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SAN DIEGO (ABP) - To its critics, the current doctrinal standard of the Evangelical Theological Society leaves the group indecently "exposed."

And two of the society's members have submitted a proposal to tighten the document into a more specifically evangelical declaration of theology—something a Catholic couldn't sign in good conscience. But other society members worry it may signal the beginning of an inquisition at an already-turbulent period in the society's life.

Professors Denny Burk and Ray Van Neste proposed the change in a business session at the society's recent annual meeting, held this year in San Diego. It came months after Francis Beckwith, a professor at Baylor University, resigned from his position as the society's president after declaring he had returned to his Catholic roots.

Beckwith's announcement caused a stir in the society and the wider evangelical world. Society members will have one year to consider the proposal before voting on it.

Leaders say the group's current formula—known officially as its doctrinal basis—is deliberately not called a “doctrinal statement.” The difference between the two concerns the document's openness. While a doctrinal basis functions as a basic outline of principles for scholarship within differing theological disciplines, a doctrinal statement functions more strictly as a set of parameters or essential beliefs for one particular church or denomination.

The society's current doctrinal basis states: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

Van Neste, a professor at Baptist-affiliated Union University in Jackson, Tenn., first presented a paper at a previous society meeting asserting that the current basis “leaves the ETS embarrassingly exposed.” During the presentation, he suggested adopting the doctrinal basis of the United Kingdom's Tyndale Fellowship, which is analogous to the ETS in Great Britain. That statement is also used by the UK's Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

Burk, a professor at Criswell College in Dallas, didn't know Van Neste before hearing the presentation. But they quickly joined forces, and began to refine their suggestion. Their newest proposal would use the British statement with the current ETS statement added. An additional section would define the “written Word of God” as the 66 books of the Protestant Bible. The resulting document forms an 11-point statement of belief.

Craig Blaising, a Baptist theology professor and member of the ETS

executive committee, told the group the change would alter the way the doctrinal basis has been used.

“There would be a major change,” he said, later adding that the British groups use their statement “as a synonym for a confession of faith. The Evangelical Theological Society has not used the theological basis in that way.”

Burk and Van Neste are adamant that their document is not a confession or doctrinal statement and wouldn’t change the way the society uses its basis.

Blaising, executive vice president and provost of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, told the group that according to society rules, the executive committee may choose to endorse proposed changes to the ETS constitution. That document has been changed “eight or 10 times” in the society’s history, he said.

The committee, Blaising said, has chosen not to endorse Burk and Van Neste’s proposal.

Some rank-and-file society members at the meeting said they dislike the proposal. One ETS member who asked not to be identified said she didn’t think the amendment had “a snowball’s chance” of passing. Another said he thought the timing was all wrong: “The ETS needs a chance to breathe.”

Some of the reticence comes from fears that the change will prompt a witch hunt for society members who may not fall completely within the new, more detailed, parameters. Some worry the change is the first step in the society embracing all-out Calvinism or fundamentalism. Other reservations stem from the proposal’s roots, since no broad-based ETS committee was responsible for the statement’s formation.

Other critics have expressed concerns that having only one year’s worth of discussion isn’t enough. James Borland, the society’s secretary and

treasurer, said he and the executive committee had requested that the professors withhold formally submitting the proposal this year, in order to foster more discussion.

But Van Neste, who wrote the paper that led to the proposal back in 2001, said he wanted to “get it out there” sooner rather than later.

“Some people see this as a negative effort to kick more people out,” Van Neste said. But his supporters see it rather the opposite, he said. “We want to make it a positive declaration of what we believe.”

Nonetheless, the professors acknowledged that it will be what Van Neste called “an uphill battle” to get the 80-percent supermajority needed to approve the change.

The proposal’s sponsors are using blogs and other Internet tools to foster discussion and rally support. Already, more than 40 people have posted their names on www.amendets.com, an online forum supporting the changes.

So far, Beckwith, who is no longer a member of the society, has not commented publicly on the proposed amendment. In a previous blog entry about his return to Catholicism, however, he had said he could, in good conscience, affirm the current statement.

“There is a conversation in ETS that must take place, a conversation about the relationship between evangelicalism and what is called the ‘Great Tradition,’ a tradition from which all Christians can trace their spiritual and ecclesiastical paternity,” he wrote. “It is a conversation that I welcome, and it is one in which I hope to be a participant.”

That conversation is coming sooner than some had suspected—or desired.

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