

The Presidents' Corner

The Presidents' Corner provides a venue for current and past Society presidents to speak to the membership on key issues facing the Society, the academy, and the church. In this issue we hear from Stanley Gundry, ETS President, 1978.

Abstract

In the last business session of the 2015 national Meeting of ETS a set of four resolutions was moved and passed that affirmed human dignity and worth, marriage as a life-long union of one man and one woman, sexual intimacy as reserved for such marriages, and an affirmation of distinct traits of manhood and womanhood as an unchangeable gift that constitutes personal identity. In the aftermath some ETS members expressed dismay that any ETS member would vote against passage of the resolutions. Others, I among them, were shocked that resolutions of this nature would be proposed and passed by a substantial majority. In this open letter to ETS members, I explain the problems with the resolutions and the real issue at stake: Will ETS be true to its Doctrinal Basis and its Statement of Purpose? Hence, my open letter to ETS members, Whence and Whither ETS?

WHENCE AND WHITHER ETS? An Open Letter to the Members of ETS

Stanley N. Gundry
President of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1978

The following resolutions were adopted in the last business session of the 2015 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society:

- 1.) (1) We affirm that all persons are created in the image and likeness of God and thus possess inherent dignity and worth.
- 2.) (2) We affirm that marriage is the covenantal union of one man and one woman, for life.
- 3.) (3) We affirm that Scripture teaches that sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage as defined above. This excludes all other forms of sexual intimacy.
- 4.) (4) We affirm that God created men and women, imbued with the distinct traits of manhood and womanhood, and that each is an unchangeable gift of God that constitutes personal identity.

In the immediate aftermath of this business session, many ETS members were deeply troubled that any ETS members would vote against these resolutions. The post-ETS blogs of a few ETS members and the comments of their followers expressed dismay that anyone who claims to be evangelical and subscribes to the Doctrinal Basis of the Society would cast a negative vote.

But there was also a significant minority that opposed and voted against these resolutions. These members were troubled that such resolutions would be introduced, that they were not ruled out of order or at least tabled, and that they were passed by a significant majority of those present and voting. I was among the minority that voted "Nay."

Why? It is a question that deserves to be answered because I am convinced that the future of ETS depends on our repudiation of what happened in that session and that ETS members must realize that resolutions of this nature are not consistent with the nature of the Society. In fact, the

issue at stake is whether or not ETS will remain committed to the original purpose for which ETS was formed. I have not taken even an informal poll of others who voted against the resolutions, but I have discussed the matter with enough members to give me confidence that many members agree that the future of ETS is at stake.

My history within ETS uniquely qualifies me to address the concerns these resolutions raise. I have been immersed in the culture and affairs of ETS since my student days in the 1950s and 1960s. I knew on a first-name basis many of the first-generation ETS members. I was taught by some of them. I have been a full member of the Society since about 1968. I have attended most national meetings since 1970, and in the 1970s I was an active participant in the Midwestern section of ETS, serving also as president of that section and on its leadership committee. Then in 1978 I served as the national president of ETS and planned the program for the 30th Annual Meeting of ETS in collaboration with Dr. Kenneth Kantzer, followed by serving the allotted time on the ETS Executive Committee. Relevant to the concerns at hand, my first-hand knowledge of the workings of ETS and its Constitution, most especially the Purpose and Doctrinal Basis of the Society as stated in the Constitution, and my acquaintance with many of the founders and first-generation members of ETS give me insight into their intentions in forming the Society.

So why did I vote against the resolutions? *Because the resolutions went beyond the Doctrinal Basis of the Society and were inconsistent with the clearly stated Purpose of ETS.* But I run ahead of myself and it is a bit more complicated than that. So let me start at the beginning, the resolutions themselves.

First, it is unfortunate that the resolutions were presented at the last business meeting and then discussed and voted on as a group. My understanding is that those responsible for the agenda did not anticipate that the resolutions would be controversial and so they were scheduled to be considered in the last business session. This was not inconsistent as such with the ETS Constitution or Bylaws, but in a case like this, members should have had advance warning of the nature of the resolutions and ample opportunity to discuss them among themselves and on the floor of the business meeting. Further, many members had already left the conference or were absent for other reasons. Thus, members could not deliberately consider in advance whether or not voting on such resolutions was even consistent with the Purpose of ETS; and, given the time constraints of the program, there was not sufficient time to debate the merits of the individual resolutions and to vote up or down on each one.

The resolutions were so poorly stated that they needed such careful consideration. For instance, the second resolution ignored the question of biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage. And given the diversity of views on divorce and remarriage within ETS, is this really a question on which ETS should be taking a position even in the form of a resolution? What about the third resolution? Viewed superficially, who could possibly object to that resolution? But looked at more closely, “sexual intimacy” and “all other forms of sexual intimacy” are squishy descriptors. Are they intended to refer to physical sexual intimacy, and if so, are holding hands, kissing, or hugging forbidden? My fundamentalist and separatist father would have thought so, but what about the membership of ETS? Would we have a consensus on that question?

And what about the fourth resolution affirming “distinct traits of manhood and womanhood”? While I suspect all members of ETS (even those of us who self-identify as biblical egalitarians) believe that men and women in many respects are complementary to one another, many of us also believe that the terms “manhood” and “womanhood” are reifications of socially and culturally conditioned patterns of behavior more than they are descriptors of biblically supported male and female characteristics. Rather than being biblically supported, the terms tend to refer to stereotypical lists of alleged gender characteristics to which men and women are

expected to conform. Even self-avowed complementarians have no consensus on what constitutes “manhood and womanhood,” so why would a scholarly society like ETS that includes both complementarians and egalitarians even take such a resolution seriously?

So I return to the opening statement of this first point—scheduling the resolutions for consideration as a group at the second business meeting without prior notice meant there was not adequate time to consider and debate the merits and wording of the resolutions and it made it impossible to carefully consider whether or not voting on such resolutions was even consistent with the Purpose of ETS.

Second, this broader issue needs to be considered by the Society. Is it even appropriate for resolutions to be introduced, debated, and voted on that go beyond the Doctrinal Basis and officially stated Purpose of the Society? I believe the answer is a clear and unequivocal “No!” Members tend to forget that ETS was never intended to have a doctrinal statement to which members had to subscribe. We have a “Doctrinal Basis,” one that originally had one affirmation: The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. Years later, the Trinitarian statement was added to the Doctrinal Basis out of concern that anti-Trinitarians such as Jehovah’s Witnesses might successfully claim membership in ETS. But even with that addition, it remains a Doctrinal Basis, not a doctrinal statement. Some members seem not to understand and/or remember the significance of the fact that we function as a scholarly society with a Doctrinal Basis. But even many who remember that we have a Doctrinal Basis all too easily and sloppily refer to it using the phrases “doctrinal basis” and “doctrinal statement” interchangeably, suggesting they do not really understand (or perhaps accept) the significance of the distinction. But this distinction is at the very heart and Purpose of ETS. A bit of historical context will be useful here.

When ETS was formed in 1949, evangelical biblical and theological scholarship was just beginning to emerge from its decline in the dark days of the modernist-fundamentalist debate and the loss of so many mainline denominations and associated colleges, seminaries, and missionary agencies to the takeover of these institutions by theological liberals. For at least fifteen or twenty years, fundamentalists and evangelicals at the local church and grassroots level had a profound suspicion of serious biblical and theological scholarship. But in the mid and late 1940s, this began to change as scholars who were willing to self-identify as fundamentalists (in the classic meaning of that term) and/or evangelical began to find each other, come together, and realize that in spite of all that divided them, they held one thing in common—the Bible and the Bible alone in its entirety is God’s Word written, it speaks truthfully on whatever it intends to say and teach, and hence it is the only rule for Christian faith and practice. Eventually in 1949 many of the fundamentalist and evangelical scholars who shared this conviction agreed there was a need for a scholarly society where members shared the same **basis** on which conservative scholarship and research should be discussed and debated. On that Doctrinal Basis, they formed the Evangelical Theological Society.

It is easy to forget, or perhaps many ETS members do not know, how deep and sometimes rancorous the divisions were that otherwise separated these same scholars. These divisions ranged from matters of church polity to biblical hermeneutics to the various loci of systematic theology. In fact, dispensational and amillennial theologians were accustomed to trading charges that the hermeneutical methods and theological systems of the other undermined the authority of Scripture. Scholars who practiced secondary separation risked their reputations if they joined with other evangelical scholars who practiced only primary separation or who were inclusivists. At least four of the ETS presidents in the first twenty years of the society would have been sympathetic to what is now known as biblical egalitarianism, a matter over which ETS members today have profound disagreements. Yet these scholars came together in ETS as

did Pentecostals and cessationists, believer-immersionists and paedo-sprinklers, Arminians and Wesleyans and Reformed and Lutheran, as well as those who held to congregational, or presbyterial, or episcopal church polity.

A quick scan of the listing of ETS presidents over the past sixty-seven years and the institutions they represented makes the same point. Schools represented range from Wycliffe College, to Dallas Theological Seminary, to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, to Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, to Moody Bible Institute. The theological spectrum represented by ETS presidents is also quite remarkable. As I look at the list I can identify at least twelve presidents associated with one of five or six varieties of Presbyterian and Reformed communions, thirteen who were dispensationalists, five who were covenant premillennialists, one Pentecostal, three Wesleyans, and twelve sympathetic with biblical egalitarianism.

Throughout its history, ETS has been a demonstration of the Purpose for which ETS was formed: 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.

So I return to the opening question and statement of my second point—“Is it even appropriate for resolutions to be introduced, debated, and voted on that go beyond the Doctrinal Basis and officially stated Purpose of the Society?” I believe the answer is a clear and unequivocal “No!” Why? Because such resolutions are inconsistent with the Purpose of ETS and the reason why we have a Doctrinal Basis and not a doctrinal statement.

Third, the introduction and passage of the four-fold resolution package and the internet conversations following the 67th Annual Meeting are symptomatic of the desire of some ETS members to move the Society in the direction of precise, doctrinal, and interpretive clarity and definition, ideally in the form of a doctrinal statement and other “position statements.” I am trained not only as a theologian but as a church historian; consequently I am inclined to be skeptical of conspiracy theories unless there is compelling evidence. Nevertheless, based on the evidence, some of us are now wondering if there is a conspiracy within ETS to:

- 1.) ease out biblical egalitarians,
- 2.) exclude women from the leadership of ETS,
- 3.) let qualified women scholars know they are not part of “the old boys network,”
- 4.) shut down discussion of contentious ethical and theological issues,
- 5.) marginalize those who do not come out on the “right side” of those issues,
- 6.) “pack” the nominating committee so as to get their compatriots in the positions of leadership,
- 7.) question the evangelical and inerrantist bona fides of those who ask hard questions and come up with answers that most of us are not persuaded by, and
- 8.) propose and pass a poorly framed set of four resolutions that makes the Society sound more like the Family Research Council or the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood than the intentionally diverse “medium for the oral and written expressions of thought and research in the general field of the theological disciplines as centered in the Scriptures” as stated in the ETS Purpose statement.

Lest I be misunderstood, I do believe that theological boundaries are important within the church and its institutions, and as an evangelical Protestant, I believe it is appropriate for churches and parachurch organizations to draw those boundary lines, based on their understanding of Scripture. But ETS is not a church and it was formed to serve a clearly defined purpose. It is significant that it takes an 80% majority vote to amend only three things in the ETS constitution—the Doctrinal Basis, the Society’s Purpose, and the requirement for an 80%

majority to amend the first two items. The founders of our Society could hardly have made it clearer that they regarded the Purpose and Doctrinal Basis of ETS to be essential to the organization they were creating.

Why is it important to guard the integrity of the original Purpose and Basis of ETS? I will answer with another question. What better forum is there for collegial discussion and debate of complementarianism and egalitarianism, open theism and classical theism and all points in between, eschatology, the “new perspective” on Paul, and yes, even the question of whether same-sex “marriages” can be defended biblically, than a forum where we have agreed to appeal to the sole source of authority for Christian faith and practice, the Bible, God’s Word written?

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