

Who Are We? Distinctives and Essentials of Being an Evangelical Presbyterian

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WHAT'S IN A NAME? I am an identical twin. When my sister and I were born, we were each banded with a bracelet conferring our temporary identities as “Baby A” and “Baby B” until our parents decided upon permanent names. Those names were chosen with great care and deliberateness. Apart from one lazy uncle who simply called us both “twin” (never bothering to try to identify the distinctive elements of our personalities and physical characteristics and match them with our names), we have generally gone through life being recognized as distinguishable individuals. And that is quite appropriate and appreciated. For although we share many common traits and look very much alike, we are as much dissimilar as we are similar. We each have a unique personality, an identity that is unalterably linked with our name. Thus, a name really matters. A name serves not merely to establish existence, but to identify in such a way as to set apart individually and specifically. It is an unnatural state to be nameless, lacking a defined identity. Who of us has not won-

dered with a sad and burdened spirit about the particular humanity of Arlington's "Unknown Soldier"?

What is true for individual people is equally true of organizations, which are, after all, simply groups of people who collectively hold to a shared mission, core values and identifiable traits. Thus, an organization's name is (or should be) inexorably linked with those defined elements of commonality.

In former generations, Christians were bound by either family tradition or deep theological conviction to an ecclesiastical "brand name." One was perhaps a Free Will Methodist, or a Southern Baptist, or an Orthodox Presbyterian—or one of a plethora of other distinct Christian denominations—and it mattered! Moreover, if you were a member of such a family, you were thoroughly aware of and conversant with the identity and distinctions represented by that family name.

By contrast, in our contemporary era of one-size-fits-all theology (ala "I just want to love Jesus!") and the societal push toward melting pot multiculturalism and Oprah-endorsed New Age syncretism, denominationalism is dying a slow, painful, and mostly un-mourned death. Many (most??) American Christians are unable to define, let alone defend, the specifics of the theology to which they bind themselves.

The objective of this portion of the curriculum, then, is to thoroughly familiarize the women involved with ministry in the EPC with its unique theological personality and ecclesiastical identity. We will explore our historical "genealogy" and the role we have to play in the current culture of the church. We will examine both the distinctives which set us apart from other Presbyterian denominations, and the essentials that bind us together under the banner of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

What is a Presbyterian, Anyway?

Good question! That can really be answered in two ways. First, a Presbyterian is one who adheres to a particular form or type of **government** which simply means "rule by elders" or **presbyters**, derived from the Greek word translated as presbteros. Presbyters are elected and serve in our representative system of church governance. This system stands in sharp contrast to the Episcopal form of government with its rule by hierarchy, or the Congregational form where decision making and legislation is the prerogative of

the entire congregation. Scripturally, one can observe a Presbyterian form of government in the early church by reading Acts 15 and the account of the Council at Jerusalem.

...the council of apostles and elders in Jerusalem, to which Paul and Barnabas appealed (Acts 15), is positive evidence of the principle of representation and central authority. The various district organizations would quickly follow as administrative and judicial needs demanded; such development came early in the growth of the church, so early that it is unmistakably present in the post-apostolic age.”

(Source: International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

Second, a Presbyterian is one whose Christian **belief** has been shaped by the Protestant Reformation, and particularly through the lives and work of John Calvin and John Knox. In other words, the **theology** we embrace as Presbyterians is called “reformed” because it is the result of the correctives and re-forming efforts applied to the Christian faith as it was practiced by the Church of Rome in the 16th century. The systematic theology we as Presbyterians endorse argues for the absolute Sovereignty of God in the matter of predestination and election of sinners for salvation, and the fundamental truth that it is only by faith alone, which comes by grace alone, that anyone comes to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord.

What Does the Word “Evangelical” Mean?

An “evangel” is one who has a **good message** to deliver! Thus, an evangelical is a believer in Jesus Christ who possesses zeal to share that message, i.e., the Gospel. The word “Gospel” itself is an Old English word that means “good news.” It translates the Greek word euangelion (eu-, “good” and angelion, “message”), which also yields the term “evangelist” and is related to the word “angel.”

When the first Christians wanted to record the “good news” about the Man who was God, none of the familiar forms of literature seemed suitable. The Christians didn’t write the kinds of biographies or sacred texts that were common in Greek, Roman, or Jewish culture. Instead, they created a new form: the gospel. (Source: NIV Study Notes)

God gave Jesus all authority over heaven and earth. On the basis of that authority, Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples themselves as they now preached, baptized, and taught in his name. This is a continuing directive to modern disciples—we are also to go and tell others the Good News and make disciples for the kingdom. **Whether it is across the street or across the globe, our unending task and joy as evangelicals is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and participate in the mandate to make disciples.** This is not an option, but a command to all who call Jesus “Lord.” We may not all be evangelists by spiritual gifting or occupational calling, but it is incumbent upon every Christian to share the gospel.

Putting It All Together

Now that we’ve explored the parts, let’s focus on the whole of our name. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is the sum of its parts: we are a Reformed church body theologically, which employs rule by Elders (or presbyters) in its representative form of government, and we are committed to historic evangelicalism that embraces sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ as central to the mission of the church.

As our official EPC documents state it, the founders of the denomination “wanted to form a church that took seriously the words of Scripture, the theology of the historic confessions of the faith, and the evangelical fervor of Presbyterian founders. They envisioned a denomination that was truly evangelical and truly Presbyterian; hence the name.”

How the EPC Began

In the summer of 1980, a group of pastors and elders from two major mainline Presbyterian denominations—the United Presbyterian Church (northern churches) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (southern churches)—came together for prayer and planning in St. Louis, Missouri. These leaders had become increasingly disturbed by and uncomfortable with the growing trends of liberalism within their denominational bodies. They had a heartfelt desire to form a new church that would honor the Scriptures, fully embrace the theology of the historic confessions of orthodox Christianity, and be characterized by the same passion and zeal for sharing the Gospel that was the hallmark of its spiritual ancestry.

As a result of those first meetings, they decided to press ahead with their

prayerful efforts to birth an authentic Presbyterian church. They shared invitations with like-minded clergy and elders to join them. According to former EPC Moderator Dr. Richard Little, “That September, dozens of ministers and elders met for continued prayer and deliberation. The result of this meeting was a covenant expressing their unity of purpose. It read:

‘As Presbyterian churches seeking a new denominational affiliation, we affirm these basic principles of faith and life:
The primacy of Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, without question or apology
The Bible as God’s infallible Word
The Westminster Confession as our Biblical and confessional standard
The Presbyterian form of government as most effective for Christ’s rule in the Church
The evangelical vitality which expresses itself in life
The spiritual and constitutional freedom essential to the work of the Holy Spirit
We covenant, therefore, to create a provisional fellowship of churches and to reconvene next spring to consider how God’s Spirit has been at work among us and what God’s future holds for us.’ ” (Source: Reflections)

In March of 1981, the EPC Constituting Convention was held in St. Louis, where the EPC was officially “born” with about a dozen member congregations. The following September, the First General Assembly took place at Ward Presbyterian Church in Livonia, Michigan, with 120 commissioners in attendance representing 30 particular churches.

Today the EPC has over 140,000 active members in some 300 member congregations, and has about 80 missionaries serving in more than 20 countries.

What Sets Us Apart?

The Presbyterian “family” has within it members which are unique and distinctive. In particular, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has some features that set it apart from the rest of the Reformed and Presbyterian

denominations. Here, in a nutshell, quoted directly from our EPC literature, are the particulars that we refer to as “distinctives” of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

1. Distinctive: The Essentials

While adhering to the Westminster Confession of Faith, along with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught by the Bible, we have developed a document called “The Essentials of Our Faith.” While we believe all of our faith is important, some elements of that faith are absolutes. For example, it is essential that we agree on the meaning of the atoning death of Jesus on the cross. However, we do not believe it is essential to agree upon the timing of Christ’s second coming. The EPC, therefore, has set forth these core beliefs of the Christian faith upon which there must be agreement, but permits latitude and differences of opinion on those matters not considered essential to be a Christian.

2. Distinctive: The Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession of Faith has had a number of revisions over the years. Not only has the Evangelical Presbyterian Church adopted some important revisions that bring it up to date, but in addition, it has adopted a modern language version that has carefully maintained the integrity of the document while providing greater readability to our modern world.

3. Distinctive: Work of the Holy Spirit

In a unique way among Presbyterians today, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is fully Trinitarian. We believe strongly in all three persons in the Godhead. As a consequence, there is a balanced emphasis on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. While affirming the priority of the fruit of the Spirit over the gifts of the Spirit in the Christian life, we also affirm those who believe that all the gifts of God’s Spirit are Biblically valid for today. While we are not Pentecostal, neither do we believe that the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, should be ignored or forbidden.

4. Distinctive: The Ruling Elder

Part of the genius of Presbyterianism has been the role of the Ruling

Elder, the layman, in the government of the church. When a denomination becomes clergy dominated, it tends to lose touch with the grassroots of the church. To maintain that important balance, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church provides for each congregation to send two Ruling Elders for each minister to Presbytery and General Assembly. Presbyteries have means available to maintain this distinctive regardless of the number of ministers belonging to Presbytery.

5. Distinctive: Women in Ordained Office

The understanding of the role of women in the life of the church differs widely. For example, one Presbyterian denomination may require that women be elected as Elders and Deacons, another may forbid their election. Equally sincere Christians may differ on this issue. In the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the decision to elect women as Ruling Elders or Deacons is left to the discretion of the local congregation. We believe that under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, God's people should be free to follow His leading on this important issue.

6. Distinctive: Rights in Perpetuity

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church recognizes that many things change over time. However, there are certain features of our government that are unique and distinctive, and should never change. Among these are the rights of a church over its own property and to elect its own officers. To insure that such features are not the victims of time or circumstance, there is written into our Book of Government, a section called, "Limitations in perpetuity." Here are identified certain rights held in perpetuity by Christians, both individually and in congregations. These rights must always be guaranteed by the Church. Additions to this section may be made, but nothing can be taken away.

7. Distinctive: Mission of the Church

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church spells out specifically the first duty of the Church. Our Book of Government reads, "The first duty of the Church is to evangelize by extending the Gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." It makes clear that "good works" are not the Gospel, but the fruit of the

gospel. The statement concludes, "... The Church must never confuse its primary task of evangelism (the Gospel) with the fruit of faith (good works)." This affirmation settles for us a dispute that has caused much division in our day when churches have become preoccupied with social change to the neglect of true spiritual change.

8. Distinctive: Congregational Rights

In our Book of Government, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church spells out rights reserved to a particular church. These rights include many things also guaranteed in perpetuity, but additionally, the right is included for a particular church to own its property as well as to withdraw with its property if it so decides. It outlines other rights, such as the right to call its own pastor. This means no pastor can ever be placed over a congregation without its consent.

9. Distinctive: Voluntary Giving

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church has no "per capita tax." We do not believe that one court of the Church has the right to put a "tax" with obligation on another lower court. The Presbytery or General Assembly may have a per member asking which is a voluntary contribution of the particular congregation to support the administrative and benevolence work of the Church. Gifts may always be designated.

10. Distinctive: Position Papers

In the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we have developed a system whereby the denomination can speak clearly and decisively to member congregations on issues facing our society. We do not believe in political positions, but we do believe the Church has an obligation to speak its mind to congregations on important issues. To do this, we have instituted a method whereby "position papers" are developed. Initially set forth as "preliminary," the paper is given to the denomination for response and input. Then a committee studies it and makes final recommendations to the General Assembly. Among the subjects on which the EPC has position papers are the Holy Spirit, the ordination of women, the value of and respect for human life, the problem of suffering, death and dying and divorce and remarriage.

Conclusion: Truth in Love

Perhaps the finest distinctive of all in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is the spirit of love that characterizes our denomination. With the historic marks of the true church – the practice of scriptural discipline, the right preaching of the Word and proper observation of the sacraments – we have included loving fellowship (John 13:35). Our motto is “**In Essentials, Unity; In Non-Essentials, Liberty; In All Things, Charity.**” In underneath this motto, the seal of our Church adds “truth in love.” Veritas in caritate so states the Latin translation of Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:15. Indeed, the most distinguishing characteristic of all is “truth in love.”

While Reformed and Presbyterian, we believe these distinctives set us apart as true to both our Biblical Christian faith and our heritage. We were formed out of a desire to be a Biblical denomination which was not diverted by unnecessary doctrinal arguments or sociopolitical issues. Our primary task remains to lift up the cross of Jesus to a lost and dying world.

How Does All This Impact EPC Women In Ministry?

To be an effective leader in the EPC, it is critical to have an understanding of who we are as a church body. Since denominational affinity is no longer a key factor in the typical churchgoer’s reason for attending a particular church, one must not assume either a general awareness or studied comprehension of our Reformed theology or Presbyterian polity among those a leader is leading!

And though we have no interest in promoting theological and doctrinal division over **non-essential** matters, we do have an interest in protecting and promoting the purity of faith in the essential elements of Christian belief. Therefore, it is imperative for every EPC women who engages in ministry within her local church or presbytery environment to be thoroughly conversant in matters of the core issues of our shared faith—the **essentials**.

What Are the Essentials?

As adopted by the General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, following is our **Statement of Faith** outlining the “essentials”:

All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God, the sixty-six

books of the Old and New Testaments, is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks. On this sure foundation we affirm these additional Essentials of our faith:

1. We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all honor, glory and praise forever!
2. Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever. He died on the cross, a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day He 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.
3. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior. Indwelling our hearts, He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth, and seals us for the day of redemption.
4. Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, thereby justifies them in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.
5. 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. 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. For her perfecting, she awaits the return of her Lord.

6. Jesus Christ will come again to the earth—personally, visibly, and bodily—to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation. 22:20)

7. 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.” He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians. 2:10)

These Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

So What is a Non-Essential?

Because the EPC’s Founding Fathers wisely anticipated the danger of division over non-essentials, they promoted an atmosphere of loving freedom where matters of secondary importance to the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be left to the conscience of individual churches and believers.

Examples of non-essentials would include the freedom of a local church to elect its own officers without restriction or quota, to exercise spiritual gifts under the guidance of God’s Word and the authority of its session, and to own and keep its property. EPC churches are charged with the sacred responsibility to study the Scripture and make Holy Spirit-led decisions about things like worship style and the ordination of women.

It is expected that at both the Presbytery and General Assembly levels of church governance church leaders will work and worship with other leaders who may differ with them on such non-essentials, and do so with charity and grace.

About Women and the EPC

The EPC is a family of churches whose members, not unlike any human family, display a range of personality types and distinct behavioral attributes. Thus, a particular EPC body may be more or less “charismatic” (open to the full range of the gifts of the Holy Spirit), more or less open to contemporary worship forms and music, more or less open to women serving in positions

of leadership and/or being ordained as ruling or teaching elders.

In terms of non-essentials, the denominational label “EPC” does not translate into a fixed position on the continuum of beliefs and behaviors. We are not a “one size fits all” organization. This variety of individually embraced positions/preferences can either be a force for good, challenging us to learn to love one another despite our differences, or a force for evil, creating disunity and division.

Fortunately, by God’s abundant grace to the EPC throughout her formative years and on into the present time, an honest, dynamic, yet healthy tension has existed within the family. We have agreed to disagree agreeably in matters where uniformity of thought or practice has threatened our family cohesion.

In particular, the issue of the ordination of women is one that ignites passionate debate and emotionally charged rhetoric. Christians of good will and theological integrity come down on both sides of the question using Scripture to defend and advance their argument. Thus, the EPC has allowed this issue to rest with the individual churches and the leading of the Spirit to guide decision making relative to ordaining women. Our EPC Position Paper on the Ordination of Women summarizes it this way:

“Thus, while some churches may ordain women and some may decline to do so, neither position is essential to the existence of the church. Since people of good faith who equally love the Lord and hold to the infallibility of Scripture differ on this issue, and since uniformity of view and practice is not essential to the existence of the visible church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has chosen to leave this decision to the Spirit-guided consciences of particular congregations concerning the ordination of women as elders and deacons, and to the presbyteries concerning the ordination of women as ministers.

It is in this context that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church states in its Book of Government, Chapter 7, titled “Rights Reserved to a Particular Church” that “The particular church has the right to elect its own officers” (7-2). This right is guaranteed in perpetuity.” (Adopted by the 4th General Assembly, June 1984)

For a more thorough understanding of each perspective on the issue, the following suggested resources are offered:

The Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood

<http://www.cbmw.org/Resources/Articles/The-Danvers-Statement>

Christians for Biblical Equality

http://www.cbeinternational.org/new/pdf_files/free_articles/PPWhatIsBiblical.pdf

The EPC Committee on Women in Ministry states its goal succinctly in its brochure: **“Our task is to relate in relevant ways to women in a changing world with the Good News of an unchanging God.”** It has emphasized the need to encourage, resource, equip and mobilize women in order to help them utilize their spiritual gifts and make a difference in the world. The mindset of the EPC with respect to Women in Ministry is captured in these words:

Questions for Reflection:

- Why is it important for a ministry leader to have a sense and understanding of the distinctives and essentials of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church?
- How do the words “evangelical” and “Presbyterian” communicate “who we are”?
- What questions arise for you from this study?

Get To Know the Writer

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