

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> With regard to a contemporary ethical matter, I

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>7</sup> 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

today many who deny biblical inerrancy or who advocate open theism are genuine believers. But there is still a parallel here, because we can see a similar purpose of God for allowing such false teaching to have influence in the church. God is watching our response to it, and watching our hearts, to see if we will be faithful to him and to his Word.

Believing the Bible is not always the easiest or most popular thing to defend. There are many things that God asks us to believe that are not really logical contradictions but are mysteries or paradoxes, matters that we cannot fully explain. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the hypostatic union of Christ (the union of Christ's human and divine natures in one person), or God's sovereignty and our responsibility, are doctrines that fall in this category. Why can we not explain fully what the Trinity is like? It is because there is nothing in all creation that is exactly like the Trinity! There is no other being that consists of three distinct persons, with each person possessing the whole of that being in himself, and yet the three together are only one being, not three. How can this be? It is not a contradiction, but it is a mystery beyond our comprehension.

And then there are other doctrines in which God does not ask us to approve something that is evil or wrong, but asks us to believe things that are emotionally hard for us to receive, at least in this age. Such doctrines include the doctrine of hell (with the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked), and the doctrine of God's sovereignty in relationship to evil, for example.

In these matters that are not easy to defend, and in many more, the question is, will we believe them, not because we can explain them fully, and not because we enjoy them and take delight in them in our present state of understanding, but simply because God's Word teaches them and we submit to his Word?

Throughout our lives as Christians, from time to time God will test our hearts to see whether we will be faithful in believing all that he teaches in his Word. If we are faithful, and if we pass the test, then God will often entrust us with more stewardship in the work of his kingdom.

#### c. TESTING OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD FALSE TEACHERS

I think there is also a third reason why God allows various false teachings to have influence in the church. God is also testing our attitude of

heart toward the false teachers. Will we act in love and gentleness toward those with whom we disagree?

When he looked back on the splits that occurred in the Presbyterian church in the 1920s and 30s, Francis Schaeffer (who had been part of the conservative group that left the Presbyterian church) said,

At the same time, however, we must show forth the love of God to those with whom we differ. Thirty-five years ago in the Presbyterian crisis in the United States, we forgot that. We did not speak with love about those with whom we differed, and we have been paying a high price for it ever since . . . we did not talk of the need to show love as we stood against liberalism, and, as the Presbyterian Church was lost, that lack has cost us dearly.<sup>8</sup>

Paul reminds Timothy,

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)

As we confront others who teach what we consider to be false doctrine today, God is testing not only our faithfulness regarding what we believe and what we write into our doctrinal statements but also how we act toward those with whom we disagree. Will we continue to act toward them with love and kindness, even when we come to the point when we feel we must exclude their teaching from what is allowed in our organizations or our churches?<sup>9</sup> God is testing our hearts toward these people with whom we disagree.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 69-70.

<sup>9</sup> Paul's own insistence on excluding people who persist in teaching false doctrine demonstrates that it is not impossible to act in love toward others even when (in sorrow) excluding them from a church or organization. Many pastors who have faithfully carried out church discipline to the point of excluding someone from fellowship know that this is possible, for they know that they have acted with love and deep sorrow at the same time. Greg Boyd seems to pit love against any kind of disciplinary action, however, in his objection to any process by which the Evangelical Theological Society might move to exclude open theists: see Gregory A. Boyd, "Christian Love and Academic Dialogue: A Reply to Bruce Ware," *JETS* 45 (2002): 243.

### C. WHEN SHOULD CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

#### 1. *After a False Teaching Has Become a Significant Problem*

It is impractical and impossible to rule out all future doctrinal errors before they appear. We do not even know what they will be! Probably twenty years ago no one would have expected that we would be dealing with a controversy over whether God knows our future choices. In fact, in 1952 C. S. Lewis could write, without fear of contradiction, "Everyone who believes in God at all believes that He knows what you and I are going to do tomorrow."<sup>10</sup> Therefore it would have been impossible to deal with this matter before it arose as a problem in the church. In other words, problems must be dealt with after they arise, and after they begin to gain some following and thus become a significant problem for the church.

#### 2. *Before the False Teaching Does Great Harm, and Before It Has a Large Following Entrenched in the Organization*

Here is a matter that requires much wisdom from God. While we cannot draw new boundaries to exclude false teaching before it appears, and while we do not want to make our doctrinal statements hundreds of pages long by excluding strange teachings that hardly anyone has heard of and that have gained no following at all, we still cannot wait too long. If we wait too long to exclude a false teaching, it will gain more and more influence and may soon become entrenched in the church or organization. For example, several more liberal denominations—such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church—now have so many vocal advocates of the legitimacy of homosexuality that it is practically impossible to exclude them from the denomination. Bible-believing members who have remained in those denominations are heavy-hearted about the situation. The denominations waited too long, and the false teaching became entrenched.

Regarding the Presbyterian Church, again Francis Schaeffer commented:

Let us again go back to the Presbyterian struggles of the 30s when true Christians did not remember to keep this balance [of showing both the

<sup>10</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier, 1952), 145.

holiness of God and the love of God simultaneously]. On the one hand, they waited far too long to exert discipline, and so they lost the denomination, as did the Christians in almost every other denomination. On the other hand, some of them treated the liberals as less than human, and therefore they learned such bad habits that, later, when those who formed new groups developed minor differences among themselves, they continued to treat each other badly. Beware of the habits you learn in controversy. Both must appear together: the holiness of God and the love of God exhibited simultaneously by the grace of God. It will not come automatically. It takes prayer.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, I think a good example of acting at the right time is found in the recent actions of the Southern Baptist Convention, when it added several statements to its official statement of faith, the "Baptist Faith and Message."

On June 9, 1998, the Southern Baptist Convention added an entire article (Article XVIII) on the family, which affirmed that "the husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image," but also that "a wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband." It also excluded the validity of homosexual "marriage" by saying, "marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime."

Then on June 14, 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" that affirmed inerrancy ("all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy," Article I); that denied open theism ("God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures," Article II); that rejected the idea that baptism in the Holy Spirit is subsequent to conversion (regarding the Holy Spirit, the statement affirmed, "At the moment of regeneration He baptizes every believer into the Body of Christ," Article II. C); that denied racism ("every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love," Article III); that denied inclusivism ("There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord," Section IV); that restricted the role of pastor to men ("While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men

<sup>11</sup> Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World*, 71-72.

as qualified by Scripture," Article VI); and that defined clear positions on contemporary ethical issues ("In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death," Article XV). Interestingly, the Convention broadened its boundary in one area, with regard to appropriate activity on Sunday. The previous "Baptist Faith and Message" had said that "the Lord's Day" should include "refraining from worldly amusements, and resting from secular employments, works of necessity and mercy only being excepted," but now in the new statement, it says, "Activities on the Lord's Day should be commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ," Article VIII).<sup>12</sup>

It seems appropriate to me that the Southern Baptist Convention added these explicit doctrinal boundaries when it did. These matters had become issues of concern in the current culture and among many Christians, and the overwhelming vote to approve these changes (approximately 90 percent, according to news reports at the time) showed that there was strong support among the messengers to the annual meeting to make these changes. Many of these issues had become controversial since the last major revision of the "Baptist Faith and Message" in 1963.

Other denominations and organizations will probably come up with lists that differ from the Southern Baptist list in various ways, depending on their organization's purpose, composition, and history, but the important thing is that organizations have a process by which they consider the need for such changes from time to time, and that they make such additions in a timely manner, before the wrong teachings do much harm and become entrenched in the organization.

### 3. *But Who Has the Authority to Make These Changes?*

Among evangelical churches and organizations, we do not have a pope to decree doctrine for us. Nor have we ordinarily had church councils

<sup>12</sup> The text of the statement is available at [www.sbc.net/bfm](http://www.sbc.net/bfm).

such as that at Chalcedon in 451. Instead, in the evangelical world, decisions are made by tens of thousands of organizations in a gradual process, as their governing bodies, or the organizations as a whole in some kind of formal meeting, come to a decision on doctrinal matters. Almost always such decisions are preceded by vigorous debate and discussion, and by much study on the part of the people involved. Over the course of time, the direction of the church is determined by tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of churches and denominations and organizations deciding these things one at a time. They do that based on the best information available to them, and working within the governing processes that each one has set up.

Is this a good system? Personally I think it is a very workable system, and one that in the long run results in the Lord's purposes being accomplished. The alternative to such a system would be some kind of worldwide church government, but that (to my mind) would concentrate too much power in the hands of too few people, and would likely lead to far worse decisions in the end.

For those of us who are scholars, we have a significant responsibility in this process, for we often write the materials that are read by study groups and church leaders as they make decisions on these questions. It is our responsibility to be truthful and accurate in what we publish, to represent the arguments fairly, and above all to be faithful to Scripture as God by his grace enables us to do so.

### D. FOR *WHAT DOCTRINAL AND ETHICAL MATTERS* SHOULD CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS DRAW NEW BOUNDARIES?

There is no simple answer to the question of what matters should be included when we draw new boundaries. This question requires mature wisdom, thoughtful judgment, extended prayer, and widespread discussion on the part of leaders and members in churches and organizations.

In order to help in this decision making process, I list here some questions that should be asked. It is important to remember that these questions should be weighed and not just counted, for some of them will be more relevant than others, depending on the individual situation.

As I ask these questions, I realize that I am differing with some who

would say, "If we begin to draw new doctrinal boundaries, we won't know where to stop." There are many things in life that we would never do if we followed the warning, "Once we begin we won't know where to stop." Eating is one example. Sleeping is another. Preaching a sermon is a third! I hope the questions that follow will give us guidance in knowing where to stop drawing new boundaries as well as where to add them.

Here then are the questions that I suggest each church or organization should ask when considering whether to draw a new boundary (usually in the form of adding to a doctrinal statement) in order to exclude a particular wrong teaching.

*1. Certainty: How sure are we that the teaching is wrong?*

Have the advocates of this teaching been given a fair hearing? Has there been enough time to reflect on the matter carefully?

And is there a growing consensus among God's people generally that this new teaching *cannot be right*? I believe this question is important because I think that among God's people who are reading his Word and praying daily, honestly seeking to be obedient to him, God gives a generally reliable sense or "spiritual instinct" about when a particular teaching simply cannot be consistent with Scripture.<sup>13</sup> For example, I think that there was a growing consensus among Bible-believing Christians in the 1960s and 70s that, except to save the life of the mother, abortion simply *cannot* be right. Prior to the 1960s there was uncertainty and discussion and debate, and various viewpoints were expressed, but through that process a growing consensus emerged, and a settled certainty of conviction took hold among God's people.

I think it is the same today with the doctrine of "open theism." There is a growing consensus among God's people, when they learn about it and are given enough information, that this teaching simply cannot be consistent with the teachings of the Bible.

<sup>13</sup> I would make one qualification here: this spiritual instinct among God's people is reliable only if they have had access to enough true information to make a correct decision. But if they have been allowed to read and hear information on only one side of a controversy (as in a church or denomination where a study packet of material is all on one side), they generally do not have an adequate basis for making an informed judgment.

*2. Effect on other doctrines: Will this teaching likely lead to significant erosion in other doctrines?*

Some doctrines are absolutely important to maintain because of their effect on other doctrines. Examples would include doctrines such as the Trinity, or the deity and humanity of Christ in one person, or the inerrancy of Scripture, or justification by faith alone. If we abandon one of those doctrines, many other doctrines will be lost as well.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Protestant liberals began to emphasize the love of God so much (and who could object to that?) that they came to deny the wrath of God. They denied that God exercised personal wrath toward his sinful creatures.

At that point someone might have said, "So what? This is just one attribute of God, and I can't see that it's that important." But the result was highly destructive, because once they denied the wrath of God, then they had to deny that Jesus bore God's wrath against our sins when he was on the cross. They had to deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ. And once that happens, then the whole Christian gospel is lost.

I think that this example has significant parallels to the current debate about open theism. The advocates of open theism are denying "just" one attribute of God (his exhaustive foreknowledge with respect to future human, angelic, and demonic choices), and so someone might ask why that is so important. But, as several authors in this volume have shown, once God's attribute of exhaustive foreknowledge is denied, many other things begin to change as well, and the God who results from this process is no longer the God of the Bible.

*3. Effect on personal and church life: Will this false teaching bring significant harm to people's Christian lives, or to the work of the church?*

As with question two, this question asks about the effect of a false teaching, but this time with respect to living the Christian life and with respect to the work of the church.

For example, the advocacy of homosexuality as a legitimate practice brings significant destructive consequences to people's lives. Or, to take another example, inclusivism (the idea that people can be saved

without hearing about Christ) tends quickly to destroy the motivation for evangelism and tends to destroy missionary activity.

*4. Historical precedent: Is this teaching contrary to what the vast majority of the Bible-believing church has held throughout history?*

This was an important consideration with respect to the inerrancy of Scripture. The vast majority of God's people throughout history assumed without question that God's Word was completely truthful, no matter what their differences were on other doctrines. This fact did not absolutely prove that inerrancy was true (for our only absolutely authoritative source for doctrine is Scripture alone, not Scripture plus tradition), but it is an important consideration nonetheless. It meant that those who denied inerrancy were in the difficult position of saying that the vast majority of God's people throughout the entire history of the church were wrong.

With respect to open theism, this argument is, if anything, even stronger. Probably 99.9 percent of Christian believers throughout history have believed that God knows all future events. The very few exceptions (such as the Socinians—who advocated false teaching in other matters as well) are a tiny minority. Therefore open theism has a huge burden, because it must demonstrate that 99.9 percent of God's people throughout history have been wrong on this issue.<sup>14</sup>

*5. Perception of importance among God's people: Is there increasing consensus among the leaders and members that this matter is important enough that the false teaching should be explicitly denied in a doctrinal statement?*

This is a very important consideration because it takes into account the deep spiritual instincts of God's people, not just regarding the rightness or wrongness of a doctrine, but regarding its importance. In the open theism debate, an increasing number of God's people are

<sup>14</sup> Someone might object, wasn't the doctrine of justification by faith alone discovered by Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century, and wasn't the doctrine of believer's baptism discovered by the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century? Not exactly. Evidence for both of these positions can be found in the writings of the early church fathers, though their viewpoints were later obscured, and they were not as fully developed as they would be when opposition and controversy arose.

thinking and saying, "Something fundamental is at stake here. A God who does not know the future is simply not the God of the Bible. This is not the God I have known and trusted for my whole life." The continued propagation of open theism within the church then becomes very troubling to them.

In this case, as well as in a number of other cases, my own personal evaluation is that the spiritual instinct of God's people who are thinking this way is correct.

*6. Purposes of the organization: Is the teaching a significant threat to the nature and purposes of the organization?*

In asking this question I am attempting to take into account the fact that God raises up different organizations for different purposes. For example, the Evangelical Theological Society provides an excellent opportunity for dialogue among Calvinists and Arminians, Baptists and paedobaptists, premillennialists and amillennialists and postmillennialists, and so forth. To exclude any one of those viewpoints would make the ETS something different from what it is and always has been. It is a very broad organization, while still being evangelical. To try to rule out some of those views would be a significant threat to its nature and purpose. On the other hand, allowing the ETS to include theological liberals who deny inerrancy and deny that the Bible is our unique and absolute authority would also be a significant threat to its nature and purposes, and would soon make the ETS a far different kind of organization.

The situation is somewhat different with denominational groups and denominational or theologically distinct seminaries. For example, the Presbyterian Church in America is Reformed in its doctrinal convictions. If it were to begin to admit Arminians into leadership, it would be a significant threat to the nature and purposes of the denomination, and I do not think that it would be appropriate for them to do so. It would fundamentally change who they are. Or, to take another example, I do not believe that historic Pentecostal groups such as the Assemblies of God should allow into their leadership people who deny that spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues and healing and prophecy continue today. To do so would be a significant threat to the nature and purposes of that denomination.

So each evangelical organization must ask itself, what things are fundamental to preserving our purpose and identity?

With respect to open theism, this is again an important question. Personally, my own view is that open theism is so serious an error, and so far over the line of what is doctrinally acceptable, that I do not think its advocates should be allowed to continue as members of the Evangelical Theological Society.

*7. Motivations of advocates: Does it seem that the advocates of this teaching hold it because of a fundamental refusal to be subject to the authority of God's Word, rather than because of sincerely held differences of interpretation based on accepted hermeneutical standards?*

I realize that people often quote the Bible verse, "You shall not judge people's motives." But that verse is not in the Bible; it is just an evangelical saying that people repeat over and over. I agree that there is some wisdom in it, because we cannot be sure of what is in other people's hearts, and so we can easily make mistakes, particularly when we assume that we know what is in their hearts without hearing it directly from them. So we need to be cautious in this area.

But there is another side to this matter. For example, after a half hour of serious dialogue with someone who holds another view, we often can get a good sense of that person's fundamental commitments. That is what we mean when we say (positively), for example, "I differ with John Doe on predestination, but I so appreciate what is in his heart." Or we might say (negatively), "I know John Doe says he's not preaching this doctrine because of the money he earns from it, but it just doesn't ring true to me." God has made us in such a way that we instinctively evaluate people's motivations and heart attitudes all the time, whether or not we say anything about it; but we must do so with caution.

In fact, if we look through Paul's epistles, from time to time he did speak about the motives of his opponents:

Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for

a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (Gal. 2:4-5)

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only *in order that they may not be persecuted* for the cross of Christ. (Gal. 6:12)

Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. (Phil. 3:19)

For such men are false apostles, *deceitful workmen*, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (2 Cor. 11:13)

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. (2 Tim. 3:2-5)

(It would be impossible for Timothy to obey that command without "judging people's motives"!)

... there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies. ... And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. (2 Pet. 2:1-3)

They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. ... They have hearts trained in greed. (2 Pet. 2:14)

Many other examples could be found, especially if we look at Jesus' interaction with his hostile critics such as the Pharisees, but the point should be clear: the Bible simply does not command us not to judge people's motives.

With regard to some specific type of false teaching, after some interaction with one of its responsible advocates (not just with a fringe follower of the teaching who may be ill-informed or unsanctified, or even an unbeliever, but with a responsible advocate) we might ask ourselves, for example, "Deep down inside, is he (or she) just embarrassed by the

offense of the cross?" Or we might ask, "Deep down inside, is he embarrassed by the exclusive claims of Christ to be the only way to God?" "Is he driven by a desire to be accepted or approved by liberal scholars?" "Is he craving for attention, for praise, and for being called 'creative' and 'innovative'?" "Is his case built again and again on hermeneutical novelties, special pleading, and methods of interpretation that we could not adopt elsewhere?"

On the other hand, to take an example where I think the motivations are good on both sides, we could think about differences among evangelicals over the length of the days of creation in Genesis 1. Some Christians believe these are six twenty-four-hour days. Other sincere believers think these days were millions of years long. As I have talked to and read things written by advocates of both positions, it does not seem to me that there is a wrong motivation on either side. I do not think that people on either side of the question have any deep refusal in their hearts to be subject to Scripture. Rather, I think this is a case of sincerely held differences based on accepted hermeneutical standards, and people are just weighing various factors more or less heavily and coming to different conclusions on a complex question.

*8. Methods of advocates: Do the advocates of this teaching frequently manifest arrogance, deception, unrighteous anger, slander, and falsehood rather than humility, openness to correction and reason, kindness, and absolute truthfulness?*

In 1923, J. Gresham Machen, in his classic book *Christianity and Liberalism*, wrote about liberal Presbyterian professors and pastors who believed one thing but said another just to keep their jobs and their influence. They signed the doctrinal statement even though they disagreed with it, and there was a fundamental dishonesty in what they were doing.<sup>15</sup>

If the advocates of a particular doctrine, especially the most responsible advocates, frequently manifest deception, falsehood, unrighteous anger, and arrogance, then we have a further indication that what they teach is not the "wisdom from above" that James speaks about:

<sup>15</sup> See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1923), 162-170.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:17-18)

#### *9. Some wrong questions to ask*

It is important to add that there are some questions that should not be part of our consideration in deciding which doctrinal matters to exclude with new boundaries. These are questions such as the following:

- Are the advocates my friends?
- Are they nice people?
- Will we lose money or members if we exclude them?
- Will the academic community criticize us as being too narrow-minded?
- Will someone take us to court over this?

Such questions are all grounded in a wrongful fear of man, not in a fear of God and trust in God.

#### E. CONCLUSION

This chapter was not only about open theism but about the general problem of when to add new doctrinal and ethical boundaries. But it is appropriate here to make specific application to that particular question, because in today's evangelical world, the widespread and forceful public advocacy of open theism now requires us to evaluate this belief and to ask whether our churches and organizations should draw new boundaries to exclude it. As I indicated with regard to several of the criteria listed in the previous section, I believe that on several grounds open theism is a serious enough doctrinal error that it should now be excluded by new boundaries. In addition, other chapters in this book have argued persuasively that open theism leads naturally to an abandonment of biblical inerrancy, a loss of belief in the trustworthiness of God, and a loss of the gospel itself. The price of allowing it to remain and flourish in our midst is too great.

But I do not want to end with an appeal concerning open theism

alone. It is only one of many doctrinal permutations now threatening the evangelical community. For each one of these issues, we should be satisfied neither with pleas for snap dismissal from fellowship nor with pleas for blanket avoidance of the question of new boundaries. The only right solution is careful consideration of each new matter with prayer and searching of Scripture, and then, as God gives us wisdom, humility, love, and courage, we must bring each matter to a resolution, knowing that for each decision, whether to include or to exclude, we will one day give account to our Creator. Will we have the resolve to make such decisions?

We look back with admiration and thanksgiving on the heroes of the faith from previous generations. They defended the substitutionary atonement, the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the inerrancy of Scripture, justification by faith alone, and other important doctrines. During and after the Reformation, some paid with their lives.

But we look back with disappointment and shame on those who failed to take a clear stand, for example, against racism and slavery in our country.

Now God has entrusted us with a stewardship in this generation. Many of us have positions of leadership and influence in our churches and in the evangelical world. Now the choice of whether to do something or nothing about false doctrine is up to us.

Isaiah 56:10 talks about a tragic situation. Israel is about to be destroyed and her watchdogs cannot bark:

His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. (Isa. 56:10)

Will we be like this? Will we be blind, silent watchdogs?

Or will we earnestly "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)? Will we do so with gentleness, with wisdom, and with sorrow if we need to part with friends? Will we also do so with courage to do what is right and what is necessary in order to remain faithful to God and to his Word?