

**EVANGELICAL REUNION**  
**Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity**  
**Chapter 15: Evaluating Churches**

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If God is pleased to bring about the reunion of his one, true church, I tend to think that it will be a step-by-step process. Most likely, denominations will first merge with those denominations that are most like themselves. Then those larger, more diverse denominations will merge with others most like themselves, and so on, doubtless with many roadblocks along the way. One alternative might be an "evangelical COCU:"<sup>1</sup> a (possibly large) group of denominations including, perhaps, some with major differences between them, covenanting to pray, study and work together however long it may take to bring about a large-scale reunion. Obviously various modifications and combinations of these ideas are possible. Others are certainly more likely than I to hit upon the right strategy. Those so gifted should definitely begin thinking up a good plan.

If we are to be prepared to take steps in any such direction, we need to develop criteria for evaluating other churches (and indeed for re-evaluating our own).<sup>2</sup> Our vision for reunion should not include every organization that calls itself a Christian church. There are certainly bodies that use that name – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for example – which are not

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<sup>1</sup> "COCU" stood originally for "Consultation on Church Union," later for "Church of Christ Uniting." This movement was set up to implement the vision of Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the PCUSA, and James Pike, Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, to merge the major US denominations into one. Discussions of the plan continue, but it has not yet been put into effect, and it faces many obstacles.

<sup>2</sup> In this section I am thinking about evaluating *churches*, not denominations as such, though we must also learn to evaluate denominations by the same criteria. One complicating factor is that there can be sound churches in unsound denominations. One can well argue that they ought not to be in those denominations; but one cannot doubt that this sort of thing happens. So to say that a denomination (as a national organization) is apostate, or not a true manifestation of the church, is not necessarily to say that all its presbyteries, dioceses, congregations, ministers or members are apostate. Those must be evaluated separately.

Christian churches at all and which should have no role to play in any ecumenical venture. Our goal is reunion of the one, *true* church. But what is a true church? And what denominations are suitable candidates for mergers?

### What is a True Church?

The Protestant Reformers suggested three criteria for a sound church: the true preaching of the Word of God; the right administration of the sacraments; and the diligent exercise of church discipline. I believe myself that these criteria may be misleading without some explication or even supplementation; however I will begin by considering these. As I do, I would remind you of an earlier point: Scripture requires Christians to give one another the benefit of the doubt. If a church claims to be a Christian church, that claim ought to be accepted unless there is cogent reason for rejecting it. The burden of proof is upon those who would reject such claims. It is remarkable that through church history, though there have been many schisms, it has been very rare that one denomination has accused another of total apostasy.<sup>3</sup> The Protestant Reformers did not take that position in regard to the Roman Catholic Church, nor do many denominations today take such views of their rivals. Thus, we may expect the “burden of proof” to be very heavy indeed. Indeed, as we shall see, it is.<sup>4</sup>

### The True Preaching of the Word

One's view of what constitutes true preaching of the Word will depend somewhat on his theological perspective. Yet, it would be wrong to insist that that preaching must agree with one's own theology in every detail in order to constitute true preaching.<sup>5</sup> As I argued earlier, some degree of tolerance is inevitable. How much? Here I can only refer the reader to the less than definitive suggestions of Chapter Eight.

My personal application of those scriptural principles comes about as I ask my conscience before God whether this or that deserves to be called authentic gospel preaching. There is an inevitable subjective dimension to any application of scriptural principles.<sup>6</sup> This is not *subjectivism*, because (1) it is an application of *scriptural principle*, (2) it is the divinely ordained route to *truth*, and (3) each individual's decision ought to be open to correction from others in the church; God leads his people corporately by his Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> An "apostate" church is a body which was once a church, but which can no longer legitimately be called a church.

<sup>4</sup> Note again the article of Charles Hodge, "Is the Church of Rome Part of the Visible Church?" cited in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> If that were the case, then I doubt if I could accept any preaching as true except my own, and even my own past preaching would be of very doubtful integrity.

<sup>6</sup> See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 76-88, 149-164, 319-346.

In my own Presbyterian circles, the discussion often centers around the question of whether Arminians preach an authentic gospel. I hope my Arminian readers will not be too upset if I take this as a serious question and seek to answer it! In return, I will not be offended if some Arminian writer asks the same question about Calvinistic preaching, especially if, as in my discussion below, he comes to an affirmative conclusion! I want to deal with Arminianism at this point simply so that I may illustrate the kind of thinking that we must do in order to assess one another according to biblical standards.

Some Calvinists think that there is in effect no truth at all in Arminianism, that it is in fact equivalent to paganism because it fails to affirm a fully sovereign God.<sup>7</sup> I agree with these Calvinists that the Arminian doctrine of free will is in error, and that if all the rest of Arminian theology were worked out to be consistent with that error the result would be paganism.<sup>8</sup>

However (1) Arminian theology is not, in my judgment, developed with a view toward consistency with that error, and indeed it does not achieve such consistency. It is therefore, at worst, an inconsistent theology, not a pagan theology.<sup>9</sup> (2) The error in question occurs mostly in technical discussions, not in preaching or in popular theology. Technically, Arminians regard human free decisions (at least the decision to believe in Christ) as causeless and independent of God's decrees. But when Arminian *preachers* bring up the issue of free will (which, to be sure, they do) they tend to use formulations which can be construed as an authentic biblical doctrine of human responsibility. Calvinism too teaches human responsibility, and means by that phrase that human faith, a real, uncoerced and meaningful choice that only the individual can make, is necessary and important to salvation. Most of the Arminian preaching I have heard does not go beyond this picture of human responsibility. I often wonder if the Calvinistic critics of Arminianism are fully aware of what Calvin and the Reformed Confessions themselves teach about human responsibility, even about "free will!"

It is true that Calvinism teaches the total inability of man to do anything toward his salvation. Wesleyan preachers, however, because of their view of "prevenient grace" often tell the unbeliever that he *is* "able" to come to Jesus, to

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<sup>7</sup> To see this view presented in its most extreme form, note the discussion in *Journey* magazine between William Dennison, William White and myself, in various articles, letters and replies, in the issues of Sept.-Oct., 1987, March-April, 1988, May-June, 1988, July-Oct., 1988, Jan.-Feb., 1989. The position I oppose in these exchanges I would characterize as theological chauvinism (a close cousin of denominationalism) at its worst.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, most all theological errors, worked out consistently, lead to paganism, including the ones of which I-- or you-- may be guilty.

<sup>9</sup> These analyses of Arminianism (like other such analyses in this book) are certainly not rigorous enough to be persuasive as they stand, at least not to one who is inclined to doubt them. Nor have I taken the trouble to document them. To do so would be to distract us from our purpose, which is not to prove any conclusion about Arminianism, but rather to present an illustration of how someone might think through questions about what is or isn't a true church.

make a decision for Christ. Here, however, let us note that there are many kinds of “ability.” What the Calvinist denies is that the unbeliever has the *moral* ability to make the right choice apart from saving (not merely “prevenient”) grace. He “cannot” decide to obey Christ, because he cannot do anything that is morally right. On the other hand, even on the Calvinistic view, there are senses in which the unbeliever “can” make the right decision: (1) he has, usually,<sup>10</sup> the mental ability to understand the choice before him and to make the right decision; (2) he has, usually, the physical ability to do the things which please God; (3) he is not prevented, by elements of his heredity or environment, from pleasing God; (4) God's offer in the gospel to save those who come to him by faith is a sincere one; those who come to Christ he will not cast out (John 6:37). The need for grace is genuine; but it is a need that God meets. So no one can plead lack of grace as an excuse for failing to believe in Christ.

Preachers rarely make these distinctions. In preaching it is not a matter of whether the hearer has this or that kind of ability, but simply of whether he “can” or “cannot” properly respond to the message. Some Calvinist preachers go out of their way to inform the unbeliever that he “cannot” come to Christ; Arminians typically seek to inform him that he “can,” and that he is therefore responsible to do so. Faced with those two alternatives, I'm inclined to think that the Arminian presentation is more biblical! I say that, even though I reject the Arminian theory of prevenient grace and free will by which the Arminian technical theology justifies such preaching. To tell unbelievers that they “cannot” come to Christ, while true in a sense, is to encourage passivity on their part. It tells them to wait and see if God will do something to them. That is not the biblical pattern, which, without neglecting the necessity of grace,<sup>11</sup> rather stresses present responsibility and encourages action. On the other hand, the Arminian pattern of telling unbelievers that they “can” come to Christ and are therefore responsible is true in a sense and does properly encourage a response of faith.

Would it not be better if evangelists made the proper distinctions between different kinds of ability before making their appeal? Such a suggestion does not indicate a proper understanding of the evangelistic situation. It bids us include very technical theological distinctions in teaching people who have no biblical discernment.

My own conclusion, then, is that Arminian preaching is far better than Arminian theology, better even than some of the worse forms of Calvinistic preaching. If now and then more serious errors enter Arminian sermons, I must be honest and recognize that serious errors often enter Calvinistic sermons as well.

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<sup>10</sup> The qualification pertains to those who because of youth, retardation, brain damage and the like cannot understand the message. I cannot here enter into the problems raised by such cases.

<sup>11</sup> Does Arminian preaching neglect the necessity of grace? One would not know it from John Wesley's sermons, or from Charles Wesley's wonderful "And Can It Be?"

I would have no difficulty inviting a non-Christian friend to hear the gospel from an Arminian evangelist, or from one who, like Billy Graham, does not draw the theological lines between the two very sharply. While I would certainly prefer for myself and family to hear Calvinistic preaching (not at its worst, but at its average or better) as our steady diet, I have no hesitation in admitting that Arminian preachers, on the average, preach the biblical gospel.

This is the kind of mutual analysis I am recommending: discerning, analytical, but sympathetic, not taking historical polemics for granted, but seeking to penetrate beneath those polemics to identify otherwise hidden areas of unity – or diversity. It is a form of analysis that seeks not only to identify differences, but also to assess the weight of those differences, to see them in proper “perspective.”

I cannot, however, leave the subject of true preaching without touching on some other areas. The discussion above pertains mostly to doctrinal assessment. But it is also important to evaluate preaching as to effectiveness, balance of content, style and other matters. A preacher can be perfectly orthodox and yet be a poor communicator. If he fails to get the gospel across to real people, can his preaching be called “true preaching of the word?” I doubt it. Preaching is a form of communication; where communication is lacking, preaching is not really preaching.

Or a preacher can be perfectly orthodox and yet be hung up on certain “hobby horses,” certain pet topics which he preaches constantly to the exclusion of other important biblical truth. That is at least as dangerous as theological error as such. Or a preacher may be so negative in his style and formulations that he fails utterly to communicate the joy and freedom of the gospel. That too is a falsification.

Preaching which presupposes an “ingrown” as opposed to “outward facing” view of the church is a very serious deformity, for it implicitly renounces the church's fundamental task set forth in Matthew 28:19-20.

On these criteria, much preaching which appears quite adequate from a traditional theological analysis comes off looking very bad. I cannot say, as some would, that the traditional theological criteria are the most important; these latter criteria are theological as well. They have to do with our obedience or disobedience to God's Word.<sup>12</sup>

This is why I said earlier that I have sometimes recommended for inquirers to sit under ministries committed to traditions other than the Presbyterian. The question is “how much truth actually gets across?” In my judgment, it is often the

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<sup>12</sup> It is only in this broadened sense that we ought to accept “true preaching of the word” as a mark of the true church. If we take the phrase as referring only to the theoretical orthodoxy of the preacher, we will be mistaken as to what Scripture really expects of the true church.

case that more truth actually gets across in non-Reformed preaching than in Reformed preaching.

I do believe that if we engaged in this kind of analysis, we would find more faults in our own traditions and more virtues in the traditions of others – so much the better for the prospects of reunion.

### **The Right Administration of the Sacraments**

On this criterion, compare Chapter Nine, in which I argued a fairly liberal view of sacramental acceptance of Christians from other denominations. The main tradition of the church has been to accept the sacraments of schismatics, even of some heretics, as valid sacraments, even when there are some errors in the theology and administration of those sacraments.<sup>13</sup> Of course, recognizing the validity of a church's baptism, for instance, is not the same thing as agreeing with that church's theology of baptism. Although I seriously disagree with both Roman Catholics and Baptists as to the theology of baptism, I do not deny that people baptized under such auspices are truly baptized. These are both churches which hold to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, and they are doing what Jesus commanded to initiate members of the church. They may think they are doing much more, or they may deny additional elements of the sacrament that I would affirm; but I cannot deny that they are certainly baptizing, whatever else they may or may not be doing. I would not, myself, participate in a Roman Catholic baptismal ceremony, for I would not want to imply consent to much of what is being said. But I cannot deny that one who receives baptism, even in such a ceremony, is truly baptized.

Very much the same is true with the Lord's Supper. I agree with the Protestant reformers that the Roman mass is blasphemous because in it there is idolatrous worship of the host (thought to be the literal body of Christ) and because the mass is regarded as some sort of continuing sacrifice for sin. These are serious errors, and they would prevent me from participating in Roman Catholic communion unless I could get assurance that those doctrines were not held by the particular congregation in question. Yet I do not deny that in such circumstances the Lord's Supper is being received. Think of a parallel with preaching (for the Reformers usefully regarded the sacraments as “visible words”): A sermon may contain a mixture of error and truth. Yet the presence of error does not prove that the truth has not also been present.

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<sup>13</sup> We should always remember that error is a matter of degree. No one's sacramental theology and practice is perfect; no one's is wrong in every respect.

## Church Discipline

The third mark of the church is that which maintains the presence of the other two. I have mentioned earlier (Chapter Four) that discipline is very much on the wane today in the church, for many reasons, among them denominationalism itself. Very few churches actually have formal judicial processes to discipline, especially to excommunicate those who are involved in sin, even though Scripture clearly provides for them (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; etc.).

The absence of formal discipline does not, of course, mean that discipline is totally absent. Teaching and counseling are themselves forms of discipline. And churches do have informal ways of making unrepentant adulterers, e.g., feel rebuked, even to the point of driving them from the fellowship. This sort of thing is not the best kind of discipline. It is surely better in most cases to have formal procedures available, in addition to the informal process of mutual admonition and rebuke. That way, such matters can be dealt with fairly and in order, rather than allowing gossip and prejudice to go unimpeded as often happens in "informal" discipline. But informal discipline is discipline, nonetheless.

In many cases informal discipline may even be preferable to formal discipline that is harsh, arbitrary, impatient or unloving. The goal of church discipline is always, even in the case of excommunication, to restore the offender (1 Cor.5:5).

Most orthodox churches (judging orthodoxy roughly according to the creed of 381) have enough discipline, formal or informal, to maintain their doctrinal and moral integrity from one generation to the next. We may well wish for more, but the question before us is the minimal definition of a true church. In fairness, I doubt that we will be able to remove many bodies from the list of true churches by reference to the mark of discipline. I would say that the major liberal denominations, as national organizations, lack this mark; or, worse, they use discipline to punish orthodoxy and to enforce error. An example of the latter would be the requirement of the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. that its officers support the ordination of women. But even to say this is not to deny that legitimate discipline exists in these denominations, at least at the congregational and middle (presbyterial, synodical) levels.

## Other Marks?

The traditional marks of the church are still a fairly good guide for us to determine what bodies are and are not true churches. However, they do not, unless they are accompanied by elaborate explanation, adequately characterize the distinctive qualities of the New Testament church as it stands over against the world. For one thing, the traditional marks do not specify the unique task to which the church is called in Matthew 28:19-20. The Great Commission may, to

be sure, be seen as implicit in the other marks, especially that of teaching, as we have seen. But to speak merely of “teaching” may well encourage the ingrowth of the church which I criticized earlier.

Earlier in the chapter, I did indicate what *kind* of “teaching” must be done to do justice to the Great Commission. Here, let me go beyond that and say that the entire ministry of the church is to be “outward facing,” geared to the salvation of the lost and their training to be mature members of the body. A church that is not preoccupied with reaching the unsaved is not merely a weak church; it is not properly a church at all.

Another mark neglected in the usual enumeration is that mark Jesus mentioned when he said “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Earlier I mentioned that discipline ought to be loving. But much more needs to be said here. Love, according to Jesus, is *the* mark; it is *the* means by which Christians are to be distinguished from the world. Paul's way of putting it is also instructive: whatever gifts we have, whether prophecy, tongues, knowledge, faith, generosity, none have any meaning without love (1 Cor. 13:1-3; cf. 1 John 2:10ff; 3:14-18,23; 4:7-21).

Evaluating churches by this mark is bound to involve some element of subjectivity. That is true to some extent of all evaluation, but especially here. Nevertheless, I am very reluctant to recognize as a true church a church where discipline is harsh or mechanical, where the worst features of bureaucracy<sup>14</sup> dominate the administrative structure, where preaching is largely denunciatory, where people have a haughty, prideful or suspicious attitude toward Christians outside their group, where there is no ministry to the poor, where the shepherds beat the sheep rather than feeding and gently leading.

### **What Church Should I Join?**

We should only join “true” churches, defined according to all the marks listed above. Beyond that, God's Word allows us considerable latitude.

In some cases, even a true church will err in such a way as to be undeserving of new members. For instance, if a church requires one to do something sinful as a criterion of membership (supporting abortion, e.g., or supporting theologically liberal colleges, seminaries, missionaries) a believer should not join such a church.

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<sup>14</sup> In general, bureaucracy at its worst looks like this: the official is proud, more interested in guarding his or her turf than in serving the people, contra Matt. 20:26-28. He or she insists on “procedures” even when they hurt people, even when they disrupt rather than help the progress of the church's ministry. The official must have all the forms signed, with i's dotted and t's crossed, because he/she must never be inconvenienced in the work of bookkeeping. At worst, the bureaucrat will impose a major inconvenience on someone else in order to maintain a minor convenience for himself

Otherwise, many criteria may play a role. It is natural for a Christian to seek a church that agrees with his doctrinal position. Most of us don't believe that we will receive excellent teaching unless the teachers of the church interpret Scripture pretty much the way we do. But if one is a Baptist, let's say, and the local Baptist churches lack evangelistic vision and/or mutual love, Scripture certainly permits him to look elsewhere.

Geography, quality of programs for youth and children, depth of worship, and quality of pastoral care all play legitimate roles in our choices. It is wrong, however, to make a choice purely or largely on the basis of denominational affiliation. Indeed, denominational affiliation as such is not at all a biblical criterion, for denominations play no role in New Testament church government. We ought to cultivate an openness to crossing denominational lines when so doing will best meet the spiritual needs of ourselves and our families.

### **What is a Good Candidate For Church Union?**

I can accept most evangelical Arminian churches as true churches, but I would not advocate at this time seeking merger between them and my own denomination.<sup>15</sup> Such a merger would take many years of negotiations, and the prospect of reaching sufficient unity of mind to merge is extremely dim. We must use our energies in the way most helpful to the kingdom and to church unity. Thus, it makes sense first to seek union with those who are closest to us. Presbyterians should seek union with other Presbyterians, Wesleyans with other Wesleyans, Baptists with other Baptists, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

Eventually we wish to merge with all who love the Lord and who demonstrate that love by a profession of faith made credible by their lives. Who does that include? Could a united evangelical denomination ever consider merger with the Roman Catholic Church? Well, by the time we need to cross that bridge, the Roman Catholic church might have changed a great deal! If it has not changed, however, I would regard it as I regard the large liberal Protestant denominations: there are many Christians in these organizations, perhaps godly congregations and regional units as well. But as of now the organization as a whole is committed to so many serious errors that it is not a fit candidate for

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<sup>15</sup> Except, possibly, via joint membership in a kind of evangelical COCU.

<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, one of my correspondents (a Presbyterian) suggests that it might be better if we just dissolve the Presbyterian churches and send the Presbyterians out to join other churches. I suggested in an earlier context that Presbyterian churches tend to have a higher percentage of good teachers than other denominations, while being relatively deficient in other gifts. On my correspondent's proposal, the Presbyterian teachers could influence other bodies in the direction of union. Well, perhaps *all* of our denominations should be dissolved, and we should just scramble ourselves up again, forming congregations along neighborhood lines, perhaps. Like "back to the future," this is an unrealistic proposal which I really don't want to advocate. But it does stimulate the mind in radical directions!

merger into the one, true church. Christians within the church, perhaps even congregations and bishoprics, may be candidates, but not the denomination as a whole.

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