

The Canadian Evangelical Theological Association—A Vision for the Future

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In February 2009 I received an email from Tim Perry, then president of CETA. The email informed me that the paper I had proposed for CETA's 2009 annual meeting in Ottawa had been accepted. But then, in that very email Tim asked (out of the blue) if I would be willing to let my name stand for president of CETA, beginning in 2009.¹ I was frankly surprised, but also honored. However, because of my commitments at the time, I had to decline; but I indicated I might be open to it at a later date.

I didn't think about the presidency again until May 2010, just a few weeks before the next Congress (in Montreal). That's when I received an email from Jeff McPherson, who had succeeded Tim Perry as CETA president. Jeff explained that he had accepted the position on an interim basis the year before, so he was wondering if I would let my name stand for CETA president.² But with the Congress coming up in just a few weeks, that felt too quick for me. I wasn't even attending the Congress that year. Instead, Jeff and I had a long phone call a few days later as a follow-up to that email. As a result of that call, I agreed that I would join the executive as "president elect" for a year (to learn the ropes), and then transition to president beginning in May 2011 (at the Fredericton meeting).³

Well, I've now been president of CETA for three years. My term finishes today! And I'll be succeeded by Gus Konkel, past president of Providence University College and Theological Seminary, and current Professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College.

Back in February 2009 when Tim Perry told me that they were looking for a new president, he wrote this: "Basically, the title is honorific. . . . the work . . . is, in my experience, very minimal."

Those words couldn't have been further from the truth. Tim wasn't being deceptive; his description was scrupulously accurate—up to that point.

But great changes were afoot. Especially the last two years have been full of new ventures and significant CETA activity, which I'll report on in a moment. I'll also look ahead to what's in store, and then our president elect, Gus Konkel, will present a brief response.

Looking Back—Beginnings (1990)

But first, let's look back. In May 1990, about sixty scholars, pastors, and other interested persons met together in Toronto to form The Canadian Evangelical Theological Association, as a new theological society oriented towards the renewal of theology and the church in Canada. As I understand

¹ Email from Tim Perry, February 26, 2009.

² Email from Jeff McPherson, May 3, 2010.

³ Phone call with Jeff McPherson, May 18, 2010.

it (from oral tradition) a great part of the motivation was to provide a more irenic Canadian alternative to the Evangelical Theological Society.

John Vissers, the first president of CETA, had previously been chair of the Canadian branch of ETS (which he inherited from Clark Pinnock). In a recent email he explained that “there was considerable turmoil in ETS about issues that most of us in Canada were less concerned about, so we broke off and launched a Canadian evangelical theological group that had a different agenda.”⁴

This is confirmed by Terry Tiessen, a long time CETA member, who noted that “the major impetus came from theological/ sociological reasons rather than geographical/ nationalistic ones.”⁵ And past CETA president Doug Harink affirmed that the lack of a statement of faith was an important distinction from ETS. “We decided that . . . we would rely on the good faith of our members to either self-identify as evangelicals or simply be interested in their cause.” It was “a recognition that the ETS USA did not stand for what we wanted to stand for, a more generous and fluid evangelicalism which we thought was more suitable to the Canadian context.”⁶

So CETA was born, and sponsored its first academic conference the following year (1991), in Kingston, Ontario, in connection with the Learned Societies of Canada (now known as the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences). I presented my very first academic paper as a new doctoral student at CETA that year, along with a paper at the Canadian Theological Society.⁷

Looking Back—What We’ve Accomplished Over the Years

CETA has had nine presidents before me, most serving for two years each, though Doug Harink served for five years, David Guretzki for four, and two served for one year each.

- John Vissers (1990-1992)
- John Stackhouse (1992-1994)
- Glen Scorgie (1994-1996)
- Gordon T. Smith (1996-1998)
- Doug Harink (1998-2003)
- Hans Boersma (2003-2004)
- David Guretzki (2004-2008)
- Tim Perry (2008-2009)
- Jeffrey McPherson (2009-2011)
- J. Richard Middleton (2011-2014)

CETA’s interest in serving both the church and academy is evident from the very beginning. When CETA began meeting in connection with the Learneds, there would often be a special evening event in a local church that was open to the public (sometimes with supper served). This event was usually held the evening prior to the formal CETA annual meeting, and was typically either a lecture or a panel discussion on a topic of current interest (I myself sat on two such panels, one on the suffering of God, one on the relevance of apocalyptic).

⁴ Email from John Vissers, May 16, 2014.

⁵ Terry Tiessen on CETA list-serv post, January 27, 2011.

⁶ Email from Doug Harink, May 16, 2014.

⁷ A version of the CETA paper was published as “Why the ‘Greater Good’ Isn’t a Defense: Classical Theodicy in Light of the Biblical Genre of Lament.” *Koinonia* 9/1&2 (1997): 81-113. The CTS paper was published as “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 24/1 (1994): 8-25.

Over the years CETA moved from being an additional meeting to the Learneds to becoming a full-fledged member of the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences. This was a decision made just before I became president, and it was precipitated by the Congress sharply raising the fees for additional meetings (the trouble is that the fees for membership are pretty steep too, especially for a small society like ours).

CETA also began a newsletter for members back in 1991, which transitioned into an academic journal, the *Canadian Evangelical Review*, with two issues per year. Together, the journal and the annual meeting have provided a forum for scholarly contributions from Canadian theologians and biblical scholars in various Evangelical traditions that would speak to a general theologically-educated audience on matters of interest and concern to the Canadian church.

Recent Changes—Fall Regional Conferences

CETA has seen two main changes since I've been president, both beginning in 2012. The first significant change is that CETA has begun to co-sponsor regional fall conferences with different seminaries and theological schools. We came to realize that our annual meetings were well attended only when the Congress was located in central Canada; sometimes our meetings out east or west (especially out east) had only two or three papers! We came to the realization that merely continuing the *status quo* would result in the shrinking, and ultimately the death, of CETA.

The idea for regional, co-sponsored conferences came from an informal proposal I made to Jeff McPherson in May 2010 when I accepted the position of CETA president,⁸ and we followed this up with discussions with both the executive and other CETA members. As the idea was discussed over the CETA list-serv and in various CETA meetings and other venues (including a meeting of Canadians at the 2011 ETS), it received significant support from the membership—in fact, quite a bit of excitement—though Chad Hillier (a CETA member) perceptively noted: “One downside to this is that it would require more work for the Exec.”⁹

Our idea for these fall conferences was to partner with different theological institutions each year, in an easily accessible venue where theological students and more established academics would come together to present papers on a given theme. These conferences would create a synergy between CETA and the particular theological schools involved, and would attract local scholars, pastors, and theological students. We are particularly interested in mentoring the next generation of Evangelical theologians in Canada for the benefit of the church and the wider world.

CETA co-sponsored its first regional theology conference with McMaster Divinity College, in Hamilton, Ontario, in October 2012, with the theme (chosen by the seminary): “New Voices in Canadian Evangelical Theology.” In response to the call for papers we received 36 proposals, significantly more than we had been receiving for our annual meetings up to that point. Out of the 36 proposals we accepted 18 papers, and grouped them in pairs, with a paper respondent (typically a senior scholar). We had three concurrent paper sessions throughout the day, along with a keynote speaker (Brian Walsh) during the lunch session. The conference was a resounding success, with 70 in attendance that day.

We also offered a Theology Award, which I funded in memory of my parents (who had recently passed away), for the best paper given at the fall conference by a student or non-tenured professor; a special criterion of the award was that the paper must relate theology and Scripture in some significant

⁸ Middleton email to Jeff McPherson, May 22, 2010.

⁹ Chad Hillier on CETA list-serv post, January 24, 2011.

way. Two awards were given in 2012, to Tony Pyles and Mary Conway (who presented this morning)—both of McMaster Divinity College. Both papers were published in our journal.

Many thanks to Steve Studebaker, Associate Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at McMaster, who was our liaison with the school, and without whom (to be frank) the conference would never have happened.

Before we were even beginning to plan for the following year (fall 2013), the institution where I teach (Northeastern Seminary, in Rochester, NY) had made a standing offer to host the next regional conference. Since the school is only two hours south of the Canadian border, the executive agreed. The topic chosen by the seminary was “New Creation” and they asked me to give the keynote address.

This time the call for papers generated 65 proposals, which (by the way) is as many as the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS) received for their 2013 annual meeting at the Congress. We accepted 45 papers and grouped them into five tracks throughout the day (New Testament, Old Testament, Theology, History, and Ethics). Just under 120 persons attended.

Drew Van’t Land, a student at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, received the 2013 Theology Award for best paper.

Recent Changes—The *Canadian Theological Review*

The other significant change that’s taken place for CETA, besides the fall conferences, has to do with our journal. Although the *Canadian Evangelical Review* was never intended to be limited to Evangelical points of view, the name has communicated an unduly narrow sense of our interests. So in 2010 the journal’s editor-elect, Kent Clarke of Trinity Western University, suggested a name change.

The executive committee agreed that we had no wish for the journal to be parochial in its content, singular in selecting dialogue partners, or representative of one single theological stream. Rather, our desire is to engage a broad range of theological discourse in order to ensure that Evangelical views are thoughtfully weighed and evaluated in conversation with others from different traditions.

To that end, we not only changed the name of the journal to the *Canadian Theological Review*, with an open invitation for scholars of all traditions to submit their contributions, but the journal is now peer reviewed with an editorial board. Thanks are especially due to Kent for initiating these changes and shepherding the journal through them.

Since the name change we have published three issues, with six essays per issue, plus book reviews; and the essays have begun to include more biblical studies—something lacking in the earlier phases of the journal.

Looking Ahead—The Immediate Future

The next issue of the *Canadian Theological Review* (the last issue of 2013, which is running late) will likely include six articles, from those given at the last fall regional conference.

Once this issue is published, we would need to catch up (or speed up) publication of the journal. This might not be as difficult as it seems, due to recent developments. As is well-known, some of the religious societies such as the Canadian Theological Society (CTS) and the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (CSBS) are frustrated with *Studies in Religion*, the formal journal of member societies of the Canadian Corporation of Religion. This frustration has led the executive of CTS to ask us if they

might publish selected papers from their annual meeting at the Congress (including their presidential address) in the *Canadian Theological Review* each year.

Representatives from both executives will be soon be working out the logistics. This joint project might give us an issue of the journal almost ready to go. And, who knows, perhaps the CSBS might be interested in a similar arrangement, especially CSBS members who are interested in the intersection of the Bible and theology. Of course, we would have to work out how to finance this (producing the journal is the major CETA expense).

At the moment, most of our funding comes from our fall conferences, along with CETA memberships—though we've been giving free memberships to students registering for the fall conferences (so we don't have much coming in from memberships at the moment). And we actually lose money every year from having our annual meeting as part of the Congress. So we need to rethink some of our financial strategies.

This leads to my announcement about our fall 2014 regional conference (October 18, 2014). We had been planning to have our next October conference out west (we are hoping for an occasional conference out west would balance conferences in central Canada); but that fell through for various reasons. So we've been negotiating with other schools for a number of months.

We just received confirmation last week that the October 2014 conference will be held at Wycliffe College in Toronto, co-sponsored by both Wycliffe and the Institute for Christian Studies (Wycliffe will provide the space, ICS will provide the administration). A call for papers will shortly be going out, so mark October 18 on your calendars. We also have confirmation that the fall 2015 conference will be held at Tyndale Seminary and College, in their new campus.

I also want to take this opportunity to announce that CETA is today unveiling a new website (ceta-ctr.com).

The website will have up-to-date information on conferences, with calls for papers and registration information. It will have a page for guest blogs by CETA members (so think about proposing some reflections you might like to post). And another page is for links to member websites (so far only my website is listed, so send in your links).

The last issue of the *Canadian Theological Review* is available in digital format on the website, and in coming months we plan to have all past issues of both *CTR* and *CER* posted. We are also planning to archive past CETA programmes and others matters of interest in the history of CETA. And there will be a link to a Facebook page for posting conversations and pictures, to foster interaction among members at an informal level. Special thanks to Tony Pyles, our website coordinator over the past year, for his regular updating of the old website, and to Kirk Baker, our new website and social media coordinator, for working with me to get the new website ready.

Looking Ahead—Where Do We Want to Go?

Well, that's what we've accomplished, and some of what we have planned for the near future. But what about long-term plans? What does the future hold for CETA?

Let me share a bit of my vision with you. I believe that CETA's distinctive offering to the Canadian church and the theological academy is twofold.

First, it is important to keep the church connection alive. CETA was formed with the explicit mandate to relate theology to the church. Our continuing to take this mandate seriously can only benefit both theologians and the church.

CETA can have a role in shaping the ecclesial orientation of theological students as they are being trained in our seminaries and in faculties of theology or religion. We can help turn the attention of graduate students to the *So what?* questions of life—on both personal and social levels. How will the academic research of Evangelical theological students and new professors benefit the church (and, through the church, the world)? We cannot afford a cadre of top-notch academic theologians, historians, and biblical scholars who are out-of-touch with the life of the people of God or the needs of faithful living in an ever-changing world. We need theologians who are both grounded in the life of the church and who take their cultural and societal context seriously. And the church desperately needs genuine *theological* thinking about the gospel and the issues of our time.

This leads to the second distinctive that I believe should characterize CETA—namely, the Bible connection. I believe that CETA needs to enhance and nurture the link between theology and Scripture.

It is my passion—which you may have picked up from various things I’ve said so far—that theological reflection on Scripture is crucial for the renewal of the church. I hope I don’t come across as a naive biblicalist; but I don’t believe that any of the theological disciplines as typically practiced (whether systematic, historical, pastoral, or philosophical) will bear fruit for the renewal of the church if they are divorced from engagement with the Scriptures. This is one of the reasons why the fall conference Theology Award specifies that the winning paper must engage Scripture in some significant way.

Likewise, the purely academic study of the Bible separated from exploration of its theological and ethical claims will not empower Christians to embody God’s kingdom in their lives. This doesn’t mean there is no place for technical studies of philology or textual criticism, or of historical or philosophical investigation. But both theology and biblical studies are mutually enriched with they are in dialogue with each other.

It is therefore my hope, as we face the future, that CETA might stay the course, building on and nurturing our exciting recent gains with a long-term vision. May we continue to explore cooperative ventures with theological schools, churches, and other academic societies, both for our own benefit and to the furtherance of God’s kingdom and glory in Canada and beyond.