

Open Theism and
the Undermining of
Biblical Christianity

BEYOND THE BOUNDS

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WHY, WHEN, AND FOR WHAT SHOULD WE DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

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INTRODUCTION

Christian groups usually have doctrinal statements that define the “boundaries” of their organizations. How can they know whether to add new topics to their doctrinal statements from time to time? This is the question of drawing new boundaries.

I will consider four questions in this essay:

- A. Why should Christian organizations draw boundaries *at all*?
- B. Why should Christian organizations draw *new* boundaries?
- C. *When* should Christian organizations draw new boundaries?
- D. For *what doctrinal and ethical matters* should Christian organizations draw new boundaries?

A. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS DRAW BOUNDARIES *AT ALL*?

When I say “Christian organizations” I mean all kinds of organizations, certainly including both local churches and denominations, and also mission organizations, specialized ministries like Campus Crusade for Christ or Focus on the Family, educational institutions (including

Christian schools, colleges, and seminaries), other kinds of organizations like Christian book publishers, Christian radio stations, professional groups like the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), and so forth. The four questions I am asking here are relevant, I believe, for all Christian organizations.

By the term “boundaries” I am referring primarily to doctrinal statements that are enforced by an organization. Usually “enforcement” occurs when people are required to agree with a doctrinal statement either for membership or for certain kinds of leadership in that organization.¹

For example, churches and denominations hold ordination councils, and churches interview prospective pastors. These activities serve as means of enforcing their doctrinal statements. Theological seminaries and Christian colleges likewise interview prospective faculty members at length, asking if they agree with the institution’s statement of faith. Mission boards also interview prospective missionaries regarding their doctrinal soundness and allegiance to the doctrinal distinctives of the mission board. The Evangelical Theological Society (a professional society for evangelical scholars) simply requires that members annually sign an affirmation of the ETS doctrinal statement, and so there is a mild sort of enforcement by the “honor system,” and, to some extent, by peer pressure. Such doctrinal enforcement mechanisms, when they function correctly, tend to keep people who differ with the beliefs of the organization from gaining influence and making the organization into something different.

If someone is admitted to a position of influence and then changes his mind about what he believes (for example, if a pastor decides he no longer believes in the deity of Christ), then another kind of “enforcement” comes into effect. In such cases, Christian organizations usually have procedures to follow whereby a person who no longer holds to the organization’s beliefs can be removed from a position of influence.

But *why* should Christian organizations have such boundaries, such enforced doctrinal statements? There are several reasons.

¹ In addition to formal doctrinal statements, Christian organizations usually have some other policies and traditions that also serve as “boundaries” to protect the organization’s character and distinctives. Some of these other boundaries are written, some are oral, and some may merely be practiced by habit. What I say in this essay will also have some application to these less formal boundaries, but they are not the focus of my attention.

1. *False Teaching Harms the Church*

To say “false teaching harms the church” is perhaps just to state the obvious, but in a day marked by much pluralism and subjectivism it bears repeating. The very *existence* of the epistles in the New Testament testifies to the importance that the apostles placed on sound doctrine! In the epistles, sound doctrine is taught again and again, and error is implicitly or explicitly corrected. This is the case in every New Testament epistle.

I am not at this point defining *what kinds of false teaching* do such harm to the church, for that is a task that comes at the end of this essay. At this point it is enough to note that *some* false teaching harms the church (as it did in the first century), and the New Testament epistles give several examples of such harmful teaching.

Sometimes false doctrine in the early churches threatened the gospel itself. Paul was concerned that false teachers would come to the churches of Galatia, even preaching a “different gospel” (Gal. 1:6), in which case Paul says they should be “accursed” (vv. 8, 9).² And he told the Galatians that if they gave in to those who wanted to require circumcision, Christ would be of “no advantage” to them (Gal. 5:2). The implication is that salvation itself was at stake because people could not be saved through a false gospel.

False teaching was a continual threat in other churches as well. For example, Paul warned the elders at Ephesus that “fierce wolves” would come in, “not sparing the flock,” and that even from among the elders themselves, there would arise “men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30).

When writing to Timothy about the church at Ephesus, Paul said that those who teach a “different doctrine” (1 Tim. 6:3), far from promoting the peace and unity of the church, and far from giving the church greater insight through conversations about their novel ideas, actually harmed the church by their “unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth” (vv. 4-5). Paul also warned Timothy to

² Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

“avoid” the “irreverent babble and contradictions” of certain false teachers, for by professing what they called “knowledge,” Paul says that some of them had “*swerved from the faith*” (vv. 20-21). In his subsequent letter to Timothy, Paul again warned Timothy to “avoid” such “irreverent babble,” for, he said, “*it will lead people into more and more ungodliness*” (2 Tim. 2:16). In fact, Paul knew that this was already happening, for Hymenaeus and Philetus were “upsetting the faith of some” (vv. 17-18). He also warned that in latter times some would “*depart from the faith* by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1).

With respect to the churches in Crete, Paul wrote to Titus that elders had to be able both “to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). He knew that false teachers there were “upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach” (Titus 1:11).

Peter, in writing to probably hundreds of churches in “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1; cf. 2 Pet. 3:1), warned that false teachers would arise among the people, and that they would “secretly bring in *destructive heresies*” (2 Pet. 2:1), that “*many will follow their sensuality*,” and that “because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed” (v. 2).

Jude, in a similar way, urged his readers to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) because certain false teachers had “crept in unnoticed” and, far from being harmless, they were people who “pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

After reading such verses, we might wonder if any of us have the same kind of heart for purity of doctrine in our Christian organizations, and the same sort of sober apprehension of the destructiveness of false doctrine, that the New Testament apostles had in their hearts.

If we ever begin to doubt that false teaching is harmful to the church, or if we begin to become complacent about false doctrine, thinking that it is fascinating to ponder, stimulating to our thoughts, and worthwhile for discussion, then we should remind ourselves that in several cases the New Testament specifies that the ultimate source of many false teachings is Satan and his demons:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to *deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*. (1 Tim. 4:1)

And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from *the snare of the devil*, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:24-26)

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. (2 John 7)

2. If False Teaching Is Not Stopped, It Spreads and Does More and More Damage

Speaking personally, I think that my profession as a scholar contributes easily to a tendency to overlook the increasing damage that is done by false teaching when it is not corrected but is allowed to continue in a church or in a Christian organization. In fact, professional academics whose minds are trained by constant practice to see the errors in false teaching can easily slip into thinking that all believers will have those same analytical skills and that all believers will quickly recognize false teaching for what it is and pay no heed to it. But if we think this we deceive ourselves into a wrongful complacency. Again and again the New Testament writers warn that false teaching is deceptive, and that false teachers *do* draw people away after them. Consider the following passages:

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (1 Cor. 5:6, regarding a man living in incest and the Corinthian church tolerating his presence in the church)

A little leaven leavens the whole lump. (Gal. 5:9, in this case with those who preached the necessity of circumcision)

[And] their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. (2 Tim. 2:17-18)

Here Paul pictures false teachers quietly working their influence among unsuspecting church members, spreading silently and invisibly like “gangrene” or “leaven.” In practical terms, once a church or a Christian organization allows some vocal advocates of a false teaching (or even one) to have a position of influence, then those people become precedents by which others can be allowed in. For example, if Professor X has been teaching at a certain seminary for fifteen years, and then he suddenly decides that he no longer believes in the inerrancy of the Bible, and if the seminary allows him to continue teaching there, they have a serious problem. This is because he or others can argue, “We have no right to refuse to hire Professor Y or Professor Z, who also deny inerrancy, since we did not exclude Professor X. You don’t think we should fire our friend Professor X, do you?” And so the anti-inerrancy teaching gains more and more influence.

Paul warned the elders at Ephesus:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:29-30)

This passage pictures great damage. It portrays wolves among a flock of sheep. The longer they remain the more damage they will do. Paul does not say, “Oh, the sheep will see the problem and they’ll reason with the wolf and they’ll all come to a new, deeper understanding of life.”

Sometimes the problems will come from without (“fierce wolves will come in among you”), but sometimes the problems will come from within, for Paul tells these elders, whom he loved and trusted, “*from among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things . . .” We must recognize that most false teaching in the history of the church has come from people with a sincere profession of faith in Christ, and many of them were devout, genuine Christians who had a love for Christ and strong faith—but they were deceived by some wrong idea. Even the apostle Peter was deceived at one point, and Paul had to correct him publicly:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and sepa-

rated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:11-14)

Therefore the argument that a person is a strong Christian and has had a fruitful ministry in the lives of many does not prove that his teaching is correct, or that it is harmless.

3. If False Teaching Is Not Stopped, We Will Waste Time and Energy in Endless Controversies Rather Than Doing Valuable Kingdom Work

Several times Paul urged his readers to “avoid controversies.” I do not think that he meant they should avoid profitable doctrinal discussions or even useful debate, for Paul himself often argued with his opponents’ positions in his epistles, and he would spend many hours reasoning with people. For example, at Corinth, “he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). In the apostolic council in Acts 15, there was “much debate” (v. 7). And when Apollos came to Achaia, “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:27-28). Similarly, Jude appeals to his readers “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and Paul wanted church leaders to be able to do this as well, because he said that elders had to be “able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

Therefore when Paul urged readers to “avoid controversies,” he did not mean all controversies, but rather the fruitless, endless controversies that disrupt the peace of the church, that hinder us from doing more productive ministry, and that show no indication of moving toward resolution. Here are some of his warnings:

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness. (2 Tim. 2:16)

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. (2 Tim. 2:23)

But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. (Titus 3:9)

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Tim. 6:3-5)

When Paul tells Titus and Timothy to “avoid” such controversies and to “have nothing to do” with them, it shows us that there comes a point when it is no longer wise for a church to continue arguing over certain controversies. The church or organization should come to a decision, and then it should go on to other things.

4. *Jesus and the New Testament Authors Hold Church Leaders Responsible for Silencing False Teaching Within the Church*

Sometimes Christian leaders can become complacent—thinking that a few people who teach false doctrine aren’t doing that much harm in the church or the Christian organization, and not many people are believing them—and therefore no harm will come by allowing them to continue to have a platform to promote their views from time to time.

But that is not the view of Jesus or the New Testament authors. They see the destructive influence that false teaching has in a church, and they expect that those in authority will remove the platform that these false teachers have. Consider these verses:

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. *They must be silenced*, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. (Titus 1:10-11)

But *false prophets* also arose among the people, just as there will be *false teachers* among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And *in their greed they will exploit you with false words*. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

But if these false teachers are similar in many ways to the “false prophets” in the Old Testament, what should be done with them? In the Old Covenant, a false prophet who said, “Let us go after other gods . . . and let us serve them” (Deut. 13:2) was to be punished with death: “. . . that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God” (v. 5). In the New Testament, the corresponding penalty to putting a false prophet to death would be putting the person outside of the church, and this is similar to what John says should happen to those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting. (2 John 10)

Most sobering are the rebukes of the risen Lord Jesus himself against churches that tolerated the presence of false teachers. Jesus rebuked the church at Pergamum *merely for having among them* people who held to certain false teachings:

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. (Rev. 2:14)

He also rebuked them because they had some there who held “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:15).

Similarly, Jesus rebuked the church at Thyatira:

But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. (Rev. 2:20)

What was wrong? They merely *tolerated* in their midst a false teacher, and Christ rebuked them.

These false teachers were so harmful to the church that these churches' failure to exclude them brought Christ's displeasure and rebuke. Such passages combine to indicate that the Lord Jesus holds churches responsible, and holds Christian leaders responsible, for silencing false teaching within the church and within Christian organizations.

5. Objection: Doctrinal Boundaries Don't Do Any Good, Because They Cannot Be Enforced

Sometimes people will object to the claim that we should exclude false teachers from the church or a Christian organization by using doctrinal boundaries. They will claim (1) that people will be dishonest and say that they agree with our doctrinal statements when they don't, and (2) that leaders simply won't have the courage to enforce these boundaries, especially when close friends are involved with teaching the false doctrine.

In response, we can agree that doctrinal boundaries will not solve every problem in a Christian organization. But they still do much good, first, because when they are made known they prevent most people who hold other viewpoints from joining a church or organization. Second, while some who hold false teachings may be dishonest about them, as soon as they begin to teach them, their views will be known. And not all of them will be dishonest, but some will frankly admit that they have different views, hoping to persuade others. Third, the existence of doctrinal boundaries gives leaders in an organization a clear standard to use in choosing new leaders and in exercising discipline for those who begin to adopt a different viewpoint. If there is no such written doctrinal boundary, then exercising discipline against leaders is exceptionally difficult.

B. WHY SHOULD CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

When I speak of "new boundaries," I do not mean boundaries that would make an organization fundamentally different from what it was from its beginning. For example, the Evangelical Theological Society has included, since its beginning in 1949, both Calvinists and Arminians, both Pentecostals and cessationists, both advocates of infant baptism

and advocates of believer's baptism, and also members who hold differing views on the millennium, on church government, and on a number of other issues. I do not believe that the ETS should ever try to exclude Arminians (for example) and become the "Reformed Theological Society" because that would make it a fundamentally different and fundamentally narrower organization from what it was at its beginning.³

Rather, when I speak of "new boundaries," I mean boundaries that for the first time state explicitly what was already believed and assumed to be true by the vast majority of the members of an organization for many years. There are times when certain things that everyone believed in the past come to be challenged by people within an organization. Then the members of the organization see a threat that the organization might become significantly different than what it was in the first place. In such a case, "new boundaries" are put into place *to keep the organization from becoming something significantly different* from what it has been.

This process may be summarized in the following principle.

1. False Teaching Changes, So Old Boundaries Do Not Protect Against New Problems

We can notice remarkable changes in the kinds of false teaching that need to be excluded if we compare the New Testament with the creeds of the early church, and then with the creeds of the Reformation, and then with our modern age.

The New Testament writers opposed several different kinds of false teaching, such as telling believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1; cf. Gal. 5:1-6), or teaching that "there is no resurrection of the dead" (1 Cor. 15:12), or insisting on "worship of angels" (Col. 2:18), or saying that "the resurrection has already happened" (2 Tim. 2:18). The New Testament authors also warned against other teachings that would come in the future, some of which may have already been present, such as scoffing at the promise that Jesus would return (2 Pet. 3:3-4), or forbidding marriage (1 Tim. 4:3), or saying that Christians could not eat

³ However, there may be times when a Christian organization or a denomination should become more restrictive than it was from the beginning, because the church is always to be reforming itself in the light of further understanding of Scripture.

certain kinds of foods (1 Tim. 4:3; Col. 2:16), or denying that Jesus is the Messiah (1 John 2:22), or denying that Jesus Christ actually came "in the flesh" (2 John 7).⁴

But by the time of the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325 and 381) the church was dealing with entirely different problems, problems concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed affirmed the full deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in distinction from those who were denying these things. Then in the next century, in the Chalcedonian Creed of 451, there was a need for a new boundary, a need to affirm the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ in one person, with "the property of each nature being preserved."

But when we come to the Reformation in the beginning of the sixteenth century, the church is facing entirely different problems, and the great Reformation creeds address problems that did not face churches at the time of the New Testament, and that did not face churches at the time of Nicea or Chalcedon. The leaders of the Reformation found it necessary to draw boundaries that excluded the doctrines of purgatory and indulgences (which were sold to shorten people's supposed time in purgatory). They found it necessary to establish doctrinal boundaries that insisted on justification by grace alone through faith alone, and they insisted that "Scripture alone" (*sola Scriptura*) was the ultimate authority for doctrine (in contrast to the Roman Catholic view that Scripture and the authoritative teaching of the church are both sources of doctrinal truth). The Reformers also affirmed the priesthood of all believers (as opposed to the Roman Catholic emphasis on the need to approach God through the priesthood). Except for the doctrine of justification by faith alone (addressed especially in Romans and Galatians), *none of these problems had been necessary to address explicitly in the ancient creeds or in the New Testament writings*, because the false teachings that

⁴ For a detailed survey of the kinds of false teaching opposed by New Testament authors, see Craig L. Blomberg, "The New Testament Definition of Heresy (or When Do Jesus and the Apostles Really Get Mad?)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* 45 (2002): 59-72. Though Blomberg lists numerous areas of doctrinal concern found in the New Testament, the point of his article is to argue that Jesus and the apostles are deeply concerned about only a very short list of doctrinal matters: "the full deity and the full humanity of Christ," "salvation by grace through faith" (including a life of submitting to the resurrected Jesus and exhibiting the fruit befitting repentance), "Christ's still future, visible return," "keeping security and perseverance in balance," avoiding "defeatism," "triumphalism," and "perfectionism," and obeying a few standards of Christian conduct (70). Beyond this short list, Blomberg is reluctant to endorse the addition of any doctrinal boundaries (70-71).

required such new boundaries had not been present in the church in earlier ages in any significant way.⁵

In the twentieth century, the church faced new problems. For example, the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture troubled many denominations, and statements about inerrancy were placed in some doctrinal statements (for instance, in the statement of the Evangelical Theological Society at its founding in 1949, or in the statement of the Evangelical Free Church at its founding), but such statements had not been needed in the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian Creed because in those earlier centuries everyone just assumed biblical inerrancy to be true.

In recent years within the evangelical world, other problems have arisen, such as the affirmation of annihilationism (the view that unbelievers will be "annihilated" and simply cease to exist, rather than undergoing eternal conscious punishment, after they die), and inclusivism (the idea that people who have never heard of Christ or trusted in him will be saved by his atoning work anyway). And some within the evangelical world have now argued against the idea of the atonement as penal substitution.⁶ With regard to a contemporary ethical matter, I

⁵ This is one reason why Blomberg's article, "The New Testament Definition of Heresy" (see previous footnote), while it contains a very helpful survey of the types of false teaching opposed by the New Testament authors, should not be used as a sort of "maximal" list of the kinds of teachings churches and Christian organizations should exclude today. Blomberg suggests that Christians who have insisted on boundaries in addition to those specified in his survey have been too restrictive, for he says, "By way of contrast [to the New Testament authors], the last century of American evangelicalism has majored on creating extensive doctrinal statements to separate itself from outsiders, usually adding numerous *adiaphora* to more central matters" (71). But Blomberg fails to take into account at least three additional factors: (1) New heresies have arisen in every generation, heresies that contradicted the teaching of the Bible but were not explicitly opposed by New Testament authors because nobody was advocating them in the first-century church. (2) Paul's gentle correction of some errors (such as the idea that Christ had already returned, in 2 Thess. 2:1-12) may not indicate that he thought the error unimportant, but might be due to several other factors, such as his expectation that the specific church (for example, the Thessalonians) would respond readily to his gentle correction, or perhaps that he thought the error was merely the result of misunderstanding or lack of sufficient teaching (so he did not need, in Blomberg's words, to "really get mad"). (3) The expression *adiaphora* (literally, "things that do not differ") has generally been applied to matters of personal conduct on which Scripture does not require one particular kind of conduct for all Christians (such as moderate use of alcohol, or abstaining from meat [Rom. 14:2], or observing certain days as special [Rom. 14:5]). While Christians have differed over what activities belong in the category of *adiaphora*, they have agreed that the category refers to matters about which Christians have personal freedom to make individual decisions. But Blomberg uses the term *adiaphora* in a different way, to refer to all matters of Christian doctrine except his brief list of doctrines about which the New Testament writers "really get mad," thus implying that in other areas it is inappropriate to draw boundaries. As the history of development of the creeds shows, many things beyond Blomberg's short list were not at all considered *adiaphora*, but were found to be essential for preserving the life and health of the church.

⁶ See Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

expect that evangelical churches and organizations will soon find themselves having to articulate a doctrinal standard regarding homosexuality, because of the immense pressure in our culture and because of the pattern in more liberal denominations of already giving various degrees of approval to homosexual conduct.

Therefore, *because we now face several new problems with false doctrine* (and I have listed here several views which in my judgment do constitute significantly harmful false doctrine), *old doctrinal formulations that do not address these questions are inadequate*. They do not sufficiently protect the church and protect Christian organizations from the influence of these viewpoints.

I believe that the Evangelical Theological Society is a good example of an organization that will soon need to add new written boundaries to its doctrinal statement. The original doctrinal statement of the ETS in 1949 was very simple: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs." Then at a later point, because of a growing influence from some non-Trinitarian people who had joined the ETS, an additional sentence was added: "God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated Person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

Fifty years ago an affirmation of belief in inerrancy worked quite well to separate genuine evangelicals from those who were not. However, it seems to me that today these two sentences in the ETS statement are not enough to exclude some serious theological errors that are affirmed by some members of the ETS, in particular the belief in "open theism," but also some of the other issues mentioned above. It seems appropriate and even necessary, then, that the ETS should adopt a revised, longer doctrinal statement that would put more effective boundaries in place. Such a statement (to reaffirm what I said earlier) should not try to make the ETS different from what it always has been, but should aim to keep the ETS from becoming different from what it always has been.

I am also convinced that other Christian organizations and denominations will soon need to add new boundaries to protect against these new forms of false teaching, and if they don't, as explained in the first section above, these new false teachings will harm the church, will spread and do more and more damage, will consume huge amounts of time and energy in unproductive and endless controversies, and will

soon bring the Lord's displeasure upon these organizations for tolerating such harmful false teachings.

2. Why Does God in His Sovereignty Allow These Various False Teachings to Come into the Church in Different Ages?

If we believe that God is sovereign over history, and sovereign over his church in particular, then we might look at the history of the church and ask why God chose to allow this diverse array of false teachings to trouble his people throughout the history of the church.

a. THE PURIFICATION OF THE CHURCH

I can suggest three reasons why God would allow such false doctrine to have influence within the church (though there may be more reasons as well). The first is for the purification of the church. Paul tells us,

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25b-27)

Now we might ask, will this sanctification or purification process be carried out gradually throughout the church age, or will none of it happen until the very moment when Christ returns? The parallel Paul draws with the husband's love and care for his wife suggests that he has in mind an ongoing process of purification of the church throughout the church age. In fact, the pattern of God's work among his people throughout Scripture is to work in them *gradually* to fulfill his purposes, whether it be calling Abraham to himself and then over centuries making the people of Israel into a great nation, or bringing the promised Messiah to earth through the people of Israel, or spreading the gospel to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, or proclaiming the gospel to all nations on earth, or causing the influence of the kingdom of God to spread gradually throughout the earth as yeast works its way through a lump of dough or as a mustard seed grows into a large tree (see Matt. 13:31-33). Similarly, in our own individual lives, the process of sanctification is a gradual one that continues throughout life. In fact, the entire story of God's work found

in Scripture is a story in which God gradually reveals more and more of his glory over time and throughout the stages of his work of redemption.

Therefore Ephesians 5 has in mind a gradual and increasing process of purifying the church over time, until the time when Christ will be able to “present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27).

In fact, we can look back on history and see a process of gradual purification of the church. As I mentioned in another context,

Sometimes that process of purification has been marked by specific historical events; for example, in 325 and 381, the Nicene Creed; in 451, the Chalcedonian Creed; in 1517, Martin Luther’s 95 theses; even in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy’s “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.” At other times, there has been no one defining moment, but a gradual rejection of misunderstanding and a growing consensus endorsing biblical truth in some area. For example: the rejection of the militarism of the Crusades and their attempt to use the sword to advance the Church; or the realization that the Bible does not teach that the sun goes around the earth; or, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the marvelous advances in doctrinal syntheses that found expression in the great confessions of faith following the Reformation; or, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the realization that the civil government could and should allow religious freedom; or, in the 19th century, the growing consensus that slavery is wrong and must be abolished; or, in the 20th century, the growing consensus that abortion is contrary to Scripture. Other examples could be given, but the pattern should be clear: Jesus Christ has not given up his task of purifying his Church. The long-term pattern has not been 19 centuries of decline in the purity and doctrinal and ethical understanding of the Church, but rather a pattern of gradual and sometimes explosive increase in understanding and purity.⁷

But all of those advances have come through controversy. As the church has struggled to define its own beliefs clearly in distinction from

⁷ Wayne Grudem, “Do We Act As If We Really Believe That ‘The Bible Alone, and the Bible in Its Entirety, Is the Word of God Written?’” (1999 ETS Presidential Address) *JETS* 43 (2000): 13. In this statement, I am not talking about the doctrinal confusion among denominations dominated by liberal theology, where many have abandoned the truthfulness of Scripture and belief in the God of the Bible, but rather I am talking about the vast central body of Christians who have fully believed the Bible throughout history.

false doctrine, it has grown in its understanding of the teachings of Scripture. So God has used controversy to purify his church. In the process of controversy, old errors have been corrected, and the church has refined its understanding of many things it had believed implicitly but not in a detailed or deeply understood way. Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity came to be understood much more fully and clearly through the doctrinal controversies of the fourth century. Similarly, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy came to be understood much more fully through the inerrancy controversies of the last part of the twentieth century. In our present time, controversies over the nature of spiritual gifts and over appropriate roles for men and women in the home and in the church are also resulting in much deeper understanding of the teachings of God’s Word on those subjects. Through controversy, God purifies the church.

b. TESTING THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD’S PEOPLE

But I think there is another reason why God allows false teachings to have influence in the church. Through these false teachings, God tests the faithfulness of his people. Will we be faithful to him in the face of some influential false teaching advocated by winsome people, many of whom we consider our friends?

In the Old Testament, God told his people he would allow false prophets among them to test their hearts:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. *For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.* (Deut. 13:1-3)

Now I am not saying that everyone who teaches false doctrine in a church or Christian organization today is like a false prophet in the Old Testament who said, “Let us go after other gods . . . and let us serve them.” I believe that throughout the history of the church many who advocated a certain false teaching were genuine believers who were making a serious mistake in teaching something that was wrong. And even

