

## ***What is the Evangelical Presbyterian Church?***

***For more information see [www.epc.org](http://www.epc.org)***

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church traces its roots from the Reformation under John Calvin in Switzerland during the 1500's and its advancement under John Knox in Scotland during the same era. Even so, this branch of the Reformation draws on the ancient teachings of such figures from church history as Bernard of Clairvaux of the 12th Century and Augustine of the 4th century. After the Reformation, its seed continued to grow during the mid-1600s with the shaping of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Our spiritual ancestors came to North America during the middle 17th century with such leaders as Francis Makemie, Jonathan Dickinson and William Tennent. A century later, Jonathan Edwards triggered a spiritual awakening in New England and became a link in our historical chain. In short, the story of Presbyterianism is the story of the EPC.

### **In the Beginning**

Presbyterians come in many varieties with new branches being formed in every generation. The EPC began in the fall of 1980 and spring of 1981 when a group of pastors and elders held meetings in St. Louis, Missouri for planning and prayer. They came from mainline Presbyterian denominations like the United Presbyterian (northern churches) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (southern churches). These leaders had become increasingly distressed by liberalism within their denominations. They 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.

### **In Essentials, Unity**

Six months later, the first General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church met at Ward Presbyterian Church near Detroit, Michigan. To ensure that the ideals of faith would remain foundational to the new denomination, the Assembly drafted an intentionally brief list of essential beliefs. The Essentials listed in this brochure define a church that is Presbyterian in theology and church government, as well as evangelical in sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

### **In Non-Essentials, Liberty**

Even though the founders of the EPC valued purity of faith, they wisely saw the danger of division over non-essential issues. To protect the new denomination from needless strife, the founders promoted an understanding of freedom in which less essential matters were left to the conscience of individual churches and believers. This understanding included such matters as the freedom of a local church to elect its own officers, to exercise spiritual gifts, and to own and keep property. So EPC churches study the Scripture and make their own decisions about issues like worship style and the ordination of women. At regional and national meetings, church leaders take for granted that they will work and worship with other leaders who differ with them on these and other non-essential matters.

### **In All Things, Charity: Truth in Love**

The final statement of our motto speaks of love. We are fellow pilgrims, walking together with our Lord. We have, individually, received his charity toward us, so we extend that charity to each other. We speak the truth to define our faith and to extend it to others. But we speak it out of love-for our brothers and sisters, and for our Savior.

### **A Present and Future Hope**

In 1981, the 1st General Assembly convened with 75 delegates representing 12 churches. When the Second General Assembly met nine months later, more than 120 elders and ministers registered as commissioners. Before the decade of the 80's ended, an impressive growth in member congregations took place. Churches in Argentina formed a presbytery and joined us in 1987, to grow and be dismissed as a national church in 2004. Nearing the end of the first decade of the 21st century the EPC has exceeded 80,000 active members in over 225 congregations in the U.S.

With world evangelism as a top priority, the EPC commissioned its first missionary couple in 1983. By the mid 90's, 56 missionaries represented the EPC throughout the world. Today, more than 90 missionaries represent the EPC in about 20 countries. Because we believe that God uses a variety of ways to draw people to himself, many of these

missionaries serve with EPC support through mission agencies other than our own. Our global mission plan focuses on planting, developing, and nurturing the Church.

We believe that God created the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to be a significant part of his plan for the renewal of believers and for witness to those outside the faith. It is our conviction that, like the ancient Queen Esther, God has brought us together for such a time as this.

## IN ESSENTIALS UNITY

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, and 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." (Rev. 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." (Eph. 2:10)

The Essentials provide an explicit and concise expression of the Christian faith. These essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

## IN NON-ESSENTIALS LIBERTY

What is a non-essential? Non-essentials denote those doctrinal issues and convictions which are secondary to the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We believe room should be given for freedom on lesser issues. Some issues may be important to the individual Christian but such should not be promoted at the expense of unity.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a denomination that affirms the congregational freedom to elect officers without restriction or quota. Instead, congregations are encouraged to search the scriptures and prayerfully, but freely, elect those persons best qualified to lead.

Although Reformed, not Pentecostal, in theology the Evangelical Presbyterian Church affirms the gifts of God's Spirit exercised under the guidance of God's word and the authority of the local session.

Believing unity to be a spiritual not temporal relationship, we therefore guarantee in perpetuity the congregation's right to own and manage its property.

#### IN ALL THINGS CHARITY

"Love...bears all things"

Christ did not come just to teach forgiveness. He lived it! Being forgiven we are now free to forgive and understand each other. As a fellowship of believers we strive to love one another that the presence of the Spirit may transcend individuality.

"...Believes all things"

We believe not only in what we have attained in Christ, but also that we are moving forward. We are God's pilgrim people. We are in a journey together, sharing each other's burdens and joys along the way. Though we have already been redeemed, our sanctification is the process we share together.

"...Hopes all things"

Hope encourages and builds life while despair destroys. Resisting the sins and sickness of this world, we as a fellowship are more than haters of evil. As lovers of God and His people, we live for His glory. Much more than mere wishing, our confident hopes are anchored in Christ.

"...Endures all things"

To find a denomination that can weather today's storms without compromising on love is rare. We share a calling to perseverance of the saints and a commitment to a life of love.

#### TRUTH IN LOVE

We believe that if Christ is exalted He will build His church. It is therefore our mission to lift up Him who is THE truth in loving proclamation of the Christian gospel.

To accomplish this, we commit ourselves to the following goals:

- A global vision of missions outreach;
- An enthusiastic promotion of evangelism as the first priority of the Church;
- An aggressive program of church planting and church development
- The development and implementation of solid programs in Christian nurture rooted in the teaching of the Bible to all ages
- A positive concern for Christ-centered youth ministry
- A loving spirit of cooperation with all who truly are one with us in Jesus Christ.

In the words of John Wesley, 'If your heart is as my heart, let us join hands and walk together.' Let us walk in TRUTH! Let us walk in LOVE

#### Distinctives of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Historically, we Presbyterians belong to a family of faith that can be described in two ways. If you talk about how we govern ourselves, we are called "Presbyterian" which means "rule by elders." Our form of government is different from the episcopal form with a hierarchy, or the congregational form where government is by the congregation, for we have a representative form of church government. If you talk about what we believe, we are called "Reformed." This means that our belief grows out of the Christian faith as it was "reformed" during the Protestant Reformation, particularly through John Calvin and John Knox.

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.

#### 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 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 does 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." And 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.

#### **Explanatory Statement to "Essentials of Our Faith"\***

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a confessional statement of orthodox Presbyterianism. The Westminster Confession of Faith is our standard of doctrine as found in Scripture. It is a positive statement of the Reformed Faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith constitutes a system of biblical truth that an officer of the Evangelical

Presbyterian Church is required to believe, acknowledging that each individual court has the freedom to allow exceptions which do not infringe upon the system of doctrine in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

"Essentials of Our Faith" is an irenic statement of historic evangelicalism. The purpose of "Essentials of Our Faith" is to define core beliefs of the Christian Faith. It expresses historic Christian beliefs common to all true believers and churches throughout the world. "Essentials of Our Faith" 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. It is not to be construed as a substitute for the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Both the Westminster Confession of Faith and "Essentials of Our Faith" are important documents in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The Westminster Confession of Faith 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 Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The Westminster Confession of Faith preserves our commitment to the historic orthodoxy of the Reformed Faith. "Essentials of Our Faith" preserves our commitment to historic evangelicalism.

### *Frequently Asked Questions about the EPC*

#### **1. What is unique about the EPC?**

We are unique among American Presbyterians with our self-conscious attempt to balance essential and non-essential matters within a confessional heritage. We are unified in our commitment to the essentials of the historic Christian faith taught in the Bible, but allow liberty of conscience on those matters which are not so plain in or central to the Bible's teaching.

#### **2. What is the EPC's view of the Bible?**

We believe that the Bible is fully inspired by God the Holy Spirit to lead people to a saving knowledge of God and to help them understand their world rightly. By its very nature, the Bible is infallible.

#### **3. What does the EPC believe?**

The EPC is Presbyterian in government, Reformed in theology and Evangelical in spirit.

#### **4. What does it mean to be "Presbyterian?"**

To be Presbyterian is to be governed according to the pattern of elders seen in the Old and New Testaments. We are ruled neither by bishops in a hierarchical model nor by members in a congregational model. Biblically qualified elders are recognized through congregational election and, along with ministers, rule the church corporately. It also means being connected in mutual accountability and responsibility. Just as individual Christians are connected to one another as members of the body of Christ, so also individual congregations are connected under Christ as the great Head of the Church.

#### **5. What does it mean to be "Reformed?"**

To be "Reformed" means several things. Historically, it means that we trace our roots to the Reformation, when John Calvin and others led the movement to reform the Church according to Scripture. Theologically, it means belief in the absolute sovereignty of God and that the highest good is God's glory. This historical and theological heritage is often expressed in the "solas" of the Reformation-God's grace alone as the only way to be reconciled to God, faith alone as the only means of receiving God's grace, Christ alone as the ground of God's saving grace, Scripture alone as the only infallible authority for belief and God's glory alone as the ultimate purpose for the lives of men and women.

#### **6. What does it mean to be "Evangelical?"**

To be "Evangelical" means to believe in the importance of sharing the good news that through Jesus Christ the kingdom of God has been inaugurated, freeing people from the guilt and power of sin through personal faith and repentance. We express this priority on evangelism by stating it in our governing documents as the first work of the church. This priority is evidenced in our emphasis on church planting and world missions.

#### **7. Does the EPC believe in missions?**

Absolutely! Our World Outreach Committee oversees the sending of over 90 missionaries to over 20 different countries. Some of our best and brightest members are serving with the generous support of our congregations because we believe that the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations.

### **8. What is your relationship to other Presbyterian and Reformed denominations?**

We lie in the middle area of a continuum of American Presbyterian denominations. The EPC believes in historic Christianity as taught in Scripture, thus looking to the Bible as our guide on moral issues and believing in the reality of sin, salvation and judgment. At the same time, we want to give evidence of what we consider a mark of the true church-loving fellowship-by holding our convictions with charity toward others and charitably allowing a diversity of views within the EPC on non-essential issues. Thus we identify positively with those Presbyterian denominations which hold to biblical authority.

### **9. How does the EPC view the gifts of the Holy Spirit?**

The EPC believes the Holy Spirit is active today in applying the benefits of Christ's redemption and equipping the Church for service through the granting of spiritual gifts, including the gifts of office (Eph. 4:8ff.). The EPC believes the church should encourage God's people to serve Him with all the gifts the Spirit gives. The EPC consists of churches which believe the charismatic gifts are still given today as well as churches which do not. This would be a prime example of what the EPC believes is a "non-essential." We believe that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is part of the new birth (1 Cor. 12:13), but that every believer is commanded to be filled with the Holy Spirit as part of the ongoing work of God's grace (Eph. 5:18). For more on the EPC's view of the Holy Spirit, consult our "Position Paper on the Holy Spirit."

### **10. What is the EPC's position on social issues such as homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia?**

The EPC looks to the Bible as the rule of faith and practice on such issues. For example, we believe that homosexual practice, like many other things, is sinful. Regarding abortion, we believe the Bible does not distinguish between prenatal and postnatal life, attributing personhood to an unborn child. Our positions on these and other issues can be found in position papers available on our web site or in print from the Office of the General Assembly.

### **11. Where is the EPC congregation nearest to me?**

You can find out where the nearest EPC congregation is by going to the church locator page on this web site or by calling the Office of the General Assembly. If there is no EPC congregation in your area, we are always interested in talking to viable and compatible groups of people who are interested in church planting.

### **12. What is the EPC's view of women in office?**

While this is a topic about which many Christians feel strongly, the EPC believes that there can be genuine unity amid diversity on the subject. Each congregation has the right to decide whether to have women officers. The local congregation, subject to presbytery approval, determines whether they will have women as pastors. We believe that, whatever a congregation's view of office, women should be encouraged to serve as God has called and gifted them. For more on this topic, you may obtain our "Position Paper on the Ordination of Women."

### **13. In the EPC, who owns the property of a local church?**

The congregation has the exclusive, inalienable right to own and control its own property.

### **14. Does the EPC have any special programs for youth or women?**

The EPC maintains active programs for both youth and women. The Student Ministries program offers a variety of missions and camp experiences throughout the summer as well as ongoing training and support for individual churches. While, the Women In Ministries program promotes local women's ministries, presbytery-wide training, retreat programs, and special missions projects. Both denominational departments have staff members serving these areas.

### **15. How are churches represented in the EPC?**

Every church has a right to send representatives to presbytery and general assembly meetings. Further, our form of government attempts to achieve a two-to-one ratio between lay delegates (elders) and ministers at those levels. This provision helps keep the EPC from being a clergy-dominated denomination, out of touch with the needs and interests of the average person in the pew.

### **16. How big is the EPC?**

The EPC consists of approximately 230 churches representing approximately 80,000 members.

### **17. Does the EPC have its own colleges and seminaries?**

No, the EPC does not own any denominational schools. We look to a number of evangelical colleges and seminaries across the country, many of whom annually attend our General Assembly and have EPC trustees.

### **18. What is on the horizon for the EPC?**

Since our beginning we have felt that we represented a unique move of God. We have been blessed with a fervent beginning, a warm spirit and an uncommon oneness of heart. While the EPC has grown through the transfer of many existing churches, we have a deep desire to see the kingdom of God extended through energetic church planting and evangelism. Our Vision 21 strategic plan through the year 2010 sets ambitious objectives for doing so. Our growth has varied over the years, but has always been positive. We expect our intense efforts in church planting to breed a church planting mentality that will produce significant growth in the next decade.

**19. Where are your denominational offices?**

The Office of the General Assembly is located in the Detroit area in Livonia, Michigan.

**20. How can our church become part of the EPC?**

The process of becoming part of the EPC begins with getting to know one another. You can start by calling the Office of the General Assembly. We can provide you with regional contacts to begin that process. In general terms, it consists of your congregation voting to affiliate and the EPC presbytery in your area voting to accept you and your pastor(s). If you are currently affiliated with another denomination, you will have to consult with officials there about the process for being released.

**21. How can I help start an EPC church in my area?**

You can begin by calling the National Outreach Office of the EPC at the Office of the General Assembly.