

**WHEN WE DIFFER SHARPLY:
PURSUING TRUTH AND PRESERVING COMMUNITY¹**

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago I was approached by the editor of a Roman Catholic journal in Canada who wanted to inform his readers about what was to them a vague and peculiar stream of Protestantism known as evangelicalism. The mission of this bilingual journal was to bring Christians together, at least to talk, and the question he posed for my article was whether evangelicalism tended to be a uniting or divisive movement in the history of Christianity. Did it bring Christians together or tear them apart?

The question was pointed, and to some extent at least, embarrassing. Seen from one perspective, the history of evangelicalism in the last several centuries is a dismal tale of church splits and acrimonious fragmentation. My Catholic friend's suspicion, of course, was that on balance we probably are more divisive than reconciling. What Catholic can help contrasting their own massive church, which despite its diversity still remains unified, with the bewildering plethora of denominations and independent churches spawned by the evangelical movement over the last two centuries? And perhaps working Catholic assumptions about our movement are also based on the widespread stereotype of the fractious fundamentalist—the person who gravitates to

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Far West regional meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in April 2001, and also at the annual meetings of the ETS in November 2002. I am especially indebted to my Bethel Seminary colleague Bill Travis for a number of very constructive criticisms of the original document.

military metaphors, who likes to fight rather than make peace, who prefers to split away rather than be compromised by association, who makes theatrical spectacles of defending principles at all costs, and who likes to view his own cause as divinely-sanctioned and to caricature his enemies as agents of the Devil.

Against all this I tried to put our best foot forward. I mentioned how evangelicals were instrumental in laying the foundations of the modern ecumenical movement through the development of international and interdenominational associations like the Evangelical Alliance of 1846.² My argument was (and still is) that evangelicalism is actually a uniting force whenever it has an outward-looking cause to champion. When there is an evangelistic or missionary goal to achieve, evangelicals come out of the woodwork, put their shoulders to the wheel, and show such magnanimity toward one another that they are able to transcend all sorts of boundaries and divisions. It is in these situations that we see evangelicalism at its best. The evangelical vision of unity is functional rather than structural or liturgical. It is a vision of a great host of believers, voluntarily joined together in common cause, marching forward, shoulder to shoulder, in powerful evangelistic enterprise.³

Unfortunately, it can be quite a different and less irenic matter when evangelicals begin

²See J. W. Ewing, Goodly Fellowship: A Centenary Tribute to the Life and Work of the World's Evangelical Fellowship, 1846-1946 (London & Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1946); for the American scene, see Philip D. Jordan, The Evangelical Alliance for the United States of America, 1847-1900: Ecumenism, Identity and the Religion of the Republic (New York & Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982).

³Glen G. Scorgie, "Evangelicalism: A Unitive or Divisive Movement in Christianity?" Ecumenism no. 85 (March 1987): 11-13.

to look inward and try to deal with the often-irritating and sometimes downright alarming heterogeneity, doctrinal and otherwise, of our broad movement. Darrell Bock, a recent Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) president, agrees in his book Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies (2002). “My sense is,” says Bock ruefully, “that we do not engage each other very well when people feel that the stakes concerning the truth are high.”⁴

THE OPENNESS OF GOD ISSUE TODAY

The so-called “Openness of God” controversy has recently captured center-stage in the ETS. Apologetic in motivation, the Openness view offers a non-traditional proposal for resolving the classic tension between divine sovereignty and human free will, and for addressing the awkward old theodicy issues associated with the claim that the infinitely-loving God is also all-knowing and all-powerful. The crux of the Openness proposal is that Almighty God, in his resolve to dignify humans with authentic freedom of choice and genuine self-determination, has deliberately and voluntarily restricted not only his power to predetermine every outcome, but has also voluntarily restricted even his power to foreknow all things. In order to allow human beings genuine (as opposed to predetermined and phony) freedom, the argument goes, God sometimes allows himself to be surprised (though, of course, never thrown or defeated) by what people

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 7-8. This book is an expansion of Bock’s ETS presidential address, which was published as “The Purpose-Driven ETS: Where Should We Go?” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 45, no. 1 (March 2002): 3-33.

decide to do. God is like a chess grand-master who successfully counters our best moves in such a way as to ensure an ultimately successful outcome. The Openness view goes well beyond traditional Arminianism in maintaining that Almighty God either has voluntarily chosen not to exercise his capacity for exhaustive foreknowledge, or is simply not capable (given the open nature of the future) of knowing in advance how authentic human freedom will be exercised.

Now this is a step to the left even for Arminians, and not a great number feel comfortable yet in taking it. As for Calvinists, it requires an even greater stretch, and not a few are profoundly alarmed. But what makes matters very interesting is that some of the leading exponents of this view happen to be members of our society. On the other side, however, there are many other members of the ETS, including key leaders, who are convinced that the Openness view espoused by such persons as Greg Boyd, John Sanders and Clark Pinnock⁵ falls outside the appropriate boundaries of an organization united in a mutual commitment to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.

A remarkable number of papers delivered at recent annual meetings of the ETS have addressed this controversial issue. In addition, in 2000 there was standing-room only in for an energetic panel discussion involving Greg Boyd and his opponents. Significantly, the theme for the Society's annual meetings in November 2001 was "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries." Moreover, the ETS executive had earlier proposed a discussion for that year to address the question of whether Open Theism is compatible with biblical inerrancy. The executive had

⁵See Greg Boyd, God of the Possible (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); John Sanders, The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998); and Clark Pinnock & others, The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

already concluded for itself that the Bible clearly teaches exhaustive foreknowledge, but welcomed a wider discussion of the topic in the interests of fairness.⁶ Once again the Society faced the awkward issue of what to do with persons who continue to espouse inerrancy but draw non-traditional inferences from the biblical text. As it turned out, the 2001 meetings produced a motion affirming belief in exhaustive divine foreknowledge.⁷ Although there was majority support for the motion, it failed in the end to receive the level of voter support required by the Society's bylaws to make this belief a condition for membership in ETS. But that was not to be the end of the matter. In November 2002 the ETS voted to challenge the membership of prominent advocates of Open Theism on the grounds that their proposals were incompatible with biblical inerrancy, which is a defining doctrinal basis of the Society. In accordance with the ETS constitution, the matter has been referred to the Society's executive committee, which will examine the case and determine whether the Society will vote on the charges in 2003.⁸

A DIFFERENT QUESTION TO CONSIDER

Much ink has already been spilled, and more is likely to flow, concerning the flaws as well as the merits of the Openness view itself. Already this has proven to be a vigorous theological dialogue, and as long as it is allowed to continue in a thoughtful, informed and

⁶“Reports Relating to the Fifty-Second Annual Meeting of the Society,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 44, no. 1 (March 2001): 182.

⁷ “Reports Relating to the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Society,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 45, no. 1 (March 2002): 186-87.

⁸ Doug Koop, “Closing the Door on Open Theists?” Christianity Today, 21 January 2003, 24.

mutually-respectful manner it should be encouraged.

But perhaps it is time to look beyond our initial tasks of investigating and appraising this theological view. Perhaps we should also put a little more thought into what we ought to do once we have decided whether the Openness view is within the bounds of our preferred definition of orthodoxy or beyond the pale. Eventually this controversy will die down, and may already have begun to lose a bit of steam. In any event, the point should not be lost that this current controversy affords us a strategic opportunity to clarify some principles--principles that could help guide our responses when new controversies may surface in the future, as inevitably they will.

In general terms the questions we face can be stated this way: What should we do with views with which we disagree? And how should we treat those who espouse them? Is it right and appropriate, for example, to denounce such views and exclude such persons by a democratic vote of the society's members? Eventually this line of questioning leads us towards the truly foundational issue before us, and that is the very nature and purpose of an evangelical theological society. It is to a consideration of these matters that I would like now to go, beginning with a brief survey of the history of the Evangelical Theological Society.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY

The Society was birthed when some sixty evangelical scholars met for two days in late December of 1949 at the YMCA in downtown Cincinnati. Its organization followed quickly on the heels of the establishment of a number of other organizations which were destined to lead the evangelical movement beyond its fundamentalist roots. These include the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Youth for Christ (1942), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947), and World

Vision International (1949). *Christianity Today*, the chief voice of the evangelicals, would follow soon afterwards in 1956.

A press release drafted by Carl Henry on behalf of this new scholarly society explained that the founders were “one in their view of the Scriptures and in the desire to foster true evangelical scholarship.”⁹ Further light is shed on the original purposes by Clarence Bouma of Calvin College, the first president of ETS. In his keynote address to the first meeting, Bouma explained that there was a need for an evangelical society distinct from the existing organizations for biblical and theological scholarship. “The deepest and ultimate reason for this need, as I see it,” he explained, “is found in the radical divergence between the basis, presuppositions, and consequent methodologies of a sound evangelical theology on the one hand, and that of the prevailing types of theology (which may with a general term be designated as modernist) on the other.”¹⁰ Essentially Bouma was saying that the raison d’être of the new organization was its distinctive theological methodology.

Further on he explained that it was in Scripture that evangelical theological method found its source and focus.

The ultimate source and authority for Theology is no longer sought [today] in the objective divine revelation of Scripture, but in the religious consciousness of man. Theology thus becomes anthropocentric instead of theocentric This

⁹John Wiseman, “The Evangelical Theological Society: Yesterday and Today,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 28, no. 5 (1985): 8.

¹⁰Ibid., 8.

divergence between historic Christian Theology and the currently prevalent modernist Theology—of whatever shape or hue—is so great that the organization of separate scholarly societies for the evangelical theologians is so desirable.¹¹

These sentiments were reflected in the constitution of the ETS which reads: “The purpose of the Society shall be to foster conservative Biblical scholarship by providing a medium for the oral exchange and written expression of thought and research in the general field of the theological disciplines as centered in the Scriptures.”

This Bible-centeredness to which the ETS constitution attests is eminently compatible with the genius of the evangelical tradition. Anyone who ventures to sketch the distinctive contours of our movement will inevitably acknowledge that this epistemological principle lies at the very heart of evangelicalism.¹² But to center one’s entire theological enterprise on the Scriptures makes no sense unless one has a high regard for the authority and trustworthiness of this particular source. Otherwise, prudent theologians would try to diversify their epistemological portfolio, so to speak, by playing the Scriptures down a bit and transferring some weight to alternative sources of truth. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Society laid down as a requirement of members—its sole requirement, in fact—that they subscribe to the

¹¹Ibid., 9.

¹²See, for example, David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-19; Mark Noll, The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: IVP, 1994), 7-10; or Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” Christianity Today, 9 February 1998, 40-48.

statement that “the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”¹³

Now what appears a bit odd is that the ETS developed no confession or statement of faith beyond this simple affirmation of biblical inerrancy—not even an elemental one like that to which members of the World Evangelical Fellowship subscribe. In the conspicuous absence of such a statement, it seems plausible to conclude that the early ETS assumed that a commitment to biblical inerrancy would (minor denominational differences aside) ensure that members would read their Bibles in basically the same way and draw fairly uniform doctrines from it.

DEFINITIONS OF INERRANCY

In ensuing years it has become apparent that this assumption was naively optimistic. In retrospect it was so for at least two reasons. The first is that a definitive consensus on a definition of inerrancy was not achieved, and continues to elude the evangelical community. The second reason is that an affirmation of inerrancy, while it can preclude certain interpretations of a text, cannot dictate in advance exactly how readers will interpret the text they nonetheless esteem to be inerrant. Let us briefly consider these two points in order.

First, it has become increasingly evident since the founding of the ETS that there is less than a consensus within evangelicalism on what the term inerrancy implies and does not imply about the text of Scripture. Certainly few inerrantists are likely to dissent from a very general definition of inerrancy like this one: “The Bible in its original autographs, properly interpreted, will be found to be truthful and faithful in all that it affirms concerning all areas of life, faith and

¹³Wiseman, “The Evangelical Theological Society,” 9.

practice.”¹⁴ But beyond this there will be a considerable range of opinions on what words like “truthful” and “faithful” and “affirms” mean, and on the properties one should expect (and count on) from a text that is believed to be God-breathed, inerrant and infallible.

Evangelicalism was profoundly occupied in the late 1970s with this issue. Harold Lindsell, the editor of Christianity Today at the time, brought the issue of evangelical allegiance to inerrancy out in the open with his provocative book The Battle for the Bible.¹⁵ While some evangelicals opted not to subscribe to the term any more, many others elected to retain it and to devote some of their energies to defining it more precisely and in a way that was reconcilable to the patent realities of the Bible itself. Numerous books were written and symposia held for this very purpose.¹⁶

In 1978 a number of leading evangelical scholars, the majority of them members of the ETS, organized the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) to promote inerrancy and their understanding of it. That same year the Council convened a large conference (three thousand delegates) in Chicago from which came the widely-circulated Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The full text of the statement was immediately printed in the Journal of the

¹⁴This basic definition is attributed to David Dockery in Dan G. Kent, “Can You Believe in Inerrancy and Equality?” Priscilla Papers 15, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 3.

¹⁵Harold Lindsell, The Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

¹⁶For example, James Boice, Does Inerrancy Matter? (Oakland, CA: ICBI, 1979); Roger Nicole & J. Ramsey Michaels, eds. Inerrancy and Common Sense (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); and Ronald Youngblood, ed., Evangelicals and Inerrancy (Nashville: Nelson, 1984), a collection of relative articles previously published in JETS.

Evangelical Theological Society ostensibly with the full support of Society's leadership.¹⁷ But J. I. Packer, a leading champion of inerrancy and himself a subscriber to the Chicago Statement, seemed to understand that there was nothing infallible about either the Statement itself or the definition of inerrancy contained therein, and that the definition of inerrancy was far from conclusively settled. Noting that the Chicago Statement was signed by over ninety percent of the delegates, Packer simply expressed the hope that "in view of this broad representative base of support it should be able to function as an agreed platform and reference point for the debates of the next generation."¹⁸

The latitude of meaning of the term inerrancy that would be acceptable to the membership of the Evangelical Theological Society was tested when Robert Gundry, an ETS member and professor of New Testament at Westmont College in California published his 652-page book Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art (1982). Gundry's commentary employed the scholarly technique of redaction criticism, a method that presupposes that an author may have edited, adapted and otherwise shaped source material in order to make his own particular theological point. The most controversial example of this was Gundry's suggestion that Matthew used a Jewish literary genre called midrash, according to which a writer might embellish historical events with non-historical additions. The nativity account of the Wise

¹⁷See Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 289 ff. The academic papers presented at the Chicago conference were promptly published as Norman L. Geisler, ed., Inerrancy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).

¹⁸J. I. Packer, Beyond the Battle for the Bible (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone, 1980), 48.

Men was suggested as a possible case in point.¹⁹

In the end, at the national ETS meetings in 1983 a motion to ask Gundry to resign from the ETS was passed by a vote of 119 to 36, with many abstentions. The victorious conservatives were in accord with Norman Geisler's personal explanation of what inerrancy meant: "Any hermeneutical or theological method the logically necessary consequences of which are contrary to or undermine confidence in the complete truthfulness of all of Scripture is unorthodox." Gundry also continued to affirm inerrancy, but it was clear that his understanding of what the "complete truthfulness of all of Scripture" meant was different than that of Geisler.²⁰

The difficulty here is that the term inerrancy does not come with a built-in and automatic definition. It means what we decide it will mean. In 1983 the majority in the ETS chose to embrace a more pointed definition of inerrancy that excluded the possibility of this sort of redaction activity on the part of biblical authors.

RANGE OF INTERPRETATION

A second reason why theological views within the ETS are less than uniform is that an affirmation of inerrancy cannot always predetermine exactly how readers will interpret the text they sincerely esteem to be inerrant. To believe that the text of Scripture itself is without error is one thing; to be able to deduce its meaning, or what it is actually saying, is a distinctly different matter. Even as the furor over inerrancy was beginning to settle, there were evangelical scholars

¹⁹Leslie R. Keylock, "Evangelical Scholars Remove Gundry for His Views on Matthew," Christianity Today, 3 February 1984, 36-38.

²⁰Ibid.

who were beginning to intuit that the next landmark issue would be hermeneutics. Among them was Stanley Gundry, then a professor of theology at Moody Bible Institute and brother of Robert Gundry. In his ETS presidential speech of 1978 Stanley Gundry candidly noted that “unresolved differences of hermeneutical approach becloud the unity of our subscription to inerrancy.”²¹ After an excellent survey of contemporary theological developments Stanley Gundry concluded: “You may have noticed that one theme is the common ingredient in all [that has been said]: hermeneutics. Many, perhaps most, of the unresolved problems relating to the definition and implications of inerrancy can be boiled down to one word: hermeneutics.”²² And so Gundry concluded with a challenge for his colleagues: “Hermeneutics is the unfinished item on our agenda of theological prolegomena. It must be seriously and comprehensively addressed by all evangelical theologians and Biblical scholars in the immediate future.”²³

It has been something of an embarrassment to the ETS that members of a variety of Christian cults can readily subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. When it came to the attention of ETS president James Borland that certain inerrantists who denied the doctrine of the Trinity were seeking to participate in the ETS, he proposed, with the help of Gleason Archer, to add a Trinitarian tenet alongside the Society’s existing affirmation of biblical inerrancy. This change was quietly adopted in 1990. The result is that the Society now has a highly unusual ad-

²¹Stanley Gundry, “Evangelical Theology: Where Should We Be Going?” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 22, no. 1 (March 1979): 5.

²²Ibid., 12.

²³Ibid., 13.

hoc confession consisting of two points of orthodoxy.²⁴ This move was designed to exclude those with unorthodox views of God, but it moved the ETS into the uncharted waters of ruling (by a vote of the society's membership) on what interpretations of the inerrant Scriptures would henceforth be tolerated.

This brings us back to the current issue of whether the ETS should tolerate or condemn the Openness theology. I venture to suggest that this is not ultimately a debate about inerrancy, since both sides not only subscribe to the term, but by their respectful Bible-centered approaches to theology show that their espousal of the ETS's high view of Scripture is sincere. In fact, the debate is no longer even about which interpretation of the inerrant Scriptures is the correct one. Rather, it is about whether those who espouse this particular interpretation—the Openness theology one—will be welcomed or tolerated in the Evangelical Theological Society. It is about whether the members of the Society consider it in the best interests of evangelicalism to exclude such persons through an exercise of majority-based political power. There is a subjective dimension to this decision that needs to be acknowledged frankly.

Such considerations may seem odd to those who are acquainted with more inclusive scholarly societies that provide open forums for informed discussion of topics of common interest. In contrast the ETS has always been on a mission. It emerged in 1949 with the deliberate intention of strengthening the evangelical cause and countering the pervasive weight of modernist scholarship. It appears that sometime over the years the leadership of the ETS

²⁴The full ETS statement now reads: "The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

began to assume responsibility for being the “keepers of the content” of evangelicalism’s faith.

This sense of stewardship of evangelicalism’s best interests is evident in the Society’s earliest documents and statements. It continues to this day, as reflected in Norman Geisler’s 1998 ETS presidential address entitled “Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars.”²⁵ In it Geisler pleaded:

In the final analysis, preserving orthodoxy is not a purely intellectual matter. It is spiritual warfare. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”(Eph. 6:12). The enemy of our soul wants also to deceive our minds So we need to take on the whole armor of God in order to withstand the wiles of the Wicked One.²⁶

These remarks indicate first of all that Geisler’s goal (and presumably he did not become president by speaking only for himself) was the preservation of orthodoxy. Clearly he conceptualized his calling and that of the ETS as defenders of the true faith. Moreover, his rhetorical flourishes reveal that he has upgraded the scholarly debates carried out under the auspices of the society to the status of a spiritual warfare against deceptive powers orchestrated by the Evil One. This is, to state the matter lightly, a potentially-inflammatory approach to

²⁵Norman Geisler, “Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 42, no. 1 (March 1999): 3-19.

²⁶Ibid., 18.

academic discourse.

Beneath such statements there appears to be the assumption that interventions may be necessary from time to time in order to keep evangelical theology on course. “The prevailing winds of doctrine blow against us,” Geisler continued. “And if we are to resist them we must have a firm grip on the wheel of the Good Ship Evangelicalism and steer it to the right.”²⁷ In response to such a striking statement one must ask whether the ETS really has been mandated to assume such a firm grip on the helm of the Good Ship Evangelicalism. So strong is the imagery of control here that we must inquire with some urgency into what the opinion-leaders of the ETS consider to be appropriate means by which the cause of truth should be championed. Essentially we are asking the question of jus in bello (i.e., terms of engagement) that arises in any ethical discussion of whether the way a war is being waged is just. And that brings us finally to the question of the nature and purpose of the Evangelical Theological Society itself.

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF AN EXCLUSIONARY APPROACH

For a long time now the ETS has assumed that the theological health of evangelicalism is best served by a theological society which conceives itself at least in part as an arbitrator of orthodoxy and a kind of doctrinal tribunal. The negative consequences of perpetuating such an understanding of the function of the Evangelical Theological Society are many, and some are already being acutely felt.

1. Diminished Representativeness

²⁷Ibid., 16.

When the positions of certain bona fide evangelicals are excluded, the society itself can no longer be regarded as representative of the evangelical movement in toto or even of those evangelicals who espouse inerrancy. It can no longer speak for the whole. At best the Society can represent the interests and voices of a particular sector of evangelicalism—those who subscribe to the majority’s definition of inerrancy and who happen to agree with one another down the line in their doctrinal inferences from the inerrant text. Such a society progressively loses its moral claim to being the Evangelical Theological Society, and takes on instead the status of an evangelical theological society.

2. Loss of Imagination

The Society impoverishes itself intellectually and spiritually by driving away some of its best and brightest young (and not so young) minds and hearts. Scholars who love and respect the Word of God, but who approach it with imagination and daring creativity, are just as essential as theological conservationists to the future of evangelicalism and the hopes it entertains of winning the hearts and minds of the next generation. If such gifted individuals are forced out, or made to feel unwelcome, their places will be filled up by custodians of tradition who are content to plod the safe and familiar tracks laid down by an earlier generation of evangelicals. For years now the trend has been growing for some of the most gifted young evangelical scholars to shift over into

more inclusive scholarly organizations like the Institute for Biblical Research (IBR)²⁸ and the more recently-established Evangelical Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion. Further erosion of this sort is surely not in the ETS's best long-term interests.

3. Reduced Opportunities for Dialogue

A professional divorce between persons who disagree sharply on aspects of biblical interpretation (while nonetheless sharing each one of the defining features of evangelicalism) preempts the very kinds of stimulating dialogue and cross-fertilization of ideas that academic societies are supposed to facilitate. "Iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17), but it only works if the pieces of iron remain in proximity to one another. Unless evangelicals who disagree are allowed to feel welcome in one another's company, and safe from punitive measures, scholarly dialogues will become increasingly narrow and parochial, lazy argumentation will be tolerated, and plenary events will become confused with rallies. The alienated sides will harden in their unchallenged positions, and change and growth will become increasingly rare. It is "together with all the saints" (Ephesians 3:18-19) that we grasp the full dimensions of God's truth. This truth is fully apprehended only through the collective insights of God's people. As individuals we are always in need of an extra pair of eyes.

²⁸The IBR was founded in 1970 by E. Earle Ellis, and designed along the lines of Britain's Cambridge-based Tyndale Fellowship. The respective approaches of the ETS and IBR are described as "critical anti-criticism" and "believing criticism" respectively in Mark Noll, Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 105, 158-59.

4. Interpersonal Alienation between Believers

Finally, one of the great tragedies of an exclusionary approach to evangelical scholarship is the interpersonal pain and estrangement that occurs between persons who are, beneath their hermeneutical differences, still one in Spirit, experience and mission. The will to exclude another, as Miroslav Volf has so eloquently pointed out, always feeds that which is darkest and most hateful in our own souls.²⁹ There are always human casualties in the campaigns and holy wars waged in the interests of truth. What is perhaps most unsettling is the ease and even alacrity with which we are prepared to denounce and discredit our own brothers and sisters in Christ. As the Apostle Paul warns, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Galatians 5:15).

AN ALTERNATIVE VISION

It is time, then, to question the exclusionary approach to resolving sharp differences in evangelical theological discourse. But for conservative evangelicals to be able to move beyond the practice of exclusion, two important changes will have to take place within our ranks.

1. An Increased Confidence in Truth’s Power to Prevail

The evangelical community generally, and evangelical scholars specifically, will need to

²⁹Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996); compare M. Volf, “Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of ‘Ethnic Cleansing’,” in Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology, ed. W. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 19-43.

develop a greater degree of confidence in truth's ability to prevail in a free marketplace of ideas. The tremendous losses and humiliating set-backs suffered by evangelicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped give a suspicious and pessimistic cast to the world-view of subsequent fundamentalists. This was reflected in the fundamentalists' growing preference for escapist pre-millennial eschatology, for their sectarian separation from the cultural mainstream, and for their assumption that any new trends in thought were most likely pernicious simply because they were novel.³⁰

I think I detect something of this same concern being perpetuated in Norman Geisler's 1998 presidential address to the ETS, in which he encouraged acquiescence to the more familiar beliefs and interpretations. One wonders where we would be today if Martin Luther, John Calvin, the great Puritan Samuel Rutherford, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Martin Luther King, Jr. had adopted this counsel. But avoid the temptation to be unique, Geisler advised, and never dance on the edges. "Do not see how far the borders of evangelicalism can be stretched to accommodate the latest scholarly fad. Do not flirt with the latest critical methodology."³¹

And why not? Because the spirit of the times is hostile to faith. To underscore his point, Geisler then used the illustration of how pilots of propeller-driven aircraft must always compensate for the craft's tendency to veer to the left. Geisler commented:

Based on my observations of evangelical institutions and leaders over the past half

³⁰George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925 (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

³¹Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy," 15.

century, it appears to me that the same principle applies. The only way to keep on the straight orthodox path is to keep turning to the right. Churches, schools, and even evangelical scholarship will naturally go left, unless they are deliberately turned to the right. The prevailing winds of doctrine blow against us. And if we are to resist them we must have a firm grip on the wheel of the Good Ship Evangelicalism and steer it to the right.³²

This is a clear call for a conservationist bias to counter the drift of the times. An identical tone is sustained in Geisler's follow-up remark that "we must reject the temptation to believe 'New is true.' It is far more likely that 'Old is gold.' For truth stands the test of time, while recent error has not been around long enough to be tried in the balance and be found wanting."³³

Quite a different outlook on things is provided by an evangelical champion of an earlier generation, James Orr (1844-1913) of Glasgow. He was a marquis contributor to The Fundamentals, and general editor of the 5-volume International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, a reference work which did so much to extend conservative orthodoxy's line of defense in the twentieth century. He competently opposed Liberal theology, rationalistic biblical criticism, naturalistic Darwinian theory, and just about every other contemporary challenge to the evangelical faith. In stature he was Britain's equal to America's B. B. Warfield.

The point I wish to make can best be illustrated by Orr's role in a theological investigation of Old Testament scholar George Adam Smith. To set up the background very

³²Ibid., 16.

³³Ibid.

briefly, issues of Old Testament criticism were first brought center-stage in Victorian Scotland in the 1870s.³⁴ For years thereafter the future of biblical criticism in Scotland remained far from settled. The newer critical views were never officially declared heretical, and various churchmen, many of them evangelical, continued to affirm the principle of critical freedom in the Free Church of Scotland. The truly decisive case came in 1902, and it concerned the views George Adam Smith expressed in his Yale lecture series Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament (1902).

It is very significant that James Orr was also an eloquent defender of George Adam Smith's right to express his views within the church and remain therein. Orr opposed the idea of an elaborate legal process against Smith for a number of reasons, some of which are pertinent to our own situation. One was for strategic reasons. A heresy trial would only prolong strife and lead to embitterment. Moreover, biblical criticism was a movement of sufficient magnitude that an arbitrary act against it would be useless anyway. Then there was the practical consideration that critical questions were far too complex to be properly resolved by any committee, however able it might be.

Summing up the matter in a way that reflected his strong liberal spirit, he judged that a process against Smith would not be "in the interests of truth." This is the crucial point. Orr believed that the interests of truth were best served in a free marketplace of ideas among persons

³⁴The higher critical views were popularized chiefly through the publications and speeches of another brilliant Old Testament scholar who shared the surname Smith—William Robertson Smith (1846-1894). Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America, s. v. "Smith, William Robertson."

of demonstrated character and evangelical experience.³⁵ As his classic The Progress of Dogma reveals, Orr had a strong confidence that history had its own way of inexorably ferreting out error and exposing it for what it was, while at the same time ultimately vindicating that which was true. History bore the mark of the guidance of a providential and controlling reason. The historical and the logical corresponded.

But this is still not quite the end of the matter, for immediately Orr set about to write his own careful and thoroughly researched rebuttal to the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis espoused by George Adam and other higher critics. His 560-page work was published in 1906 as The Problem of the Old Testament, and on its strength Orr was recognized as a formidable champion of the anti-Wellhausen forces. His earlier tolerance of George Adam Smith was not based on an under-estimation of the dangers inherent in Smith's views. To the contrary, Orr maintained that the Wellhausen hypothesis, if carried to its logical conclusions, would prove "subversive of our Christian faith, and of such belief in, and use of, the Bible as alone can meet the needs of the living Church."³⁶ Nevertheless, and consistent with his resistance to settling issues simply by deposing professors, Orr explained that "the case which the critics present must be met in a calm, temperate, and scholarly way, if it is to be dealt with to the satisfaction of thoughtful Christian people."³⁷ In attitude and endeavor Orr remains an example for evangelical scholars today.

³⁵Glen G. Scorgie, A Call for Continuity: The Theological Contribution of James Orr (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1988), 82-84.

³⁶James Orr, The Problem of the Old Testament (London: James Nisbet, 1906), 6.

³⁷*Ibid.*, xv.

Much more recently Richard Mouw has confronted the irony that we are often least like Christ at precisely those times when we are defending his cause. The shrillness of our speech, and the way we white-knuckle our way, he suggests, only betray the depth of our fears concerning the fragility of our cause. He argues that one of the keys to behaving civilly with those with whom we disagree is strong faith in God's sovereignty over history and the inevitability of truth's ultimate triumph.³⁸ Without a doubt such confidence in God's providential governance is a key to civil and tolerant management of theological differences within the community of faith.

2. A Centered-Set Perspective

In addition to requiring a more hopeful view of truth's prospects in a free marketplace of ideas, a change in the current direction of the Evangelical Theological Society may also require a shift away from establishing theological boundaries and limits to focusing on central motivations and convictions.

A few years ago Robert Johnston recognized as problematic the ways in which modern evangelicalism tends to define heresy and deal with theological diversity within its own ranks.³⁹ He identified two basic approaches to resolution: one he describes as boundary-oriented, and the

³⁸Richard Mouw, Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

³⁹Robert K. Johnston, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Problem for Modern Evangelicalism," Evangelical Quarterly 69, no. 1 (1997): 7-38; Johnston in turn acknowledges his debt to Paul G. Hierbert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," Gospel in Context 1, no. 4 (October 1978): 24-29.

other as center-oriented. The first envisions evangelical identity in terms of a bounded set of fundamental doctrines that cannot be compromised under any circumstance. The second, by contrast, envisions evangelical identity in terms of a set of central convictions and core values. The distinction between the two may appear subtle, but in fact is profoundly significant.

Presently the ETS seems for the most part to be thinking according to the “bounded set” approach. However, it is Johnston’s thesis that the other approach more faithfully reflects the genius and unity of the evangelical movement, and offers more promise of constructive theological dialogue, harmony and creativity. A number of recent books bear titles that suggest a similar orientation. Both Gary Dorrien’s The Remaking of Evangelical Theology (1998) and Stanley Grenz’s Renewing the Center (2000) encourage evangelicals to move beyond the older fundamentalist notion of theology as polemic or tournament and embrace instead what Hans Frei has described as “a generous orthodoxy.”⁴⁰ Ken Mannoia, a former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, recently expressed similar convictions:

Instead of defining what we are not, we must focus on what we are. We can draw a circle and define ourselves by the perimeter (by exclusion) or by the centerpoint (by declaration). In both there are exclusions, since those not consistent with our centerpoint are naturally and automatically excluded. But the difference is where we

⁴⁰Review of Dorrien’s The Remaking of Evangelical Theology, by Rodney Clapp, Books and Culture 5, no. 3 (May/June 1999): 25. Grenz uses the identical term in Renewing the Center (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 21, 325-326. Compare also Gabriel Fackre, Restoring the Center: Essays Evangelical & Ecumenical (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

place our energy.⁴¹

Robert Johnston agrees. With the center-oriented approach, he explains, “there is still clear division as to who belongs to the set, but there is less stress on the boundaries.”⁴² This approach is potentially confusing, and can be understood in more than one way,⁴³ but the particular sense of it that I am commending would lead us to evaluate theologians primarily according to their core values and generative passions.⁴⁴ Such an approach will measure a person’s evangelical credentials by how central a role the Scripture actually plays in their theology, how respectful they are of the inspired text, and how passionate they are about the Gospel message to which the Bible witnesses. We should be more inclined to tolerate differences of interpretation if we are assured that a theologian remains strongly Bible-centered and Gospel-centered. And we would also expect from them a comparable centeredness on the other

⁴¹Kevin W. Mannoia, “What Are We For?” Christianity Today, 21 May 2001, 82.

⁴² Johnston, “Orthodoxy and Heresy,” 12.

⁴³ Compare Jack Rogers, Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) and Douglas Jacobsen and William Trollinger, Jr., Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁴⁴ What I am advocating seems actually close to what Darrell Bock calls for when he envisions “a purpose-directed theology with a prioritized core or hub versus either a centered set or a bounded set that others propose.” Bock, Purpose-Directed Theology, 9. Such a “prioritized center . . . will keep us focused on the central tasks of our calling.” *Ibid.*, 34.

touchstones of historic evangelicalism.

In conclusion, I am not venturing to suggest that this should necessarily be the approach of church congregations and denominations that face sharp doctrinal differences. Those are related but different contexts that involve some additional variables. Instead, I am simply suggesting that it does seem to be an approach eminently suited to a theological society whose members are joined together by a common Christian commitment and a shared theological method.

Darrell Bock has pointed out that evangelicalism includes different types of organizations, each with its strategic role to play and each important to the overall health of the movement. One such type is the “confessing” organization that perpetuates valued traditions and carefully maintains important values and convictions in a boundary-oriented and disciplined fashion. The other type is the “public square” organization or “village green” entity that brings evangelicals together in a more inclusive way for mutual edification, vision expansion and common cause. Nurturing both kinds of organizations, Bock insists, is the best way to keep the evangelical movement united and strong. But the Evangelical Theological Society belongs in the latter category.⁴⁵ Of paramount importance here is Michael Horton’s astute observation that “there is no power of excommunication in the village green.”⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

⁴⁵ Bock, Purpose-Directed Theology, 53-71.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 55.

In a previous life I was a student recruiter for a Christian college. As part of my job I attended a large summer-time youth rally that took over the urban campus of a Canadian university for several days. I set up my booth, arranged my materials, and then set about the job of giving away stuff and making friends. Shortly after my arrival I was advised by the conference coordinators that they were short of night watch personnel, and I was press-ganged into that role as well. By day I tried to build trust and relationships; by night I was chasing these same students around in the dark with a flashlight, catching some as they were climbing out of dormitory windows, and escorting the more defiant ones down to the bus depot and back to their homes. I felt like Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—one thing by day and another by night. It was a hopeless conflict of interest, and I made note for the future that the roles were incompatible. I think the same principle applies to a theological society that wants to encourage the best in Scripture-centered theological reflection. It cannot be simultaneously policing and punishing its own membership.

There is still such a thing as heresy, and we need to take its challenges seriously. Should the concept of heresy ever become obsolete there will not be anything known as orthodoxy left either. A healthy evangelical community must never allow itself to become theologically indifferent.⁴⁷ These things are not in question. What is in question is how an evangelical theological society can best promote the cause of truth, and how it can deal most constructively with sharp differences of opinion whenever these arise within its ranks.

When it comes to something like the Openness view, to which incidentally I do not

⁴⁷John Stott, "Truth, Heresy, and Discipline in the Church," Christianity Today, 10 March 1978, 58-59. Compare Walter Bauer, Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

subscribe,⁴⁸ I wish we were not so afraid. What do we fear will happen if John Saunders and others like him are allowed to stay and speak their minds from time to time? Do we really need to opt for theological uniformity through political means? Surely the best way to determine whether there is anything to it is to let free and unfettered conversation continue, and in the end allow those who disagree to disagree from within the fraternal ranks of those who continue methodologically to treat the Bible as their infallible and (when properly interpreted) inerrant source of revealed truth. I think we should not, like Eli, fear so much for the ark of God.

A number of ETS members envision the Society functioning as a forum for mutual edification and cooperative effort among evangelical Christian scholars who share a common methodological approach to the Scriptures. It is right and well that the ETS should continue to feel a measure of responsibility for the cause of Christ generally and the evangelical church specifically. But it is equally important that we understand that truth is best discovered, clarified and championed in a context of trust and in an open marketplace of perspectives and ideas. Evangelical scholars should come together as friends and fellow witnesses. We would all be the better for it, and our Roman Catholic friends and others looking on will be a lot more likely to conclude that evangelicalism is in fact a powerful unitive rather than a divisive force in the world.

⁴⁸I was “converted” to the Calvinist perspective as a student of J. I. Packer, and my conversion has stuck. I concur with the conclusion of Terrance Tiessen in his Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), that of all the (eleven) optional responses to the mystery of divine providence and human agency the compatibilist view remains the most satisfactory.