church hath held and expressed; to wit, that we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation, and the root of all Justification.” Bavinck, among others, have noted that the Roman Catholic Church at Trent strips faith of its central role in receiving the grace of salvation by instead granting it the function of initiation salvation (thereby!) through its synergistic cooperation with grace.<sup>51</sup> This is similar to the Arminian Five Articles of Remonstrance (1610) which occasioned the Synod of Dort. Article 2 asserted that believers partook of Christ’s work by exercising their own belief (cooperation), and Articles 3-4 taught that the exercise of this belief was an ability granted to all people as the prevenient grace of Christ. In other words, faith is not the reception of salvation, but the initiation of salvation.

The teaching Essentials is far closer to Trent and Arminianism than the Westminster Standards. The very order of the sentence (God justifies those who do x, with x being putting faith in Christ) teaches a synergism that compromises the gospel of the free grace of Christ.

Any candidate for ordination in the EPC who articulated the doctrine of justification in line with its presentation in the Essentials would not be fit for ministry. The Essentials does not share a harmonious, irenic role alongside the Westminster Standards, but challenge them on the very nature of the gospel.

---

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* Vol. I, 540.

### The Person and Work of Christ

The third essential, addressing the person and work of Christ, is sloppily written, at best. It concludes with, “On the third day [Jesus] 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 (emphasis added).” First off, Christ did not ascend into heaven on the same day rose from the dead. This is a compound sentence (a list of different actions held together in a single sentence) begun with introductory words (“on the third day”). Unless conjunctions or other time markers are included, the introductory words modify the entire sentence.<sup>52</sup> The Essentials teach that Jesus ascended into heaven on the same day as his resurrection. This is embarrassing, because it is clearly not the intent and carefully editing should have caught it.

But the language of the sentence gets worse. When does Jesus become the high priest and mediator of his people? “Where...He now is” is in the present progressive tense: the activity is continuing at this moment, and began when the now (ascending to the right hand of the Majesty on High)<sup>53</sup> started. Syntactically, the Essentials teach that Jesus became our high priest and mediator in his ascension. Unlike the timing of the ascension, I think this is likely intentional since the Essentials is attempting to describe the work of Christ post-ascension. The problem is that Jesus has been the mediator of the church in his office of priest since his incarnation.

WCF chapter 8 is entitled “Of Christ the Mediator” and his work of mediation describes the entirety of his work, from incarnation to the present moment (WCF 8.3, 6). In his mediation Christ fills the offices of prophet, priest, and king (WCF 8.1), and holds those offices throughout the entirety of his mediation. The WLC in particular organizes its entire discussion of the work of Christ and salvation through the rubric of Christ’s mediation (WLC 32, 36-42, 57, 69). WLC 42 states, “Our mediator was called Christ, because he was anointed with the Holy Ghost above measure; and so set apart, and fully furnished with all authority and ability, to execute the offices of prophet, priest, and king of his church, in the estate both of his humiliation and exaltation (emphasis added).” Christ as mediator takes on the offices of prophet, priest, and king in both his humiliation and exaltation. WLC 46-56 (cf. WSC 22-28) are discussions of Christ’s humiliation (incarnation, life, being subject to the law, crucifixion, death, and burial) and exaltation (resurrection, ascension, session at God’s right hand, intercession before God’s throne, and coming again in judgment). Christ is our mediator, our prophet, priest, and king, in all of these. In particular, Christ executed the office of priest in his death (WLC 44, WSC 25), which is part of his humiliation.

So, Christ did not become our mediator or priest in his ascension, but in his incarnation. The Essentials probably has something like Christ’s intercession in mind, but Jesus also interceded for his people during his humiliation (e.g. John 17). If the Essentials read, “Where...He now continues as...” the meaning would be entirely different. As it stands, the Essentials teach, contrary to the Westminster Standards, that Jesus begins as our mediator and high priest only after he ascended into heaven.

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, the sentence “On Friday Joe got up in the morning, climbed the stairs, and sat down” communicates that Joe did all three actions on Friday, not just getting up in the morning.

<sup>53</sup> This is a reference to Hebrews 1:3 and 8:1, which say that Jesus was seated at the right of the Majesty in heaven. It is odd that the Essentials cite this phrase without discussing the session of Christ at God’s right hand, the point of those verses, and a subject present in the all the Reformed confessions and Catholic creeds.

The beginning of the same section of the Essentials also carelessly states, “Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth (emphasis added).” Jesus did not become flesh in his birth, but in his conception, period. He most certainly had a body while in Mary’s womb!

It is worth reiterating that the EPC’s position is that Essentials is a summary of the WCF, and therefore what the WCF teaches explains and defines the meaning of the Essentials. However, without that official hermeneutic in place, it should be clear that the Essential does not merely fail to bring up and frame biblical teaching in a way consistent with the WCF, but what is in the Essentials actually contradicts the Westminster Standards in key areas. This weakens the EPC by having a constitutional document whose teachings either need to be ignored or explained away, or is actually used to avoid subscription to our doctrinal standards.



### The Fifth Ordination Vow: No Exceptions to the Essentials?

Candidates for teaching elder are allowed to disagree in part with the Westminster Standards, and presbyteries are allowed to permit those disagreements, as long as they are not disagreements with the system of doctrine taught in the Standards.<sup>54</sup> However, the presbytery “shall not allow any exception to the ‘Essentials of Our Faith.’”<sup>55</sup> The fifth ordination vow, requiring an affirmative response from all EPC candidates for church office, is “Do you affirm and adopt the ‘*Essentials of Our Faith*’ without exception? (emphasis original)”<sup>56</sup>

This stance of the EPC is why every careless wording of the Essentials matter: Not allowing any exception to the Essentials elevates every small issue into a non-negotiable without recourse for the disagreeing officer. This prioritizes the Essentials over the Westminster Standards when the two disagree.

Granting that my analysis in the previous section is correct, and there does exist actual contradiction between the content of the Essentials and Westminster Standards, there are several different approaches to this dilemma. The first is the one already implied throughout this critique, and is probably the official position of the EPC: Regardless of what the Essentials actually says, it means whatever the Westminster Standards say, and therefore there is no contradiction between them. This understanding is why I believe I have been honest to my ordination vows. I can honestly say that I “affirm and adopt” the Essentials without exception, even though I disagree with the content of the Essentials, because the EPC’s position is that Essentials means what the WCF says, and I do not take exception to the WCF.

This view and practice render the Essentials useless. The Essentials was intended to be a distillation of core doctrines of the faith in the WCF to which no reasonable Christian could disagree. If the Essentials does not mean anything on its own, it does not serve as a minimal statement of Christian faith. It doesn’t then actually serve any purpose, because the fifth ordination vow is just another way of affirming the Westminster Standards. This is the opposite of what the Essentials was intended to achieve, but is the logical consequence of the EPC’s position. Some might say the intent is for subscription to the Essentials to protect key doctrines in the WCF, but of course, the EPC has already determined that the Essentials does not cover enough doctrinal ground to do even that.

Now, if the EPC’s position becomes that the Essentials have meaning independent from the Westminster Standards (rather than functioning as a summary of something else that defines its meaning) and my critique is correct that the Essentials contradict the WCF on multiple points, then EPC officers need to ask to which ordination vow they will be faithful. Subscription to the Westminster Standards as containing the system of doctrine found in the scriptures, or the Essentials without exception? There are four possible responses if there is indeed conflict between the Essentials and the Westminster Standards.

---

<sup>54</sup> This topic is the focus of Part IV.

<sup>55</sup> BoG 12-4. This was added to the BoG along with the fifth ordination vow as part of the constitutional revisions in 2002.

<sup>56</sup> BoG 13-2.A.5.

The first possibility is that where contradictions between the Essentials and Westminster Standards exist, the Essentials take priority and EPC officers are required to take exception to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. In this approach, for example, if a candidate for ordination were asked what the marks of the church are, he would be required to affirm the four listed in the Essentials and therefore state a disagreement with the WCF's listing of three. A lot of EPC elders function this way already (we added a fourth mark, beyond the teaching of the WCF), even if no exception to the WCF is demanded of candidates. This approach is ludicrous and unacceptable, even if many elders lean this direction. It prioritizes the Essentials over the WCF, even though the former is intended to be a summary of the latter, and would require elders to disagree with the church's doctrine! The assumption when the Essentials was made constitutional was that it did not disagree with the WCF, and the possibility of mandated exceptions to the WCF was never considered or intended.

The second possibility to conflicting vows is the mirror opposite of the previous option: The "without exception" subscription to the Essentials assumes that the candidate for ordination automatically disagrees with the Essentials where it contradicts the Westminster Standards. While maintaining the priority of the WCF over the Essentials, this approach still encounters the non-sensical problems of the previous possibility: the intent of the Essentials and the fifth ordination vow was to provide a summary statement of doctrine with which no Christian would disagree and no officer of the EPC would be allowed to diverge. The suggestion that the BoG carved out parts of the Essentials for people to disagree with flies in the face of the intent of the Essentials and the very text of the BoG.

The third possibility is that EPC elders can simply disagree with the Essentials without reporting exceptions. The fourth ordination vow requires EPC officers to inform their ordaining court if they develop disagreements with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms that puts them out of accord with its system of doctrine. There is no mechanism for reporting disagreements with the Essentials that developed post-ordination. The assumption in the BoG is that any disagreement with the Essentials would constitute exceptions to the Westminsterian system of doctrine, but if an officer were to disagree with the Essentials precisely because they were affirming the WCF, then they would be upholding their fourth ordination vow, not violating it. This could only honestly work after ordination, since it is about reporting changes in subscription, not initial subscription.

The fourth possibility is if a candidate for ordination or an officer of the church reported that they disagreed with the Essentials because they affirmed the Westminster Standards (and therefore could not affirm the fifth ordination vow). The courts of the church would be faced with a dilemma. The Essentials is not to be used as the minimal standard for ordination or ministerial examination, nor used as a substitute for the WCF,<sup>57</sup> which means that the standard for evaluation of a candidate's or minister's doctrine is conformity to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. In regards to freedom of conscience for doctrinal views, the BoG states, "However, those seeking ordination in the EPC, either initially or by transfer, voluntarily limit their free exercise of conscience to the lawful bounds of the Essentials of Our Faith, the **Westminster** Standards, and the **Book of Order** of the EPC (emphasis original)."<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> From the "Explanatory Statement."

<sup>58</sup> BoG 25-2.A.

If a candidate for ordination states a disagreement with the Essentials on the grounds that the Essentials conflict with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, the standard the ordaining court is required to use in evaluating the candidate's disagreement is the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Therefore, the court would by definition find the candidate in agreement with the EPC's doctrine even as they disagree with the Essentials. Similarly, the BoG does not provide a mechanism for ordaining courts to discipline an-already-ordained minister who expresses disagreement with the Essentials by way of affirming the WCF; BoG 12-4 only allows presbyteries to permit or disallow new exceptions to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, and someone taking exception to the Essentials in order to affirm the Westminster Standards would have no exceptions to those Standards for the presbytery to assess.

The EPC could potentially put an officer who disagrees with the Essentials on trial for heresy, but a similar problem arises. BoG 25-2.A on freedom of the conscience states that "No person may be rejected for membership or ordination because of such matters of conscience unless that matter has been officially declared a heresy by the Church" and that the exercise of their conscience is limited by the lawful bounds of the Westminster Standards. The EPC defines heresy as "the expressed or implied denial, openly taught and obstinately maintained, of one or more of the essential doctrines of Christianity."<sup>59</sup> This means that if an EPC officer were put on trial for heresy because they affirmed the Westminster Standards where they disagree with the Essentials, the prosecution would have to demonstrate that the view the officer holds contradicts the essential doctrines of the faith as articulated in the Westminster Standards.

Such an ordination process or trial would have to conclude either that, 1) There is no contradiction between the Essentials and the Westminster Standards, because the Essentials mean what the Standards say, and is therefore useless as an independent doctrinal statement and no exceptions are actually taking place, or 2) There are contradictions between the Essentials and Westminster Standards, but because the ordination process or trial requires use of the Westminster Standards for doctrinal evaluation, the candidate or officer would be vindicated since they affirm the Standards against the Essentials.

---

<sup>59</sup> BoW 1-9.

### Final Assessments and Conclusion

As noted throughout this series, the BoG stipulates that no amendments may be made to the BOO that contradict the Westminster Standards. The amendment process (BoG 23) only discusses the BOO and Westminster Confession and Catechisms, not the Essentials. This is because the Essentials was added to the constitution after the BOO's ratification. Therefore, the provisions for amending the constitution expressly apply only to the BOO and Westminster Standards (BoG 23-1). This raises some interesting questions, like,

- Why is there no express provision for amending the Essentials? Should there be?
- Should the Essentials, for the purposes of evaluating constitutional amendments, be considered part of the BOO?
- If the Essentials is not considered part of the BOO, was it legitimately added to the constitution since there is no provision for constitutional additions outside the BOO and Westminster Standards?
- If the Essentials is considered part of the BOO, does it transgress the requirement that no changes may be made to the BOO that contradict the Westminster Standards? If so, does that mean it is unconstitutional?
- If the Essentials is not constitutional, does that automatically mean that the fifth ordination vow is unconstitutional?

If the Essentials is not part of the BOO (and currently they are listed as a separate component of the constitution in the BOO's Preface and is printed prior to the express beginning of the BOO), then regardless of voting process, they should not be considered constitutional. The BOO provides no mechanism for adding to the constitution, only for amending either the BOO and Westminster Standards.

However, if the Essentials are part of the BOO by virtue of amending the BOO to add the Essentials to it, then its constitutional status is questionable for a different reason. The problem lies in the fact that while the EPC's official position is that Essentials does not contradict the Westminster Standards, the reality of its words shows that it does.

No changes may be made to the BOO "contrary to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms."<sup>60</sup> If the Essentials contradict the Westminster Standards and were intended to change the BOO, then they are not constitutional. The fact that the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> GAs (2001-2002), as well as three-quarters of EPC presbyteries, ratified the Essentials as a constitutional amendment is insufficient for them to be legitimately added to the BOO. They must meet the bar of not contradicting the Westminster Standards, which they fail. The EPC's assertion that the Essentials does not contradict the WCF cannot be used as an argument for adding the Essentials to the BOO; otherwise, anything that plainly contradicted the Westminster Standards could be added to the BOO as long as the EPC stated that there was no contradiction. This would fundamentally eliminate the criteria that no changes be made to the BOO that contradicts the Westminster Confession and Catechisms by simply wishing the contradictions away.

---

<sup>60</sup> BoG 23-1.B.

While the EPC's formal position is that the Essentials only mean what the WCF says, this position, enshrined in the 'Explanatory Statement', only works as an official hermeneutic *after* the Essentials were added to the BOO. In other words, if viewed prior to its attempted addition to the BOO, the Essentials' meaning (regardless of the EPC's hopes) contradicted the WCF. It is only after the fact with the Essentials and 'Explanatory Statement' made constitutional that it can be formally described as only summarizing the WCF. Yet, because it contradicted the Westminster Confession and catechisms, the Essentials never legitimately achieved constitutional status in order to receive the benefit of this official interpretive rubric.

Perhaps it could be argued that the requirement that no changes be made to the BOO that contradict the Westminster Standards only applies to the BOO, and since the Essentials is not part of the BOO (merely attached to it, while still remaining part of the constitution), then the Essentials is exempt from this requirement for no contradiction. This line of reasoning encounters two problems: first, such an interpretation of the BoG cannot provide legitimate basis for *adding* to the constitution rather than amending the BOO or Westminster Standards, rendering the Essentials unconstitutional, and second, transgresses the spirit of the BOO by providing a workaround to amend the constitution in ways that contradict the EPC's doctrine by adding to it rather than amending the BOO.

The Essentials is not constitutional because it was either added to the constitution (no provision for such an action) or was an attempted amendment to the BOO contrary to the Westminster Standards. Regardless of which option is the case, this also means that BoG 12-4 (prohibiting exceptions to the Essentials) and 13-2.A.5 (the fifth ordination vow subscribing to the Essentials) are not constitutional because they changed the BoG to require beliefs and practices contrary to the Westminster Standards.

The Essentials fails to give a summary of the core beliefs of Christianity, fails to summarize the essential teachings of the WCF, and contradicts the Westminster Standards on multiple critical doctrines. The EPC's official position is that Essentials does not mean what it says, but what the WCF says, making them useless at best, but more likely in practice providing a confusing excuse not to uphold the Westminster Standards. Or the Essentials does contradict the Westminster Standards in meaning, forcing EPC ministers to choose between two competing doctrinal standards. And it is likely that the Essentials was not legitimately added to the EPC's constitution. The presence and use of the Essentials weaken the EPC, while their deletion strengthens the church.

### Part III Conclusion

The EPC should, by the authority granted to the Stated Clerk and Permanent Judicial Commission,

- 1) Conclude that BoG 12-4 and 13-2.A.5 are not part of the EPC constitution because they fail to meet the BoG's criteria for inclusion as amendments;<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> BoG 21-3.D.1 states that the Stated Clerk between GAs may issue provisional ruling on the interpretation of the BOO, which is binding until the next GA. The PJC shall review the provisional ruling and provide its recommendation

and by act of General Assembly,

- 2) Affirm that BoG 12-4 and 13-2.A.5 are not part of the EPC constitution because they failed to meet the BoG's criteria for inclusion as amendments;
- 3) Affirm that the Essentials does not meet BoG criteria for inclusion in the EPC's constitution because it contains teachings contrary to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, and is therefore not constitutional;

and if a doctrinal statement that distills the orthodox Christian faith is still desired, the EPC should by act of General Assembly and approval by the Presbyteries, following the mechanism for constitutional amendment, should,

- 4) Endorse the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, including the *filioque* clause, as a faithful statement of evangelical, orthodox, and Catholic Christianity.

---

to the GA. The Essentials, even if part of the constitution, are not part of the BOO, and so the Stated Clerk and PJC do not have the constitutional authority to assess the validity of its inclusion.

### Appendix III (What the OPC Believes)

Our system of doctrine is the Reformed faith, also called Calvinism (because Calvin was the most important exponent of it during the Reformation). It pulls together the most significant doctrines taught in the Bible. These doctrines are set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (with accompanying biblical references). Our system of doctrine is summarized in the following paragraphs.

- The Bible, having been inspired by God, is entirely trustworthy and without error. Therefore, we are to believe and obey its teachings. The Bible is the only source of special revelation for the church today.
- The one true God is personal, yet beyond our comprehension. He is an invisible spirit, completely self-sufficient and unbounded by space or time, perfectly holy and just, and loving and merciful. In the unity of the Godhead there are three “persons”: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- God created the heavens and the earth, and all they contain. He upholds and governs them in accordance with his eternal will. God is sovereign—in complete control—yet this does not diminish human responsibility.
- Because of the sin of the first man, Adam, all mankind is corrupt by nature, dead in sin, and subject to the wrath of God. But God determined, by a covenant of grace, that sinners may receive forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ has always been the only way of salvation, in both Old Testament and New Testament times.
- The Son of God took upon himself a human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so that in her son Jesus the divine and human natures were united in one person. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and died on a cross, bearing the sins of, and receiving God’s wrath for, all those who trust in him for salvation (his chosen ones). He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, where he sits as Lord and rules over his kingdom (the church). He will return to judge the living and the dead, bringing his people (with glorious, resurrected bodies) into eternal life, and consigning the wicked to eternal punishment.
- Those whom God has predestined unto life are effectually drawn to Christ by the inner working of the Spirit as they hear the gospel. When they believe in Christ, God declares them righteous (justifies them), pardoning their sins and accepting them as righteous, not because of any righteousness of their own, but by imputing Christ’s merits to them. They are adopted as the children of God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies them, enabling them increasingly to stop sinning and act righteously. They repent of their sins (both at their conversion and thereafter), produce good works as the fruit of their faith, and persevere to the end in communion with Christ, with assurance of their salvation.
- Believers strive to keep God’s moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments, not to earn salvation, but because they love their Savior and want to obey him. God is the Lord of the conscience, so that men are not required to believe or do anything contrary to, or in addition to, the Word of God in matters of faith or worship.

- Christ has established his church, and particular churches, to gather and perfect his people, by means of the ministry of the Word, the sacraments of baptism (which is to be administered to the children of believers, as well as believers) and the Lord's Supper (in which the body and blood of Christ are spiritually present to the faith of believers), and the disciplining of members found delinquent in doctrine or life. Christians assemble on the Lord's Day to worship God by praying, hearing the Word of God read and preached, singing psalms and hymns, and receiving the sacraments.