

WHY NOT ECO?

Change is good, right? So, why can't the Presbyterians For Unity group just go along with Session's plan and allow our wonderful, imperfect church to be moved from PC (USA) to ECO? What difference would it really make?

Here are our concerns:

ECO's polity is thin in detail and protections, but thick with politicized language and theologically suspect demands for congregational submission. ECO claims to have a "flat" management structure, but in fact, all of its theological, financial, corporate, and governmental decision-making is centralized under a vaguely defined, 6- to 9-member Executive Council that is virtually untouchable from a congregational level.

ECO has existed only since January 2012. Its growth is fueled by PC (USA) churches in which denominational issues have been used to wedge congregations apart unnecessarily. What ECO vigorously markets as a fresh approach to church-building appears to be little more than aggressive and opportunistic exploitation of controversial faith issues.

Here are five things about ECO that, we believe, make it a terrible fit for First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem:

- 1 ECO REQUIRES CONGREGATIONS TO SURRENDER LOCAL DECISION-MAKING AND SUBMIT TO HANDED-DOWN DECISIONS ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES OF FAITH AND SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION.**
- 2 ECO PROVIDES NO ALLOWANCE FOR INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE, REQUIRING EITHER CONFORMITY OF BELIEF, OR LOSS OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP OR LEADERSHIP ELIGIBILITY.**
- 3 ECO PURPOSEFULLY DRIVES WEDGES INTO A CONGREGATION, REQUIRING SOME MEMBERS TO LEAVE THEIR CHURCH IN THE INTEREST OF UNIFORMITY OF DENOMINATIONAL BELIEFS.**
- 4 ECO HAS NO TRUST CLAUSE PROTECTION AGAINST IMPROPER SESSION BEHAVIOR BEYOND DENOMINATIONAL REMOVAL, WHICH THEN LEAVES CHURCHES WITHOUT A FRAMEWORK FOR OVERSIGHT.**
- 5 ECO POLITY DOCUMENTS INCLUDE THEOLOGICALLY SUSPECT LANGUAGE, SUCH AS THE POLITICIZED VERSION OF THE 10 COMMANDMENTS CITED IN ITS ESSENTIAL TENETS AND CONFESSIONAL STANDARDS.**

We love this church and would like to say that we will remain a part of it no matter what denomination we choose. But we have recognized that ECO's requirement for submissive congregations will have a profoundly destructive effect on our church's vibrant, well developed, and deeply felt faith.

We all know that our church has enjoyed the pastoral leadership of some of the most gifted ministers in America:

Elam Davies, whom Time Magazine listed as one of the 12 best preachers in the United States;

Lloyd Ogilvie, who went on to provide a decade of celebrated service to the United States Senate;

Keith Brown, who spent more than 35 years encouraging us to gratefully see God's abundant love and to reflect that love in our family, work, and play;

Gareth Icenogle, who went from our church to the leadership of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.;

Sally Brown, who now teaches new generations of pastors at Princeton Theological Seminary;

Alf Halvorson, who mixed the wisdom of great literature and timeless thinkers with Scriptural messages of grace and humility.

As a consequence of these voices--and many more--that have spoken from our pulpit for more than 60 years, generations of our congregation have taken their faith deeply to heart. Each of us has been led to think of faith as something much more than an hour per week sitting in a pew. We've been led to think of our faith as a lifelong, personal responsibility.

Nearly every member of our congregation has been spiritually enriched through K groups, Bible studies, extraordinary music ministries, community ministries, Kirk camps, and countless other examples of our congregational commitment to developing our relationship with God, with one another, and with the world at large.

Our church is extraordinarily blessed! That's why we were so alarmed when we heard of Session's intention to leave PC (USA). When we learned Session's reasoning, we were shocked into action.

Session has argued that PC (USA) is practicing a brand of Christianity that is incompatible with the theological traditions and values of our church. Specifically, Session has claimed that PC (USA) is no longer Christ-centered and Bible-based. But those assertions are easily refuted by the denomination's leadership, website, and published documents that also effectively address financial concerns raised by Session.

The only thing that has not been refuted is Session's complaint that PC (USA) has for years been immersed in debate over issues of theology and Scriptural interpretation.

Session has stated that it is weary of the constant debate and distractions over controversial theological issues. Frankly, that's an odd complaint from a Presbyterian Session.

Presbyterians are a contentious lot. The reason is simple: We are contentious because our faith demands it!

The Westminster Confession, a foundational Presbyterian document, sets down as one of its first requirements that we not only know Scripture, but understand it:

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture ..."

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Some have argued that "deducing" Scriptural interpretation is complicated and should be left to experts in theology. But that opinion flies in the face of the first chapter of The Westminster Confession:

"All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

So, why does ECO suggest otherwise? Why does ECO require members to submit to handed-down Scriptural interpretation?

ECO's Essential Tenets & Confessional Standards document notes that its requirement for congregational submission is extraordinary and a "danger," but it explains its departure from the foundational Presbyterian tradition with an overstated claim that the tradition is an organizational weakness:

"Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry."

In other words, ECO believes that what makes individual Presbyterians and churches stronger weakens the denomination.

That conclusion has been echoed by members of our Session, who have publicly criticized our current denomination as “wishy-washy” and unwilling to take a stand on core beliefs, such as the definition of marriage.

But the refusal of PC (USA) to pass blanket judgments on controversial issues is in complete compliance with the long traditions of our Presbyterian faith.

In 1930, when PC (USA) voted to allow women to be ordained elders, it did not demand that all its member churches ordain women elders. Indeed, our own church did not ordain a woman elder until the 1970s!

Likewise, when PC (USA) voted to allow churches to perform same-sex marriages and to ordain gay pastors, it did not order all of its member churches to comply. It merely acknowledged that some faithful churches have come to the conclusion that such allowances are God’s will.

Churches that believe the opposite are encouraged by PC (USA) to continue to adhere to their own beliefs on the issue.

Claims that it’s “just a matter of time” before PC (USA) makes same-sex marriage a compulsory rule ignore more than a century of our church’s experience and the denomination’s history and precedent.

Within the PC (USA) denomination, our church is free to decide for itself what it believes in matters of disputed Scriptural interpretation.

Astonishingly, what Session fears from PC (USA) is explicitly permitted by ECO polity. Under ECO, our church will give up the right to decide controversial issues of interpretation. Instead, it will be required to submit to the rulings of ECO’s Synod Executive Council, a vaguely-defined entity of 6-to-9 individuals that has the power to decide all theological, financial, and governmental issues for all of ECO’s presbyteries and member churches.¹

Presbyterians have traditionally refused to be told what to believe. Our faith has been more meaningful because it is based on our own hearts, consciences, and intellect.

A faith that is parroted from others—even if that faith is a righteous one—is not truly a faith if the holder does not understand it, but is merely mouthing the words.

So, where does ECO get the authority to make such a fundamental change in the Presbyterian faith tradition? ECO couches this fundamental shift in tradition in suggestions that it is needed to hold church members “accountable.”

ECO’s Essential Tenets and Confessional Standards document seems to claim the right and need for top-down Scriptural interpretation from a politicized description of the 10 Commandments. (See box below).

The interpretations are presented in the ECO document without references to source or authorship.

However, the closing of ECO’s Essential Tenets and Standards document provides a reason for its requirement for submissive congregations:

“Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed. Our generation may be particularly tempted to try. Forging theological consensus is hard work in any generation, but ours seems to have concluded that it is impossible work. Private and partisan interpretations are now considered inflexible and intractable. We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where

ECO ESSENTIAL TENETS AND CONFESSIONAL STANDARDS POLITICIZED INTERPRETATION OF THE 10 COMMANDMENTS:²

“As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments. We therefore hold one another accountable to:

1. worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments;
3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;
4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;
5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;
6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being from conception to natural death.
7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;
8. practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;
9. pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;
10. resist the pull of envy, greed, and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.”

ambiguities are preferred and certainties are suspect. We are coached to celebrate diversity of theological conviction, rather than seeing this as a sign of important work yet to be done.”

Like many of ECO’s theological arguments, the Essential Tenets and Confessional Standards document leans heavily on hyperbole and straw-man claims.

“Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed.”

Really? All such churches have failed? Has First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem failed? Many of its members would strongly disagree with that assertion.

“We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where ambiguities are preferred and certainties are suspect.”

What an extraordinary sentence that is! In one breath, we are asked to humbly accept the existence of ambiguity, but to open our minds to the acceptance of “certainties,” presumably those handed down to us.

Without a hint of humility, ECO’s Essential Tenets document explains how ECO is in this exceptionally powerful position:

“Because we are not traditionalists, we can be utterly honest about the church’s past failings - crusades and inquisitions, easy acceptance of Christendom and easy dismissal of the leadership of women, neglect of evangelistic mission and excess of missionary zeal. **Because we are not idealists we can be utterly honest** about the church’s current failings – marginalization of the Sacraments, indifference to theological labor, easy acceptance of cultural morality, neglect of evangelism, and inadequate mission. ”

The “we” in all that is, apparently, ECO’s wider councils, and their exclusive ability to be “utterly honest” about what is real faith and what is not real faith.

Instead of describing a genuine, sincere covenant of disciples for Jesus Christ, ECO’s literature contorts faith traditions and trumps-up Scriptural controversies into phony crises that only ECO can solve.

Shouldn’t we--the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem—continue to take ultimate responsibility for our own faith in God? Why would we ever want to surrender our faith to persons unknown, particularly when those persons demonstrate the level of hubris contained in ECO’s polity documents?

A June 2014 letter from Amalie Ash, Transitional Presbyter for Tropical Florida Presbytery, eloquently summarized ECO’s approach to “church-building,” and urged congregations to

reconsider what she described as the largest, wealthiest, and most historic churches in the Presbytery being used as fodder by ECO:

“Our denomination is being dissected by their successful, well-orchestrated strategy that aids a church pastor(s) and a few key elders to project an inaccurate picture of the PCUSA and its spiritual beliefs.

“Pastors encourage elders to take the lead. Elders are carefully schooled to focus on inaccuracies such as the PCUSA no longer believes Jesus Christ is the head of the church. ... To the person in the pew, these claims are highly charged; they trust their leaders and pastors are telling the truth. Thus the trusting congregation is easily swayed.

“We believed that our congregations had discerned their beliefs and that we needed to provide a gracious exit for them. It was after, that we realized the pastors were in collusion, that churches were using the same “play book”, using the same sound bites, and had a strategy to leave in mass with a voting bloc. Recently we have learned that cradle Presbyterians regret they are no longer in the PCUSA; that they feel duped.

“ECO is an under-resourced collection of now independent churches. ECO is built on the PCUSA Book of Confessions, PCUSA 2009 Book of Order, our church properties and our unknowing members.

“With no trust clause, churches dismissed to ECO can change to independent or become part of another denomination. When we dismiss, we give the title to the church, ECO has no hold on a church remaining a reform tradition. The founders of our churches did not intend for this to happen.

“This is not a new denomination being built on truth, but being assembled using our properties, our confessions, our processes but calling themselves a better way...”

“I believe we need to take a stand. A unified stand to save our denomination, a denomination that does make a difference in this world.”³

We, the members of Presbyterians for Unity at First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem, believe we should all take a stand to save our denomination and our church. The first is a time-tested tradition that is worth preserving. The second is an irreplaceable treasure and testament to God’s abundant and unconditional love

¹ Detailed in ECO Polity and Discipline document [http://eco-pres.org/static/media/uploads/resources/eco_polity_and_discipline_020113.pdf]

² Taken verbatim from ECO Essential Tenets and Confessional Standards. [<http://eco-pres.org/static/media/uploads/resources/Essential%20Tenets/eco-essential-tenets-confessions.pdf>]

³ Presbyterian Church (USA) official calls ECO ethically questionable (The Layman) [<http://www.layman.org/hear-sound-dismissal-door-closing/>]

