

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 10: Dealing with Historical Differences

by John M. Frame

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By "historical" I am referring not only to the doctrinal and practical differences discussed in the last two chapters, though certainly those too are historical in a sense. Rather, I am talking about various historical events that have created barriers to union.

Historic Animosities

Many denominations dwell on the injustices that have been done against them by other denominations. Often, for instance, new denominations have originated because an older denomination disciplined some of its members in ways considered unfair by those members. The mutual excommunications of the Roman Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople remain barriers to reunion of two great branches of the church. The discipline of Luther by the Roman Church, of J. Gresham Machen by the Presbyterian Church USA, and of Klaas Schilder by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, continue to be barriers to reunion of those bodies with their former denominations. Sometimes, too, people have left a denomination without formal discipline, for reasons greatly resented by the original body, such as in the split between Bible Presbyterians and Orthodox Presbyterians in 1937.

Even more serious are the literal religious wars that have taken place over the years. French Protestants will never forget the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572 in which at least 30,000 Huguenots were slain. And can Irish Protestants and Catholics ever forget the "troubles" that still poison their relationships today?

Emotional hurts and resentments are among the most difficult hindrances to reunion. From a biblical perspective, however, certain things are clear: (1) The children are not to be punished for the sins of the fathers (Ezek. 18:1-24). We are not to hold later generations of Roman Catholics guilty for the great crime of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. (2) Forgiveness is to be liberal (Matt. 18:21ff.). (3) We should not dwell on our hurts and on past evils, but on those things that are "true ... noble ... right ... pure ... lovely ... admirable" (Phil. 4:8). (4) Bodies which originate in schism, however bitter the circumstances, may nevertheless deserve our respect as true churches, as Augustine recognized the validity of Donatist baptism. (5) People and denominations change. Groups that were sharply at odds with one another fifty years ago may be very close together today, without recognizing it. It is important to focus upon the *present* situation in determining our relationships with other bodies.

Ethnicity

The Reformed Church of America and the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. were largely the same in doctrine when they were founded (in 1628 and 1706 respectively). They differed mainly in that the former was Dutch, the latter Scottish in origin. Today also there are many denominations (especially in multi-ethnic nations like the U.S.) whose main reason for separate existence seems to be their ethnic constituency. This would be true of the Christian Reformed Church (Dutch), the Evangelical Free Church (Norwegian-Danish), the Evangelical Covenant Church (Swedish), the Reformed Church, U. S. (German), the Korean-American Presbyterian Church (Korean), the Church of God in Christ (African-American), and others.

Nor should we allow our white Anglo-Saxon churches to get off the hook at this point. For they too consist largely of one ethnic group, and those churches also serve as refuges from the multi-cultural world where one can be with his "own people."

I do not believe Scripture requires every congregation to be multi-ethnic. I do believe that every congregation must *welcome* visitors regardless of race, color or socio-economic status (see last chapter). And when there is such a genuine welcome, I suspect that there will be fewer ethnically homogeneous churches.

Does ethnic diversity, even language diversity, require denominational division? Language diversity is probably the most persuasive argument for denominational division. But I do not believe that speakers of different languages *must* be in separate denominations. It is possible to have, say, Korean-speaking presbyteries within a Presbyterian denomination, with the Korean-speaking churches sending English speaking representatives to a combined General Assembly. It is awkward, but can we not remember that the early church was

formed of Jew and Gentile (and of Jews from many nations and tongues)? They had all the problems we have and more; but they did not try to solve them by means of denominationalism. Acts 6:1-7 justifies additional programs in the church to promote fairness among different language and ethnic groups. Surely we have the resources to maintain that level of fairness within a united church today.

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