

The Glaring Inadequacy of the ETS Doctrinal Statement

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Introduction

Carl Henry was not only a key architect of the evangelical movement but also a prophetic critic especially as the years progressed and he began to see a loss of direction and vitality in the evangelical movement. One of Henry's concerns was the loss of evangelical identity.¹ Henry even stated, "The evangelicals have increasingly become so broad a spectrum that the term 'evangelical' has become meaningless."² His concerns were prophetic. The boundaries of evangelicalism have become even more blurred, leading the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) to adopt as its theme for their 2001 Annual Meeting, "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries." However, it is uncertain whether the conversation generated by this meeting has produced any greater clarity. In fact, the Evangelical Theological Society, which Henry helped to start, appears to lack clear definition itself. Thus, in the spirit of Henry's critiques, desiring clarity for the sake of the gospel, I offer the following critique of the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Theological Society. What follows is essentially the manuscript of a paper given at the 2001 Annual Meeting and retains the rhetorical flavor of the original oral presentation.

Critique³

The events of Sept 11 have raised awareness of the importance of boundaries or limitations—boundaries determining who may be admitted into our country

and who may not, or determining what may be carried onto airplanes and what may not. Boundaries exist to include and exclude; and, as we have seen, the failure to properly exclude has disastrous results.

Something similar can be said of doctrinal statements, which serve as theological boundaries. To function well—indeed, to be of any use at all—they must clearly demarcate a line of exclusion and inclusion. If doctrinal statements fail to exclude properly, they provide neither definition nor boundaries to any group. A group without bounds then easily becomes a group without cohesion, and, like a word without definition, loses any relevance it may have had. It is the contention of this paper that the current ETS doctrinal statement is simply inadequate as it fails to include significant doctrines commonly held to be essential to evangelicals and it fails to exclude many who would not normally be considered the intended constituents of an Evangelical Theological Society. As a boundary, the current doctrinal statement is like a chain link fence without the chain links.

It may be useful to note that in making this argument I mean no disrespect to the framers of the original ETS doctrinal statement. Some of those men are heroes of mine. However, their work must be critically examined, especially while we are considering the "Boundaries of Evangelicalism." Therefore, I will examine the doctrinal statement in two ways. In the

first part of the paper, I ask whether the statement says enough or whether there are crucial elements left out. In the second section I test the excluding value of the doctrinal statement by pressing the statement vigorously in order to determine what can pass through it. The question is not what was intended by the authors to be included but what the statement as it stands can or could allow.

Is the ETS Statement Sufficient?

The first question, then, is, “Does the ETS doctrinal statement say enough?” The statement 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.” We have, then, two main pillars: Scripture and Trinitarianism. The statement on Scripture upholds the uniqueness of the Bible as the Word of God written and the inerrancy of the Bible. The Trinitarian statement affirms the deity, eternity, unity, and equality of each person of the Godhead. These are important truths which we cherish and on which we must not compromise. However, is this all that binds us doctrinally, and is it enough to define us as evangelicals? In seeking to describe the Evangelical Theological Society, our website says, “We are, first of all, Evangelical—that is we subscribe to the Good News of Salvation as a free gift of God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross.” Here, “Evangelical” is described in terms of the gospel of salvation through Christ. Certainly this “good news,” the evangel, is at the heart of Evangelicalism. However, despite the statement on the website, our doctrinal statement makes no reference to salva-

tion, a free gift of God (“grace”), or the sacrificial death of Christ. There is no “evangel” in the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Theological Society! Defining “Evangelicalism” without the gospel is like defining pacifism without eschewing violence, or describing the NFL without mentioning a football. Already it is clear that something is amiss.

The absence of any mention of the gospel or grace raises the question of what other gaps there may be, or what else might be missing that would be deemed essential. Exactly what should be considered essential evangelical doctrinal convictions is the point of debate in this conference. However, for a systematic evaluation it may be useful to compare the ETS doctrinal statement with the doctrinal statement of another evangelical group—another group that seeks to unite around evangelical truths a broad group of Christian scholars from varying denominational and theological perspectives. One potential group for such a comparison would be the Tyndale Fellowship in the United Kingdom. The Tyndale fellowship is supposed to be governed by the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) doctrinal basis, which also forms the doctrinal basis for affiliated student ministries and other groups (*Ed. note: A copy of the UCCF statement appears in the appendix at the end of this article*). One look at the two statements shows immediately which one is more thorough since the ETS statements consists of 43 words while the UCCF statement consists of over 300 words. The two points of the ETS statement are basically covered in UCCF points 1 and 3. That leaves 9 other points that the Tyndale Fellowship considers essential and tests for membership that apparently are

not considered so by the generally more conservative ETS. What are these other points?:

- The sovereignty of God (UCCF pt. 2)
- The plight of humanity—the fall, universal guilt, and God’s wrath (UCCF pt. 4)
- The incarnation, virgin birth, humanity, crucifixion, bodily resurrection, and current reign of Jesus Christ (UCCF pt. 5)
- Salvation only in Christ’s sacrificial and substitutionary atonement (UCCF pt. 6)
- Salvation by grace through faith, not works; the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (UCCF pt. 7)
- The work of the Spirit in conversion and sanctification (UCCF pt. 8 & 9)
- The church (UCCF pt. 10)
- The personal return of Christ with final judgment and reward (UCCF pt. 11)

Surely these are crucial points that have been historically recognized as hallmarks of orthodox, evangelical Christianity. Indeed it is apparent that the UCCF statement emerges from the creeds of the early church (“orthodox”) and the Reformation (“evangelical”). Can we relinquish any of these points? Surely not. There may be differences on how some of these truths work out but on the basics truths we surely can and must agree. Is an evangelical doctrinal statement without these truths adequate?

Someone might respond by saying that it can be assumed that anyone desiring to affiliate with ETS will affirm these other truths. Perhaps that was the assumption of the past. However, it becomes increasingly clear that nothing can be assumed. This point was acknowledged previously when the Trinitarian statement was added to the original one line doctrinal statement. Doctrinal statements should make clear our basic assumptions, not assume

them.

Someone might also argue that if one affirms inerrancy and the Trinity, then these other points will naturally follow. However, this is simply not so, as the second part of this paper will now show.

Could Non-Evangelicals Sign the ETS Statement?

With so many key doctrines left out of the statement, one might wonder who could sign this statement. Who could possibly sign this statement, but would not normally be considered an evangelical? I propose to bring before you an array of potential new members for ETS, both modern and historical. These examples serve a dual purpose: (1) they show that affirmation of inerrancy and the Trinity do not necessarily result in affirmation of other key evangelical doctrines and (2) as a result the current ETS doctrinal statement does not provide an appropriate “evangelical” boundary.

Exhibit A: Roman Catholics

I began this project with the hunch that a conservative Catholic could sign this statement. Catholics are clearly Trinitarian so there is no problem with the second sentence of the ETS statement. It has been suggested to me that the statement on Scripture would exclude Catholics because it upholds *sola scriptura*. However, this is not entirely clear. The statement only says, “The Bible alone ... is the Word of God written.” Catholics could easily consent to that. It does not say that the Bible is “the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour” as the UCCF statement does. The UCCF language places Scripture above tradition, reason and the Magisterium, but it is not found in the ETS statement (nor does the

statement define the Bible as excluding the apocrypha). Since there is no discussion of the gospel, the key sticking point with Roman Catholicism, I believed there was no compelling reason why a Roman Catholic could not sign the ETS statement.

I then tested this hypothesis in a number of interviews with established, Roman Catholic scholars and theologians. I sent them the doctrinal statement acknowledging that some terminology was foreign to them but asking if they could affirm these truths as written. A number said the “Bible alone” statement made them suspicious, but if one simply took the statement as written without making inferences they could affirm the doctrinal statement. Others gladly and firmly affirmed the statement. For example Dr. Peter Kreeft of Boston College wrote,

Of course I affirm your statement. You Protestants affirm it only because we Catholics defined it first. Not only the canon of scripture but also the doctrine that it is inerrant and that it is the only inerrant written Word of God, were first formulated and taught, and still are, by the Catholic Church. The same goes for the Trinity. It was partly to find the historical foundation for these doctrines, their continuity with Christ and the apostles (of whom He said, “he who hears you, hears Me”) that I discovered that I had better accept the claims of the Catholic Church.

Also Dr. Tom Howard wrote,

... any orthodox Catholic would gladly affirm every word of that statement re the Bible. So long as it speaks of “the Word of God written”, that’s fine. As you say, it does not even touch on the infallibility of the Magisterium, etc. And the Catholics are much more profoundly trinitarian than the Protestants, continually referring all the Gospel mysteries to their fountainhead, which is the

mystery of the Trinity.

It is clear then that the ETS statement is broad enough to incorporate Roman Catholics. Indeed, Tom Howard sent a personal message to those who would be in attendance at the presentation of this paper: “Tell them all that Mother Church is patiently and lovingly awaiting their return!” If the doctrinal statement is our only boundary there is nothing to keep ETS from following Howard’s advice and embracing Rome. One would not technically be out of bounds in presenting papers and lobbying for an ETS endorsement of, among other things, indulgences. In fact, if we think in historical terms, ETS could hold in its membership both Martin Luther and Johann Tetzel, that infamous hawker of indulgences and the precursor of too many televangelists. One can imagine perusing the book tables at ETS and coming across Tetzel’s indulgences booth with him calling out, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!” Is this what is meant by evangelical?

Exhibit B: Eastern Orthodox

We turn now to exhibit B, the Orthodox church. The Orthodox are again clearly Trinitarian.⁴ One would assume that the potential dividing point here would again be Scripture. However, the same loop hole noted in the discussion of Catholicism applies here—tradition, the Apocrypha, etc., are not explicitly excluded.

I again tested my initial hypothesis, this time by email correspondence with an official representative of the Orthodox Church of America whom I contacted through their website. While this representative made it clear that some of the terminology was foreign to the Orthodox,

and that he would not call the doctrinal statement an “Orthodox statement,” still “there is nothing really objectionable in the paragraph.” He wrote, “the Orthodox Church believes that everything that is found within the Bible is true. It is the revealed truth and word of God. In this sense it is inerrant.” He goes on to say that they do not hold to “literal interpretation” and as an example says they have no concern over the debate of whether the days of creation were 24 hour days. This affirmation of inerrancy would seem to be at home in ETS.

Again since there is no discussion of salvation or of the Bible as the supreme authority for life and practice, Orthodox Christians could fit within the ETS doctrinal statement. Rather than a distinct, well-defined group, then, we are approaching an ecumenical movement!

Exhibit C: Historical Heretics

To this point the examples given come from groups who, while not typically considered evangelical, do fall within the orthodox trajectory of Christianity. For further examples we turn to explicit heretics who could conceivably become ETS members in good standing.

First we turn to the Docetists, those heirs of Gnosticism, who in one way or another denied the full humanity of Christ, including such luminaries as Apollinarius, fourth-century bishop of Laodicea; Nestorius, fifth-century bishop of Constantinople; and the adherents of Eutychianism. These teachings were condemned as heresy by the early councils, but the ETS doctrinal statement would not exclude them. While the doctrinal statement strongly affirms the deity of Christ, it says nothing—*nothing*—about His humanity. These heretics usually

advanced their position in defense of the deity of Christ, and they appear to have held the high view of Scripture common to the early church (though of course the term, “inerrancy,” was not in use at the time). Thus, it appears these early heretics, and any modern day equivalents, could easily join ETS. First John 4 equates denial of the incarnation of Christ with the spirit of antichrist, but this antichrist spirit is compatible with the ETS doctrinal statement. One might argue that a belief in inerrancy would require one to take seriously 1 John 4, and, thus, these heretics would be excluded. However, if these historical heretics could find a way to get around 1 John 4 while still affirming a high view of Scripture, people today can do so as well.

Furthermore, it is commonly noted that this docetic teaching undermines not only the incarnation but also the atonement and the resurrection. However, this raises no concerns with the ETS statement since it also fails to address the atonement and the resurrection.

Next, and even worse, we turn to Pelagius, the heretic of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, who denied human depravity and argued that it is possible for people to meet and even exceed God’s standards apart from grace. His teachings were roundly condemned by both Augustine and Jerome and officially condemned at the Council of Carthage. However, since Pelagius seems to have held a high view of Scripture and was Trinitarian, he could have signed the ETS doctrinal statement. The idea of earning salvation and downgrading grace is repugnant historically to evangelicals, but nothing in the doctrinal statement prohibits such teaching. Thus, there is a place for Pelagianism within the current ETS doctrinal

statement. This is shocking! Furthermore, we must not believe that explicit, bold-faced Pelagianism is dead. A quick scan of the internet proves this teaching is alive and well. One example will suffice. At www.brojed.org you can find information about evangelist “Bro. Jed” who claims to be “America’s #1 campus evangelist,” having “preached on over 700 colleges and universities in all 50 states and abroad.” In fact the website features a quote from a college paper which says, “Brother Jed has become an American legend. A worldwide computer network monitors his progress. He has spawned a flock of fans who, in comparison to the fanatical followers of the Grateful Dead, call themselves ‘Jed-Heads.’” The website touts him as the Jerry Springer of evangelists. What does this apparently popular evangelist preach? The website contains a full document where Bro. Jed defends and advances Pelagianism. Yet, in email correspondence with me Bro. Jed has affirmed inerrancy and the Trinity. Thus, Bro. Jed could affiliate with the Evangelical Theological Society. For all I know Bro. Jed could be with us today!

Examples of this sort could be multiplied and no doubt some of you may be thinking of others. For example, even Origen’s universalism is not out of bounds with the ETS statement. These examples will suffice to show that many things beyond the pale of traditional evangelicalism and indeed beyond the pale of historical orthodoxy can find a place within the current ETS doctrinal statement.

Conclusion

What, then, shall we do? Some are saying we need to add a statement on the knowledge of God in response to openness theism. However, while openness

theism is a problem, for ETS it is only a symptom of a larger problem—an inadequate doctrinal statement.

In the wardrobe of doctrinal statements the ETS statement is a bikini. The claim is that it covers only the essentials but, in my opinion, some important parts remain uncovered. We do not simply need a new swatch of material to cover this or that issue. There are simply too many areas where we are indecently exposed. If we add only one patch we will be annually adding more patches as different embarrassing holes are revealed. No, the time has come to exchange our bikini for a full garment. We need a full-orbed doctrinal statement and we need it soon. Furthermore, we ought not seek to create such a statement *ex nihilo*. Why not adopt the UCCF statement with the simple addition of inerrancy to the statement on Scripture. The UCCF statement appears to have been molded along the lines of the Apostle’s Creed, and informed by the creeds of the early church and Reformation. Indeed I am told that originally the statement was always accompanied with a mention that it was to be understood in line with the historic catholic and Reformation creeds. We could use this by-line as well. The use of the UCCF statement might also be useful in providing a common statement of belief between evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Whatever we do, surely we must act now. In a world of uncertainty and increasing theological ambiguity, let ETS sound a sure and certain note. As I see it there are numerous, clear, strong reasons for totally revamping the ETS doctrinal statement, beginning in this annual meeting; and there are no significant reasons for delay or inactivity. If I am wrong, you now have opportunity to correct me. If I

am right, what then shall we do?

Epilogue

In the past few years since this paper was originally delivered, my conviction that these issues warrant keen and prompt attention has only deepened. The recent debate in ETS over open theism demonstrated that we cannot rest on a general consent on the intentions of the original authors of the doctrinal statement. If the meaning of inerrancy is not clear, why should we assume that affirmation of these key doctrines is clear? A proposal is coming in this year's annual meeting (2004) for a statement clarifying the definition of inerrancy. While useful, this is simply a small patch on our skimpy garment. Earlier in the paper I suggested the ETS doctrinal statement was like a chain link fence without the chain links. Adding a clarifying element on inerrancy is simply placing another post in the row of posts that still lack any chain links. The time is ripe for a full scale revision of the doctrinal statement. Are there any compelling reasons for failing to act? As argued here there are examples of broadly evangelical statements that could be used without any danger of excluding current constituents of ETS. There is a need. There is a solution. All that is needed is the resolve to act.

Appendix:

UCCF-RTSF Doctrinal Statement

1. There is one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. God is sovereign in creation, revelation, redemption, and final judgment.
3. The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behavior.
4. Since the fall, the whole of human-

kind is sinful and guilty, so that everyone is subject to God's wrath and condemnation.

5. The Lord Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, is fully God; he was born of a virgin; his humanity is real and sinless; he died on the cross, was raised bodily from death and is now reigning over heaven and earth.

6. Sinful human beings are redeemed from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin only through the sacrificial death once for all time of their representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the only mediator between them and God.

7. Those who believe in Christ are pardoned of all their sins and accepted in God's sight only because of the righteousness of Christ credited to them; this justification is God's act of undeserved mercy, received solely by trust in him and not by their own efforts.

8. The Holy Spirit alone makes the work of Christ effective to individual sinners, enabling them to turn to God from their sin and to trust in Jesus Christ.

9. The Holy Spirit lives in all those he has regenerated. He makes them increasingly Christlike in character and behavior and gives them power for their witness in the world.

10. The one holy universal church is the Body of Christ, to which all true believers belong.

11. The Lord Jesus Christ will return in person, to judge everyone, to execute God's just condemnation on those who have not repented and to receive the redeemed to eternal glory.

ENDNOTES

¹See for example his *Evangelicals in Search of Identity* (Waco: Word Books, 1976).

²Quoted in Darrell Turner, "Carl Henry

Critiques Evangelical Movement that He Helped to Shape," *The American Baptist* 184 (March 1986): 10.

³Special acknowledgement is due to Dr. Carl Trueman, formerly of the University of Aberdeen and currently at Westminster Theological Seminary, for the conversations which originally spurred the idea of this paper.

⁴Neither the ETS nor UCCF statements mention the issue of procession within the Trinity which has been a key dividing point between the Western and Eastern churches.