

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 13: Dealing With Our Attitudes

by John M. Frame

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.

At the root of the whole problem of church division lies our own cursedness, our sinful attitudes. We saw earlier that denominationalism encourages such frames of mind, but of course it is a chicken and egg situation. Wrong attitudes cause division, and they are also fed by it.

Lack of love for God and for one another embraces all other sinful attitudes (Matt. 22:37-40). Our lack of love for God keeps us from hearing his Word and from being willing to make radical changes in our values and practices. We would rather keep the fleeting benefits of denominationalism than claim by faith the far greater blessings that come from doing things God's way.

Our lack of love for one another, which derives from our lack of love for God, manifests itself in a number of ways:¹

1. *Pride, boastfulness, arrogance* (Pss. 10:2; 59:12; 73:6; Prov. 8:13; 11:2; 13:10; 14:3; 16:18; 29:23; Isa. 23:9; 25:11; Jer. 48:29; 49:16; Mark 7:22; 1 Tim. 3:6; 6:4; 1 John 2:6): We tend to look on what God has done in our denominational fellowships as if it were our own achievement and the unique property of our own group. Somehow, these accomplishments seem to reflect better on us when we have to share them with fewer people. Conversely, as it is difficult for us to admit our own errors and faults, it is very difficult for us to admit such errors and faults in our denominations.

¹ Compare M'Crie's treatment of this issue, *op. cit.*, 33ff. and 118ff. The former passage deals with attitudes which work against church unity, the latter with those attitudes most conducive to unity.

2. *Contentiousness, discord, strife* (Prov. 13:10; 18:6; 19:13; 21:19; 22:10; 27:15; Hab. 1:3; Rom. 2:8; 1 Cor. 1:11; 11:16; Phil. 1:16; 1 Tim. 6:4; Tit. 3:9ff.): "From pride comes contention," says the first passage in Proverbs from our group of references. Because we want glory for ourselves, we seek to find fault in others. Contentious people are constantly looking for something to argue about, some way to start controversy and disrupt the peace.

Contentiousness can be difficult to identify, for one man's contentiousness is another man's "zeal for the truth." Zeal for the truth is a virtue, certainly. But one's energetic efforts deserve that title only when they are grounded in a realistic biblical understanding of what the truth really is, including the biblical teachings about unity and about "priorities." A constant insistence that we achieve perfection in one area of church life before doing anything else is not a proper zeal for the truth; rather it is contentiousness. Dwelling on the faults of other denominations out of proportion to their importance is contentiousness.

Contentious people believe the worst about others, frequently taking the statements of others in the worst possible sense, rather than giving others the benefit of the doubt ("innocent until proven guilty"). Surely that has had much to do with the animosities underlying the church's divisions.

Contentiousness is related to over-sensitivity: when someone says an even slightly critical word about a contentious person, the latter will rush to defend himself. He cannot abide the thought of being wrong, or of being thought wrong by others. Yet, there is little consideration for the feelings of those whom he wishes to criticize. He considers himself free to interpret their words and deeds in the worst possible sense, while others are supposed to make all sorts of allowances and excuses for his excesses. Of such people it is often said, "He can dish it out, but he can't take it." Such a one will often have a double standard when evaluating denominations: one standard for his own, another for the others. He will tend to defend his denomination as he defends himself, while unjustifiably finding all sorts of fault with those outside.

It can be difficult to identify contentiousness in others, at least to identify it well enough to make them accountable to formal discipline. But I am confident that Christians can usually recognize it in themselves if they call upon the indwelling Spirit to open their eyes. The trouble is that our pride often keeps us even from considering that we might be guilty of such a seriously sinful attitude. Let us hear what the above scriptures have to say to us, as well as the following which positively urge a gentle and peaceful attitude: 2 Samuel 20:19; Zechariah 8:19; Matthew 5:9; Galatians 6:1; James 3:17; 5:19; 1 Peter 3:11.

3. *Envy, jealousy* (Exod. 20:17; Prov. 23:17; 27:4; Matt. 27:18; Acts 13:45; 17:5; Rom. 1:29; Phil. 1:15; 1 Tim. 6:4): Envy is not just a desire to take unjustly what belongs to others, but it is also what Nietzsche called *ressentiment* or hatred of others for their accomplishments and success. It is the reverse side of

pride. We wish to glorify ourselves, and we hate those achievements that allow others to glorify themselves, perhaps at our expense.

Thus churches which are strong in teaching but weak in evangelism will often feel constrained to find some fault in those to whom God has given some evangelistic success. The reverse is also true, though in my experience to a lesser degree.

4. *Harshness*, the opposite of gentleness (Isa. 40:11; 2 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 2:7; 2 Tim. 2:24; Tit. 3:2; Jam. 3:17; 1 Pet. 2:18): Harshness exaggerates the faults and errors of others, both as to the degree of evil and as to the measures we should take against it.

5. *Xenophobia, snobbery*, rather than welcoming hospitality to other Christians (Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:9): To be honest, we must admit that we have a great desire to stay with what is familiar, with our own people, our own ways of doing things. We don't want to have to deal with other ethnic or socio-economic groups in the fellowship of our churches. We don't want to have to deal with the priority concerns of those in other theological traditions. We don't want to have to endure challenges from them or to be answerable to them.

6. *Party spirit* (1 Cor. 1-3): The partisan mentality, ignoring our responsibility to love all in the body, prefers to give allegiance only to its own particular faction, which may be united by respect for a particular leader or leadership style or by preference for some doctrinal or practical emphasis.

7. *Superficiality, immaturity* (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:13ff.; Phil. 3:12; Col. 1:28; 3:14; 4:12; 2 Tim. 3:17; Heb. 12:23; 13:21; 1 Pet. 5:10): We need to grow in our understanding of what God's Word says about these issues, being willing to be taught and not taking for granted what we have heard in the past.

8. *Anger, wrath, bitterness, vengeance* (Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1; Matt. 5:22; Rom. 12:19; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 4:26,31; Col. 3:8,21; Tit. 1:7; Jam. 1:19ff.): There is godly anger, like the zeal of Christ for the holiness of God's temple. But usually Scripture presents human anger as a sinful, even murderous, lack of love. Anger seeks to replace God's vengeance with our own. It holds grudges, refusing to forgive (Matt. 18:21). There is much of this, I believe, in the movement to perpetuate division in the church. God says in Scripture that anger should be dealt with *quickly*: "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Eph. 4:26; cf. Matt. 5:23-26; 18:15-20). Reconciliation is a high priority in God's kingdom. But the nature of unrighteous anger is to indulge itself, to put off reconciliation, to harbor a grudge.

9. *Ambition, avarice* (Tit. 1:7; 2 Pet. 2:10): Those who are interested in personal power or advancement often reinforce denominational divisions. It is easier to achieve prominence (by worldly means) in a small group than in a large one, easier in a human denomination than in God's trans-denominational church. Rather than risk the end of their prominence in the uncertainty inherent in church merger, influential denominational bureaucrat types often stand in the way of biblical reunion. This is a large part of the problem, for these are the types of people most often appointed to ecumenism committees, the ones who most often must be satisfied with any negotiation.

10. *Lack of openness and honesty* (John 15:15). Too often when representatives of different denominations hold discussions, there is a reticence, an unwillingness to share what it is that *really* stands in the way of union. We need to remember again that in such cases we are dealing with other Christian brothers and sisters with whom we can share family secrets without embarrassment.

In all these and other ways we sin against God, against others, and violate the law of love. To put it differently, we create adversary relationships between ourselves and other believers, seeing them as enemies to be conquered rather than as brothers and sisters to be cherished.

How good it is to know that, unlike angry and contentious human beings, our God is a God of love and forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). May this gracious God move us to confess and receive forgiveness, that forgiveness bought with the blood of his only Son.

Students of revival have often said that revival begins with taking sin more seriously, with people truly mourning over the profundity of their guilt before God. While I do not believe that God authorizes us to go through periods of bleak despair without a sense of grace, it is certainly true that we will not appreciate the greatness of our salvation until we have seen how much our sins have offended God, how truly wretched those sins are in his sight.

And I rather think that reunion will not come without revival. Revival does tend to break down denominational barriers between Christians, though often in the end those who break free from the old denominations wind up in a new one! Perhaps true reunion will depend on a revival that does not die, that does not fossilize itself into a new denominational program.

At any rate, Jesus' concern for unity demands that we all take a good look at ourselves, a look which will have beneficial effects in all areas of the church's ministry.

In this chapter I have been rather negative, focusing on the bad attitudes which we should avoid. To balance it, I have included as an Appendix a very positive treatment, a beautiful little sermon on "Peacemakers" by my friend Dennis E. Johnson. Please take time to read it.

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.