

TEMPTATIONS OF AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIAN

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The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) has come a long way since its first meeting at the downtown Cincinnati YMCA in 1949. Yet, from its inception, the Society was formed for a distinct, confessional purpose. Indeed, speaking of the Society's first meeting, Carl F. H. Henry described the formation of the ETS as "a convocation of evangelical scholars that would encourage conservative theological literature."¹ This Society has maintained that commitment to evangelical identity. It *must* maintain that commitment.

Moreover, the ETS specifically encouraged a renaissance in evangelical publishing and scholarship. That came as an honest response to the absence of such scholarship from evangelicals in North America. During the 1930s and 1940s, evangelicals struggled to produce scholarship that was distinctively evangelical in character. The ETS was established, in the main, as an attempt to open the floodgates of scholarship among evangelical Christians.

As Henry recounted:

When the summons went out in December 1949, calling together evangelical faculty members in the American schools for a discussion of the predicament of modern theology and the possible organization of what has since been denominated as the Evangelical Theological Society, there was a gratifying response. Men gathered in Cincinnati from the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard and their stature and numbers spoke well for the future of evangelical theology in the nation. Historic Christian theism had not been reduced in our times to a possession only of unlettered disciples.²

Henry spoke of the theological urgency already clear by the middle of the twentieth century. Evangelicalism, by Henry's estimation, faced an internal issue that undermined the doctrinal depth of Protestant orthodoxy. In an address Henry delivered at the first meeting of the ETS, he argued that the gathering highlighted what he called a "basic evangelical failure." He wrote, "The concentration on evangelism and missions in terms of the redemptive uniqueness of Christianity, which had become the exclusive task of the evangelical enterprise ... had been permitted to obscure the responsibility of evangelicals for a competent literature reflective of

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¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 123.

² Carl F. H. Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1950), 7.

the biblical outlook.”³ Yet, the 1949 meeting brought opportunities for the development of a robust evangelical theological corpus. The “liberal perspective,” Henry declared, had collapsed. As a consequence, Henry charged his audience of evangelical scholars to fill that vacuum with a “competent literature reflective of the biblical outlook.”⁴

Henry’s exhortations prefigured the main oration given by the first president of the ETS, an address by Clarence Bouma of Calvin Theological Seminary. He opened his address declaring,

We have met here in our capacity as evangelical theological teachers, as orthodox scholars. We are interested in promoting theological scholarship upon the presuppositions of a genuine evangelical Christianity. The need for, and value of, biblical and theological discussion societies for the promotion and development of theological scholarship is, I presume, generally granted.⁵

Bouma crafted a vision for a distinctly evangelical and orthodox society—one at odds with the predominant associations in the theological academy. The ETS was to be authentically evangelical, suggesting from the beginning that the ETS was not a society *about* evangelicals, but *of* evangelicals. Bouma stated that the fundamental reason for the formation of the ETS arose from the “radical divergence” that existed between the “basic presuppositions and methodologies of evangelical theology,” and the convictions of the modernist theological perspective. “The antithesis between these two viewpoints,” he argued, “is so basic and far reaching that the need for scholarly theological societies on a genuine evangelical basis is beyond dispute.”⁶

To set the Society apart, the ETS immediately adopted a doctrinal statement around which its members committed themselves. It set the basis of the Society’s theological pursuit and the convictions that marked their task together as evangelical scholars. The original statement read, “The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the autographs.”

That declaration came in 1949—Harry Truman was president of the United States and World War II had concluded only five years prior. It was a time of great national energy and the building of institutions. For example, the National Association of Evangelicals was founded in 1942 and Fuller Theological Seminary was established in 1947.

Thus, the first meeting of the ETS came in a particular historical context at a time of a resurgent Christianity and public theism in the United States. It seemed that America had united after the war with a civil religion that was framed around a basic shared theism. This provided the foundation for American culture and, to a certain degree, was a high-water mark of cultural Protestantism. Consider that by 1955, the words “under God” became part of the Pledge of Allegiance. The intel-

³ Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology*, 7.

⁴ Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology*, 7.

⁵ Clarence Bouma, “Orthodox Theological Scholarship,” *The Calvin Forum* (February 1950): 131.

⁶ Bouma, “Orthodox Theological Scholarship,” 131.

lectual climate, moreover, was one of the superiority of the West and the victory of democracy over dictatorship, though certainly within the shadow of a looming Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union. The stage was set for the American Century: an age of science, technology, and the inexorable spread of democracy around the globe. American evangelicals, along with their fellow Americans, were confident as they looked to the future.

At this time, mainline Protestantism sat in the driver's seat of the culture. A census of the denominational makeup of the House of Representatives, the United States Senate, and the United States Supreme Court would have revealed the dominance of liberal Protestantism in America. The cover stories of *Time* magazine, for example, included Reinhold Niebuhr in 1948, Paul Tillich in 1959, and Karl Barth in 1962. Evangelicals were far from the structures of power and cultural influence.

Increasingly, evangelicals saw themselves and their institutions as both neglected and lacking in aspiration. They were not recognized as important fixtures for American culture or intellectual prominence. This was not only evident in the halls of Congress or by what faces populated the covers of *Time*, but was also measured by the power of theological institutions. The mainline denominations dominated in terms of wealth and endowments. They also had amassed large student bodies and burgeoning enrollments. Evangelical institutions, on the other hand, were incredibly small by comparison, and far less wealthy.

Yet, the situation for mainline Protestantism at the middle of the twentieth century ought to serve as a humble warning. Things do not stay as they are. The past several decades bear witness to the collapse of enrollments in liberal seminaries (particularly in ministry training programs), the expansion of theological studies into various worlds of religious studies and social activism, and precipitous decline of church membership in those denominations. The world of mainline theological education is decreasingly theological and the mainline is now sidelined. We have witnessed a great reversal between the mainline and evangelical seminaries. The disparity between the two becomes even more remarkable if you look at those presently enrolled who are training for ministry in a local church.

Culturally, however, evangelicalism has not replaced mainline Protestantism in terms of dominance or influence. In fact, we have witnessed an undeniable age of radical secularization. Secularization does not denote the absence of religious reference or spirituality, but rather the decline and eventual loss of the binding authority of theism.⁷ Charles Taylor's work, *A Secular Age*, spoke about secularization as essentially the hallmark of the modern age. He queried, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy but even inescapable."⁸ The intellectual furniture of our entire society has been fundamentally changed, and the conditions of cognitive activity have been similarly altered.

⁷ See R. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Gathering Storm: Secularism, Culture, and the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020).

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007), 25.

Taylor wrote of this, arguing for the three successive conditions of belief. The first condition was “impossible not to believe.” The second was “possible not to believe.” Finally, however, comes “impossible to believe.” In surveying the intellectual class, the elites, and the cultural engines of production, Taylor concluded that by the twenty-first century, Western society had undergone a comprehensive alteration in worldview reflected in the institutions of society. From the universities to the signaling of major corporations, we are living in a secular age.⁹ With reference to any substantial theism, the larger culture has moved into Taylor’s third intellectual condition—for the elites, it is impossible to believe.

Secularism can manifest itself as open hostility towards revealed religion. Yet, as Terry Eagleton has argued, “Societies become secular, not when they dispense with religion altogether, but when they are no longer particularly agitated by it”—when Christianity becomes something of a “personal pastime like breeding gerbils or collecting porcelain.”¹⁰ Eagleton, furthermore, contended that the evidence of this kind of secularization came down to the loss of theological and religious conviction in the “everyday practices” of the people.¹¹

Crawford Gribben has provided tangible evidence supporting Egleton’s thesis in *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland*. Gribben noted that about ninety percent of Ireland’s population attended weekly church services in the 1970s. Today, that number has plummeted to eighteen percent. The Catholic Church in Ireland cannot replace its own priests, which means they have to import clergy from places like Poland and Africa. The priests, furthermore, now wear more secular clothing when they walk on the streets for fear of being accosted or maligned because of their views on any number of cultural and moral issues (and residual outrage over sexual abuse scandals). Here is an example of a nation that was once invincibly Catholic and overwhelmingly theistic. In the matter of a few decades, however, it has become one of the most secular societies in the world. Gribben argued: “If current trends continue, some of the traditional moral claims of Christianity will cease to be socially acceptable. And in the absence of robust free speech legislation, the public statement of those claims may no longer be permitted.”¹²

From its inception in 1949, the ETS rooted itself in a distinctly evangelical identity—as a community of scholars dedicated to the promulgation and nourishment of robust, orthodox theology. The culture, however, has changed dramatically over the past seven decades. Given the realities of our present cultural moment and secularization, it is important for the ETS to ask a vital question about its doctrinal and theological convictions: Is there a difference in what it meant for the Society to declare, “This is what we believe,” in 1949 as compared to 2022?

Those who gathered in 1949 believed they were living at a hinge moment in history. They could look back over thirty years and see a world that had come out

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, esp. part 5, pp. 539–772.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1.

¹¹ Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 7.

¹² Crawford Gribben, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021),

of two world wars and a nation that had endured the Great Depression. They also looked to the near future—an era marked by the space age, scientific advancement, and the realities of the Cold War. It was at that juncture that a modest gathering of evangelicals banded together to form a confessional academic society.

As we look at the world around us, we must recognize the disappearance of cognitive certainty. To declare, “This is what I believe,” and to live by that statement without equivocation is scandalous in many circles. Yet, the ETS requires that we believe *something*—indeed, some very specific doctrine. It was founded upon that ideal. We must believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures. We must affirm our belief in the Trinity. Throughout the Society’s history, we have also seen the adoption of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

This has been a society defined both in terms of what we are *not* and what we *do* affirm with conviction. In 1949, the gathering of scholars understood that they were *not* fundamentalists, nor were they modernists. They *were* evangelicals.

What that meant, however, in 1949 must now be framed by the cultural and intellectual developments now facing this Society. Given the pressures of modernity, I think the ETS could fall into four particular temptations—the temptations that press upon an evangelical theologian. I am determined to speak about these temptations, sensing their urgency in these times.

THE TEMPTATION OF FUNDAMENTALISM

The ETS emerged in part as a direct response to fundamentalism. Whatever the “evangelical” meant in the “Evangelical Theological Society,” the first generation of ETS members understood that they were *not* fundamentalists. Certainly, the evangelicals of the Society shared theological convictions with what they labeled fundamentalism, namely, the inerrancy of Scripture, the historicity of miracles, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, his return in glory, and the existence of the supernatural. The shared theological tradition between evangelicals and fundamentalists explained why the mainline Protestants dismissed the self-identifying “evangelicals” as nothing more than fundamentalists with smiles. However, as the evangelicals understood themselves, they still held to the fundamentals of the faith, placing them in league with the fundamentalist movement. For mainline Protestants, an evangelical was just a fundamentalist with a better attitude—and with higher aspirations for influence.

Fundamentalists, however, held to a doctrine of separationism. The founders of the ETS rejected the fundamentalist idea of separationism. There was a sense that theological orthodoxy along with cultural engagement were necessary fixtures of what it meant to be an evangelical. Indeed, by 1949, it was assumed by the leaders of evangelicalism that fundamentalism had failed. The quintessential quote came from Harold Ockenga, who said, “For decades, fundamentalism has proved itself impotent to change the theological trend in the ecclesiastical scene. Its lack of influence has relegated it to the peripheral and subsidiary movements of Protestant-

ism. Whenever fundamentalism and modernism came into test in a theological struggle, fundamentalism lost every major battle.”¹³

Thus, those who gathered at the start of the ETS in 1949 consciously rejected the failure of fundamentalism as they saw it. Fundamentalists failed to engage the larger world of thought, thereby reducing the influence of conservative Christianity. The founders of the Society and other observers understood this theological failure to be endemic to fundamentalism. This understanding contributed to the evangelical ambition to put fundamentalism in the past and then to build a great evangelical empire.

The temptation towards an intellectual isolationism, however, has in no way dissipated. Yet, it may well be that in the present a greater temptation stems from a radical rejection of fundamentalism to the point that evangelicals risk theological accommodation as we seek the intellectual respect and affirmation of the larger culture. We are tempted, in a rush to reject the fundamentalist impulse, to blur the lines of what makes us distinctly evangelical. Doctrinal clarity is surrendered in order to earn accolades from the secular academy. In other words, an evangelical can be only so non-fundamentalist and remain evangelical. While evangelical theology, biblical scholarship, and philosophy have made strides and gains in the broader academy, the day will probably never come when the systematic theology students at Harvard Divinity School confront a textbook written by a member of the Evangelical Theological Society.

THE TEMPTATION OF ATHEISM

This may seem an odd temptation for the evangelical theologian. The struggle, however, is not that we might actually become atheists, but that we think of our Society and our task as a mere mediating position between belief and unbelief—that we take on a similar ambivalence found within the broader culture on matters of doctrine and theology.

Indecision or uncertainty, however, is not an option for the evangelical theologian. In fact, it is not an option for the honest atheist—and one of their own understood this quite well. Samuel Harris, one of the four leading figures in the New Atheist movement, once penned an open letter to American Christians. He concluded that evangelicals and atheists actually share something in common—we agree on an inescapable question. The most important question anyone could ask is whether or not God exists. Harris wrote,

You believe that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that only those who place their faith in Jesus will find salvation after death. As a Christian, you believe these propositions not because they make you feel good, but because you think they are true. Before I point out some of the problems with these beliefs, I would like to acknowledge that there are many points on which you and I agree. We agree, for instance, that if one of us is right, the other

¹³ Harold John Ockenga, “Theological Education,” *Bulletin of Fuller Theological Seminary* 4.4 (1954): 4. Online: <https://cdm16677.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16677coll11/id/6952/rec/17>.

is wrong. The Bible is either the word of God, or it isn't. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation (John 14:6), or he does not. We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so. If Christianity is correct, and I persist in my unbelief, I should expect to suffer the torments of hell. Worse still, I have persuaded others, and many close to me, to reject the very idea of God. They too will languish in "eternal fire" (Matthew 25:41). If the basic doctrine of Christianity is correct, I have misused my life in the worst conceivable way.... So let us be honest with ourselves: in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.¹⁴

This is an honest and correct assessment of the issues at stake between belief and unbelief. The ETS was founded, in part, as a declaration that there is indeed a faith once for all delivered to the saints. While our nearest enemy was then theological liberalism, our present struggle is within the larger context of modern secularism. Make no mistake: no credible position exists between belief and unbelief. Sam Harris put the matter bluntly and clearly. The questions we seek to ask and to answer remain the most important questions any human could possibly ask. The temptation of atheism is not necessarily a temptation to join conscious unbelief, but to resign to the kind of cultural and atheistic ambivalence that fails to recognize the gravity of what this Society set out to achieve, all those years ago in 1949.

THE TEMPTATION OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

To be evangelicals, we must provide an answer as to why we are not Roman Catholics. Specifically, the issue of authority becomes paramount for evangelicals to consider—if authority is not found in the magisterium or the pope, where then do we find and ground authority?

The Catholic looks to the tradition and to its popes and councils. Catholic scholars (or, at least, conservatives among them) place their hope in centuries of continual argument and doctrinal trusteeship. Within the context of the first ETS, moreover, the United States was about to experience the burgeoning growth of Catholicism, in numbers and in cultural influence. It was the era of Catholic Neo-Scholasticism, which was first a European movement that later influenced America. The latter half of the twentieth century represented a Catholic renaissance of sorts, with figures such as Archbishop Fulton Sheen and (convert) Cardinal Avery Dulles exerting tremendous impact. Catholic scholars, fueled in part by the winds of Vatican II, produced a prodigious industry of scholarship and intellectual activity.

The temptation presented by Roman Catholicism for evangelicals arose most urgently in the earliest years of the twenty-first century, as the forces of secularism wrought havoc not only on American culture, but upon the foundations of a binding theism that had marked American public life and civil religion. There was, therefore, a natural desire to try and find a place of doctrinal security—a safehouse

¹⁴ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 3–5.

of theological and ethical stability. The output and influence of popes like John Paul II and Benedict XVI were impressive, even to many evangelicals.

To be clear, I think the answer to “Why not Rome?” is abundantly clear. To turn to Rome, I believe, is to abandon the gospel—to turn to a false church based upon false and idolatrous presuppositions.

Yet, I also understand that it might help evangelicals sleep at night if we could trust in a magisterium—trust in some authority that could bear the theological stewardship for us. To be an evangelical, however, is to come to the realization that we do not have much of a backstop. There is no magisterium.

Notwithstanding this, we have no alternative but to remain genuinely and unapologetically evangelical. We are left with the Bible and the Bible alone, and that is more than sufficient. Indeed, the Bible is the Word of God, written. It alone is authoritative; it alone is true; it alone is infallible and inerrant. Whatever the temptation, we must, as evangelical theologians, commit ourselves to the singular authority of God’s revelation in the Scriptures. As Martin Luther famously came to know, the evangelical theologian has nowhere else to go.

THE TEMPTATION OF PROTESTANT LIBERALISM

Protestant liberalism existed in the foreground of the first meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. The members who gathered in 1949 asserted a distinct identity that, on the one hand, rejected the fundamentalist impulse towards isolation while simultaneously refuting the theological errors of liberal Protestantism. Fundamentalism was seen as a temptation. Liberal Protestantism was seen as the enemy.

The temptation towards theological liberalism, however, is not only substantial but attitudinal. As a belief system, Protestant liberalism arose as an answer to the mocking of a more “enlightened” and scientific culture. Decade by decade, doctrine by doctrine, liberal Protestants tried to chart a way that made Christianity palatable to the cultural and intellectual pressures of the day. That challenge was already culturally prevalent during the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher. That challenge is with us still to this day, but with greater intensity.

If we buy into the substantial temptations of liberalism, we lose orthodox theology. That will be the same result, moreover, if we give into the attitudinal temptations. Indeed, the ETS will surrender its convictions and its doctrinal commitments if it attempts to create a more plausible, salvageable Christianity that will enjoy acceptance, whether in the halls of academia or among the engines of cultural production.

Our task is not to salvage the Christian faith—our responsibility is to hold fast to *all* that is contained in the Scriptures and to contend for that faith until the end. In one sense, this is a daunting task. In another sense, however, it is exhilarating.

The longer I live, the more I recognize that the chief responsibility of any generation is to pass on the faith, intact, to the coming generation. The task of the ETS in the coming years will require more theological conviction, not less. It will

demand the resistance of these temptations that will, no doubt, continue to grow in intensity.

This means, at a practical level, that membership in the ETS must mean something. If we are to stand for the truth once for all delivered to the saints, that commitment must carry the weight of doctrinal accountability, theological fidelity, and a rejection of moral ambiguity. This Society and its beliefs stand in direct contradistinction to the currents of modernity. This will require that the Evangelical Theological Society remain genuinely evangelical, in every sense of the word.

This conviction to stand may also require more of our doctrinal statements that clarify to the world where we stand as evangelical scholars and theologians. For example, there is nothing in the present bylaws or commitments of this Society that would prevent a presidential address to be delivered by someone who identifies with a gender contrary to his or her chromosomal structure. (Try explaining that sentence to one of the Society's founders.)

We face inevitable challenges, and challenges must be met. Our theological activity and production, our community as scholars, thinkers, and theologians, will stand or fall upon whether or not we face the tasks ahead of us with faithfulness to the gospel and an unwavering, uncompromising commitment to the Word of God.

May God, the great judge of all, find this Society faithful and up to the task. The temptations are real. We must, therefore, run this race with endurance, until the end, for the glory of God.