

# Proposed Amendment to ECO Book of Confessions

*Proposed by the Northwest Presbytery and Concurred in by the West Presbytery:*

Motion to rename the Book of Confessions and other conforming amendments by adopting the following six-point overture:

1. We move that ECO's *Book of Confessions* be renamed *Foundational Statements of Faith*. To implement this, we move the following changes in ECO documents:
  - ▶ In ECO's *Essential Tenets*, article I, paragraph two, final sentence, that the words "*Book of Confessions* as a faithful exposition" be struck and replaced with "*Foundational Statements of Faith* as faithful expositions," making that sentence, "In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the *Foundational Statements of Faith* as faithful expositions of the Word of God."
  - ▶ In the polity document, also known as ECO Polity and DISCIPLINE, paragraph 2.0103d, that the word "confessions" be struck and replaced by "foundational statements of faith," making that sentence, "Relying on the Holy Spirit, do you humbly submit to God's call on your life, committing yourself to God's mission, and fulfilling your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and guided by our foundational statements of faith?"
2. We move to designate seven (7) statements to comprise what is currently called the *Book of Confessions* in the Confessional Standards of ECO: The Apostles' Creed; The Nicene Creed; The Heidelberg Catechism; The Westminster Standards including The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Longer Catechism, and The Shorter Catechism; and the Theological Declaration of Barmen.
3. We move that the text of the Heidelberg Catechism currently found in the *Book of Confessions* be replaced by the updated translation adopted in 2011 by the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, if appropriate permission is obtained from the copyright holder.
4. We move that the National Theology Task Force advance a unified, modern-language version of the Westminster Standards to be voted on at Synod 2020, and, at a minimum, one cogent version of the Westminster Confession be developed, instead of having two amended versions side-by-side. This effort may, at the discretion of the NTTF, also include small adjustments in wording to the Apostles' Creed and/or Nicene Creed to make them more comprehensible in the present context.
5. We move that in the polity document, also known as ECO Polity and DISCIPLINE, paragraph 2.0101 be amended to read as follows (new text underlined, deleted text ~~struckthrough~~):

Elders and deacons are ordained and installed by the session. Pastors are ordained and installed by the presbyteries. Ordaining bodies must ensure that all officers adhere to the *Essential Tenets* of ECO and are guided by ECO's *Foundational Statements of Faith*. Failure of officers to continue to adhere to ~~these standards~~ the *Essential Tenets* is grounds for a session or presbytery to remove an officer from service according to the *Rules of Discipline* in this *Constitution*.

6. We move that, under the direction of the National Theological Task Force and the Synod Executive Council, the following introductions in ECO's current *Book of Confessions* continue to be updated and included in the Confessional Standards of ECO as resource documents:
- ▶ "Preface to Historic Documents," amended both to reflect the new name for these documents and the deletion of some current documents, and also to include the substance of the statement adopted by the PCUSA regarding Roman Catholics. Suggested wording for the latter is "Specific statements in 16th and 17th century confessions and catechisms contain condemnations or derogatory characterizations of the Roman Catholic Church. While these statements emerged from substantial doctrinal disputes, they reflect 16th and 17th century polemics. Their condemnations and characterizations of the Catholic Church are not the position of ECO and are not applicable to current relationships between ECO and the Catholic Church."
  - ▶ All individual introductions which relate to those specific statements which are retained in the new *Foundational Statements of Faith*. Such "Preface" and introductions will be adjusted as needed to reflect all actions of ECO's 2018 Synod Business Meeting and all future Synod Business Meetings.

## RATIONALE

### MOTION 1: Retitling *Book of Confessions* to *Foundational Statements of Faith*

A renaming is appropriate because most of these statements are not actually confessions, and because most people today associate that word primarily with confession of wrongdoing. "Foundational" is an appropriate word that conveys historical importance without the higher status conferred by the word "essential."

### MOTION 2: Selection of Statements

**First**, we give our reasoning for retaining the seven statements mentioned:

The **Apostles' and Nicene Creeds** connect us with Christians throughout the centuries and around the globe, and should certainly be a part of our foundational statements.

The **Heidelberg Catechism** is an exceptional document, full of pastoral wisdom, mostly free of polemic, and shared with many Reformed Christian groups.

The **Westminster Confession, Larger Catechism, and Shorter Catechism** contain much important theology, and are an important part of our Presbyterian heritage. While we might quibble with some items, their historic position in our tradition and overall theological value merit their inclusion for ECO going forward.

While the criticism of "German Christians" in the **Theological Declaration of Barmen** references something distant, it serves as a Christ-centered reminder in our time when many "American Christians" are tempted toward idolatrous nationalism. Its prophetic voice on the roles of church and state is also needed today.

**Second**, we give our reasoning for omitting four of the existing documents:

It is appropriate to remove the **Scots Confession** and **Second Helvetic Confession** because of their length (especially the Second Helvetic), their inaccessible language, their condemnation of women in ministry (in opposition to a core value of ECO), and especially their highly polemic nature when ECO wants to focus more on what we are "for" than on what we are "against."

While there is some good material in the **Confession of 1967** (such as its call to pursue justice) and in the **Brief Statement of Faith** (such as its affirmation of egalitarian ministry), their association with the ascendancy of theological liberalism in the PCUSA makes their removal appropriate.

**Finally**, we note that we do not recommend producing a new ECO confession. While we are not strongly opposed to the idea, we feel the effort would mostly be redundant. ECO has recently stated what it believes to be doctrinally important in adopting the Essential Tenets.

### **MOTIONS 3 and 4: Updating language**

To be able to guide the church going forward, the Reformation-era statements should be made understandable for the 21st Century. This already exists for the Heidelberg Catechism; we can simply adopt the translation recently completed by the CRC and RCA. We should only have one version of the Westminster Confession; the current parallel versions with numerous footnotes is confusing and renders it nearly unusable for devotion and education. The pre-Reformation creeds might also be made more understandable in a few places without losing their historic feel. Examples in the Apostles Creed might include changing “Holy Ghost” to “Holy Spirit” and changing “the quick and the dead” to “the living and the dead.”

### **MOTION 5: Amendment to Polity 2.0101**

The suggested language in the third sentence of 2.0101 makes this part of the polity consistent with the ordination vows of 2.0103d, while maintaining ECO’s important distinction that only the Essential Tenets have Constitutional authority (thus “guided by” rather than a stronger term such as “adhere to”). With this change in the third sentence, the change in the fourth sentence becomes necessary to clarify that only the Essential Tenets are required standards in ECO polity.

### **MOTION 6: Introductory statements**

The existing introductions to the individual statements are helpful and should be retained. The current Preface is also helpful, but will need significant revision if other Motions are adopted. The specific statement about Roman Catholics was adopted by the PCUSA after several decades of positive dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. This expression of grace toward our Catholic brothers and sisters leads to greater acceptance, understanding and love within the kingdom of God.