

A LETTER FROM DR. SEAN LUCAS

November 21, 2019

My dear Friends:

It is a funny thing, looking at social media, seeing many of your friends in San Diego, and not being in the least bit jealous. The reason why my friends are in San Diego is that this week is the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, followed by the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature. In the world of theological education, this is a big week—and it is a little bit like General Assembly in this sense: it is a big family reunion with a ton of books for sale (nothing wrong with that!). People that you haven't seen for years or you knew in different contexts—you see them again, hear what they are working on, congratulate them on a new book or essay. There are also a ton of papers and panels, some of which are interesting and many of which are not.

I first went to ETS/AAR/SBL (to use the initials) back in 1995. The national meetings were in Philadelphia, where I was working on my PhD at Westminster Theological Seminary. And like many PhD students, I presented my first paper at ETS: “Jonathan Edwards—A Postmillennialist?” I remember what a big deal it was to me to feel like I had finally arrived by presenting a paper at an academic conference. It didn't matter that it was placed in a small room on the far end of the hall or that only fifteen people came to hear my (too-long, tendentious, and turgid) paper. I was an official academic!

Since then, in God's mercy, I've gotten to present papers at some really neat conferences and venues—even this year, I presented papers at a conference at Dordt College in April and at Wheaton College in October. So, I'm not pooh-poohing the value of academic papers and conferences and the whole apparatus. I guess what I'm observing is how much both the evangelical academic world and I have changed over the past twenty-five years or so.

In terms of the academic world, when I first started going to ETS, it was less than a thousand attendees; there was a greater opportunity to listen to and meet top-notch evangelical scholars and actually have interaction. Now, there are over four thousand in attendance and a slew of PhD students (far more than when I first presented), all trying to present papers and engage the larger academic conversation. As a former academic dean of a seminary, I wonder (and worry about) how these folks will find jobs and pay off their student loans. As a present-day sometime scholar, I wonder about the value of such a large conference that feels more machine-like than what I remembered in the past.

But more than that, I've changed. In 1995, my highest aspiration was to find a faculty position at a seminary somewhere and spend my life teaching and writing. But that was because, in part, I was scared to death of pastoral ministry; or at least, I had felt wounded in my early involvement in pastoral ministry in the context of the church, worried that the church was not a safe place for me and my heart, and so (like a lot of guys who head off to seminary) decided that the “cushy” life of a seminary faculty member was for me.

CONTINUED

A funny thing happened on the way to the Forum, as they say—or three things, actually. First, I came to see that working at a seminary (and I've worked at four seminaries) is not any “safer” or more “dangerous” relationally than the church. Second, I came to realize that the best seminary faculty members are those who have pastoral experience, love pastors and pastoring, and love the church. But third and most important, through the ministry of our pastor in Pennsylvania while in graduate school, I came to love the church again. It doesn't mean that I haven't been hurt or disappointed or wounded by her—I surely have, many times. But I came to love what God does in this people called his church, the unique locus of his saving activity and power.

And as I came to love the church with all of her flaws and meanness and beauty and joy, I came to love serving her in Jesus' name. And over the years, I have literally done everything at the churches where I've served—from vacuuming the floors and setting up the tables, to leading youth group, evangelism training, nursery, and Children's church, to preaching and teaching, baptizing and burying, giving the Lord's Supper and marrying couples. There really is no other place I want to be and no other thing I want to do than to serve Jesus by serving you and serving our larger church. This is what I was made to do, what I've been called for.

So, I don't miss what's going on in San Diego. I don't begrudge those who go—after all, I went to ETS in 2017 for the first time in eight years to give an invited paper. But I also know that is not really where the action is—rather, it is right here on the corner of Walnut Grove and Avon Roads and in all the other places where God's people gather Lord's Day by Lord's Day, around Word, sacrament, and prayer.

In the grip of God's grace,

