

# ATS Commission on Accrediting marks 90 years of improving theological education

By TOM TANNER

*Ninety years ago, the world was in the depths of the Great Depression. In 1934, the average US income was \$1,600, but 25% of adults were out of work with no income. A typical new car cost \$635 and a new house averaged \$6,000, but very few could afford either. A gallon of milk was 45 cents, and a gallon of gas was 10 cents—if you could get them. It was not the best of times. And it may have been the worst of times to start a new theological accrediting agency.*

But 90 years ago in June 1934, the ATS Commission on Accrediting began, authorized by 59 seminary leaders from 35 theological schools meeting in Rochester, NY. The Commission's mandate was "to establish some plan for the accrediting of theological seminaries" (ATS Bulletin 9, 1934, p. 6)—something that had never been done before in the history of theological education. Within two years, that five-member Commission did just that. They published the first ever standards for theological schools in 1936—only one page long—with a 50-page set of 18 "schedules" to be completed by any school that believed it met those nine standards. During the next two years, the (now) ten Commissioners reviewed 61 applications, visited 53 schools, and granted accreditation to 46 "charter members" of the ATS Commission on Accrediting in 1938.



They also published a 52-page "First Report of the Commission on Accrediting" in 1938. It described in some detail their first four years of work and it summarized the state of theological education in North America using almost every major category still used in the ATS Annual Data Tables (Bulletin 12, 1938). No wonder ATS reported in June 1938 that "the biennium which this meeting closes may in time be regarded as one of the most momentous in the history of theological education on this continent" (Bulletin 13, 1938, p. 41).

Since its birth in 1934, the ATS Commission on Accrediting has wrestled with some of the most difficult issues affecting theological education—from the Great Depression to the Great Recession, from civil rights in the US to Indigenous rights in Canada, from a world war and a global pandemic to controversies about institutional governance and governmental interference. For 90 years, the Commission has sought to "take the longer view," to quote Lewis Sherrill in his 1940 biennial address as ATS president, who also played a key role in drafting the

first *Standards of Accreditation*. Those four words—*take the longer view*—were his encouragement to the 75 ATS schools gathered in Lexington that year, when the dark clouds of a second world war cast “the same shadow” as the first world war in 1918 when ATS began.

To celebrate the Commission’s 90th anniversary, I have written *Taking the Longer View: A History of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (1934–2024)*. A pre-publication digital draft will be available in time for the 2024 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting. The 150-page history is based on a review of some 20,000 pages of materials, including ATS Bulletins, Commission minutes, Executive Committee minutes, and key books and articles about accreditation and theological education.

This year seems timely for a history of the ATS Commission on Accrediting. It is not only the Commission’s 90th anniversary, but also the 90th anniversary of the study that birthed it—William Brown and Mark May’s massive, four-volume *Theological Education in America*. Their 1934 work analyzed 176 theological schools in the US and Canada, as well as census responses from more than 67,000 Protestant ministers. It was their work, funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., that led directly to the Association’s decision to authorize a Commission on Accrediting in 1934 to create standards to improve theological education and ministerial preparation in North America.

The ATS Commission on Accrediting has spent the last 90 years finding ways to keep improving theological education through the key values of community, accountability, and flexibility—values reflected in its ever-changing *Standards of Accreditation*. During the last nine decades, the original nine Standards have experienced multiple modest revisions, at least three major revisions, and three wholesale redevelopments.

The current *Standards* are the latest wholesale redevelopment from 2020. They will be reviewed at the 2024 ATS/COA Biennial Meeting in Atlanta, seeking input from the membership on how these *Standards* can continue to help schools achieve their missions with challenges they may face. Whatever the next 90 years hold, the 260+ member schools that constitute the ATS Commission on

Accrediting will continue to “take the longer view.” After all, theological schools deal with eternal issues, and you can’t get a longer view than that.



Tom Tanner retired from *The Association of Theological Schools* in 2022, after ten years as a director of accreditation. He continues to do consulting work and research projects for ATS, most recently the 90-year history of the ATS Commission described in this article.

### Five things you may not know about the ATS Commission on Accrediting:

- 1** Did you know that the ATS Commission once considered offering a doctoral degree, with ATS itself as the degree-granting entity? Read that story in Chapter 3 of *Taking the Longer View: A History of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (1934–2024)*.
- 2** Did you know that the very first probation the ATS Commission imposed was on a stellar school that was struggling with civil rights issues? Read that story in Chapter 4.
- 3** Did you know that one well-known school caused more controversy for the Commission than any other in its 90-year history, with a special evening session at a Biennial Meeting that produced seven pages of debate in the minutes? Read that story in Chapter 5.
- 4** Did you know that one proposed *Standard* led to a formal protest at a Biennial Meeting? Read that story in Chapter 8.
- 5** Did you know that among the three major revisions and three wholesale redevelopments of the *Standards*, only one had no amendments from the membership during the vote at the Biennial Meeting? Read that story in Chapter 9.