

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 14: Dealing With Our Assumptions

by John M. Frame

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Besides recognizing the attitudes of our hearts, we must also become more self-conscious about the assumptions or presuppositions we bring to the question of church union. Some of these assumptions may be unconscious in the sense that we do not explicitly say them, and also in the sense that we do not reflect on them. Yet, they do influence our decisions, our attitudes, our openness or lack of openness to the views of others. They even influence the way we see reality. For assumptions do influence observations.¹ Very often, we see what we want to see. The mind is selective. It screens out data that is unsuited to our preconceptions, and it evaluates that data in the light of its established value system.

In my experience, attempts at church union have often been frustrated by assumptions such as those on the following list. They are all in my estimation untrue and unbiblical. So, we may profitably ask ourselves whether any of these assumptions are lurking in our own hearts.

1. "Nothing much of religious significance can be learned from outside my own (denominational or theological) tradition." I ask: Is it likely that God has limited spiritual wisdom to some small segment of his body? A segment, moreover, which exists as the result of sin? God's wisdom is given to his whole body, though to be sure there are some imbalances among gifts within individual denominations as we have seen.

¹ See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970). On the application of "presuppositionalism" to theology, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975); Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994); Frame, *Cornelius VanTil* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995).

I continue to believe that the Reformed theological tradition is superior to all others as a general rule. Yet, I am constantly impressed with the wisdom that God has given to people of other backgrounds. They say things that are unquestionably biblical, but which would never have been "put that way" by a Reformed teacher.

2. "The distinctives of my tradition are more important than the doctrines and practices which we share with other traditions." Few would admit to holding this assumption. Still, I think many Christians feel this way; for the things that really excite them about the Christian faith are the distinctives of one tradition rather than the common property of the universal church. Such people are understandably reluctant to consider merging with other bodies and perhaps thereby to lose those distinctives. But can anyone seriously maintain such a view? Is the Lutheran view of Christ's ubiquity more important than the universal church's conviction as to the deity of Christ? Is the charismatic experience of being "slain in the spirit" more important than justification by faith?

My own view is that the most important things are the things that are most broadly confessed across denominational and theological traditions. I value the Reformed distinctives chiefly because they give me a coherent theological account of those trans-denominational truths. It is the Reformed faith, in my view, which gives the most consistent *account* of the reality and sovereignty of God, the creator-creature distinction (Chalcedon), the doctrine of the Trinity, the death and resurrection of Christ for us. I would encourage my Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal and other Christian brothers and sisters to value their traditions for similar reasons, if they can do that!

3. "The distinctives of my tradition must be preserved at all costs in any church union." To say this is to deny the point made earlier, that Scripture warrants and necessitates a certain amount of theological tolerance.

4. "Since the truth is at stake, we cannot enter any union until we are convinced that no erroneous teaching will be permitted." Same reply here. There will never be a perfect church, and no constitution or negotiation can guarantee inerrant preaching and teaching. The issue is the *extent* to which tolerance of different views will be permitted.

5. "We should not merge with any church that uses extra-biblical data in its determination of policy." There is truth here: Scripture alone is our ultimate standard (*sola Scriptura*). But Scripture must be applied to circumstances, and to do that we must understand both the Scriptures and the circumstances. To deny that is to betray a false (unbiblical) concept of scriptural sufficiency. The issue of scriptural sufficiency is important; but that principle must be stated precisely, not according to someone's vague feeling about what it means.

6. "We should not unite with any body which does not share our *emphasis* on (this or that)." This is an even worse misunderstanding than 1-4 above, and my replies to those apply to this one also. God's word itself expresses a wide variety of different "emphases." The teaching ministry of the church, as I indicated earlier, should focus on the central message of Scripture, which is shared among all the churches. Beyond that, Scripture warrants considerable flexibility, as we apply the scriptural text to the ever-changing situations of our day. See my earlier discussion of "priorities."

7. "In a union, nothing should be agreed simply on the basis of trust. All the details of our future church life must be stated in writing, formally, with consequences of violation clearly spelled out." But churches will never unite if they insist on formally spelling out *all* the details of their life together. Indeed, the more biblical procedure is to merge first, *then* to work out differences! (See Chapter Sixteen.) As in a marriage, trust *is* important. If there is no basic trust, then formal procedures will not insure the permanence of union. But if there is substantial trust, then formal statements and procedures (which are *not* emphasized in Scripture) are relatively unimportant.

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