

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 16: Guidelines For Church Union

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When we find a likely candidate for reunion, what then? I cannot here suggest a very specific set of steps – that will vary from case to case. But let me suggest a perspective that ought to guide us through the often difficult process of bringing churches back together.

Church Union as Reunion and Reconciliation

I have been using the phrases "church union" and "merger" because of their familiarity and because I wanted to postpone some refinements to these concepts until this point in the book. Actually, I prefer to speak (as I have from time to time) of *reunion* rather than of union. This is to keep reminding ourselves that organizational church union is not something which we are seeking to create for the first time. Rather, it was created by Jesus Christ and (in its organizational dimension) destroyed by the sins of human beings. That disunity has been perpetuated by sinful attitudes and practices of which all of us have probably in some measure and at some times been guilty. What we seek now, therefore, is most precisely described not as union but as reunion.

The particular kind of reunion we are speaking about involves reconciliation. We are apart because of sin, or at least because of perceptions of sin (recall Chapter Eleven). Scripture tells us that when someone sins against us (Matt. 18:15ff.), or when someone rightly or wrongly perceives that we have sinned against him (Matt. 5:23ff.), we must go to that person and try to straighten things out. Scripture puts such a high priority on reconciliation that it tells us to interrupt an act of worship, if necessary, to accomplish it (compare Eph. 4:26: "do not let the sun go down on your anger"). If reconciliation has such a high priority in Scripture, certainly church reunion, a form of reconciliation, also has a high

priority. Church reunion is not a luxury that we can postpone indefinitely; it is a sore need of the church today (recall Part One).

In the (lamentably defunct) *Presbyterian Journal*,¹ there was an article entitled "Yes, But Can She Cook?" which compared church union discussions to courtship and suggested a thorough analysis of one another's strengths and weaknesses before any union could take place. The courtship metaphor is a common one in discussions of any kind of "merger," ecclesiastical or corporate. That metaphor does add some vividness (and sometimes refreshing levity) to the discussion. And it does describe well the kind of thinking which, alas, usually dominates discussions of church union. But we must remember that it is *only* a metaphor, and, in one sense, a deeply misleading one. Church union is not "courtship"; it is reconciliation after illegitimate separation. A much better family metaphor would be the remarriage of a couple who had sinfully divorced.²

Now, "Yes, but can she cook?" is a question appropriate to courtship. A single person normally has no divine obligation to marry any other particular person, and so he or she has the luxury of being able to scrutinize carefully all the strengths and weaknesses of any marriage candidate. So, any number of things, cooking included, may be sufficient to postpone or cancel the wedding plans. There is nothing obligatory or urgent (in most circumstances) about such a marriage.

But the situation is very different in the case of two people who have sinfully divorced. They *must* remarry; God requires it.³ And since reconciliation is involved, the matter is *urgent*, not to be delayed. People in this position do not have the luxury of sorting out all of each others' strengths and weaknesses, as if, say, the man could forego remarriage if he decided his wife were not intelligent enough. They must remarry whether or not the remarriage appears to be wise from the standpoint of human calculation. They must remarry even though they might now prefer to remain single or to choose other partners. They must remarry even if their human wisdom concludes that remarriage would weaken them or frustrate them in some way.

In the reconciliation model, "yes, but can she cook?" is a tragically inappropriate question. Imagine a sinfully divorced man refusing reconciliation on the ground that he doesn't like his wife's cooking. We can see how different is the courtship model from the divorce/reconciliation model of church reunion. The courtship model denies the urgency and the obligation of reunion. It pictures church union as something we can take or leave, depending on even minor

¹ Jan. 21, 1981.

² Even this metaphor is not strong enough. For often in divorce, even when one spouse is sinful in divorcing the other, the other spouse is free to remarry the original partner or not. See John Murray, *Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961). But in the ecclesiastical case, both parties have an obligation to reunite if such reunion does not otherwise violate God's will.

³ With the qualification mentioned in the previous footnote.

personal preferences. The reconciliation model, however, reflects Jesus' passion for the unity of his body.

On the reconciliation model, church union may not be refused-- except for conscience sake. That one qualification is necessary. Some union invitations, after all, come with strings attached; they require (or render likely) changes in doctrine or practice which an individual, church or denomination cannot accept in good conscience. We cannot enter any body where we will be required to sin as a condition of continued membership in good standing. Such invitations are not true opportunities for reunion; they do not rebuild the church that Jesus established. But with that one exception, we must affirm the implication of the reconciliation model: *We must accept any union proposal that we can accept in good conscience.*

Burden of Proof

Because of our "exception" above, union is never a foregone conclusion. Any church or denomination contemplating union must do some thinking about it first. But that thinking should be limited to the question whether there are any *barriers to conscience* in the proposed union. The question is not whether we will be strengthened or weakened by a union;⁴ the question is rather whether we will commit sin by entering into it.

The question, then, is not "why merge?" but "why *not* merge?" Our job is negative rather than positive: we must look for conscientious obstacles to union, not for reasons to unite. That means that the burden of proof is always on the *opponents* of union. This fits the biblical pattern we observed earlier in this book: in Scripture, people are innocent until proven guilty. The burden of proof is always on the prosecution. Union discussions are much like judicial trials: opponents of union are in fact accusing the other denomination of some error or sin that would prevent union. They must bear the burden of proof; they must present convincing evidence. *Otherwise, the union should be accepted.*

I cannot express this point too strongly. Let me reiterate it by sharing an experience. In 1986, the OPC General Assembly discussed whether they should unite with the PCA. I was a commissioner, and I made a speech contending for the above point, that commissioners should vote *for* the union unless they were persuaded on conscientious grounds not to do so. I emphasized that the burden of proof was on the opponents of union and argued the point somewhat as I have here. Later a fellow elder stood up and made a speech in which he argued the opposite: those in doubt about the union should play it safe, in effect, by voting

⁴ If another denomination is weaker than our own (and of course our judgments in these matters are very fallible), our obligation is not to abandon it to its own resources; rather our obligation is to add our resources to it. Union with a weaker body should be seen as a joyous opportunity to help our weaker brothers and sisters.

against it. He may have used Romans 14:23, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." The elder did not refer at all to my previous speech, and he made no attempt to reply to my arguments; therefore I did not take him very seriously and I made no attempt to reply. But after the union vote failed, a number of men told me (to my astonishment, I confess) that my fellow-elder's speech had greatly influenced the decision.

So, in case that sort of reasoning is persuasive to any of my readers, let me reply now as I should have replied at the Assembly: *Scripture puts the burden of proof on the opponents of union.* Therefore, if someone is in doubt about union with another denomination, except on ground of conscience, *he must resolve that doubt in favor of the union.* To do otherwise than follow Scripture is not to "play it safe"; it is to invite the fatherly discipline of God upon ourselves, which can at times be very severe. And as for Romans 14:23, an anti-union vote contrary to scriptural criteria *cannot* be done "in faith." *Voting against union in such circumstances is sin.*

One more point about burden of proof. Bearing the burden of proof means taking responsibility for the quality of evidence presented. I have often been appalled at the amount of gossip, unsubstantiated rumor and such that are presented as evidence in discussions of church union. In a judicial trial of an individual, civil or ecclesiastical, the court would be subject to rules of evidence, cross-examination would be allowed, replies to all allegations would be solicited, unclear matters clarified. But in union discussions, all these safeguards are typically absent, and discussion proceeds as if anything can be said that comes to mind, no matter what harm to people or loss of truth. This is sin. That would be obvious if someone were being excommunicated on the basis of such flimsy evidence. But to reject a union is in effect to excommunicate an entire denomination! Yet, we accept extremely low standards of evidence in such serious deliberations. In my view, church union discussions ought to be conducted with judicial formality, with representatives of the other body invited to reply to allegations, and strict rules of evidence.

Non-Conscience Problems

I have said that we should support unions except where conscience prevents us. What of those problems which are not really problems of *conscience* but which make unions difficult to achieve? Say that we disagree strongly with the way the other denomination finances its missions efforts. Or that we do not particularly like the Sunday school materials produced by the other group. Or that we don't want to be assessed to support their college. Should issues like these prevent or postpone reunion? Many, certainly, would want at least to negotiate such matters before agreeing to unite.

But what does God say? Again, imagine a sinfully divorced husband and wife "negotiating" their remarriage. Since the divorce, the wife has acquired some drapes that the husband doesn't care for; or her obnoxious brother has come to live in the house; or she has had an ugly house addition built over the husband's back yard putting green. Must these matters all be worked out before remarriage? God says no. Remarriage is a biblical norm. Then how are these differences to be resolved? Within the marriage, of course. The couple should remarry even if they cannot agree on all these secondary matters. Then they should work out the problems (under the headship of the husband, I believe) and in openness to the counsel of the church if necessary.

The same is true for church unions. What is God's method for resolving disputes over mission financing, support of colleges, etc.? It's the deliberation and government of the church, of course. In my Presbyterian theology, such decisions are made (at appropriate levels and with provision for appeal) by local sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies. Other governmental systems have different ways of doing it. But clearly the way to resolve these matters is not to shout at one another over man-made denominational barriers, or to throw out ultimatums that this or that must change or we will not unite.

Another fellow-elder who opposed the OPC-PCA union argued that much more discussion was needed over the sorts of matters described in the last two paragraphs. He felt that not to discuss these matters was to submit to a "corporate takeover," i.e. simply to let the other church take us over on its terms. In a sense he was right. That particular union would have submerged our tiny OPC (20,000 members) in a much larger PCA (200,000 members) so that the larger church surely would have had the deciding voice in any matter on which the two bodies differed. So my fellow elder favored more negotiations, agreements as conditions of union, promises that on at least some matters things would be done *our way*.

My reply: what my fellow-elder was asking for was really quite undemocratic and unpresbyterian. Had we merged with the PCA, we would have remained elders, members of various church courts in which we would have been entitled to one vote each. In effect, the former OPC men would have one vote to the ten of those who had been in the PCA. That is only fair; in the Presbyterian system one elder has one vote. On the basis of such votes, the various issues could have been resolved. What my fellow elder was asking for was something more than "one man, one vote." He was asking to have an influence out of proportion to his actual status as one elder in the church of Christ. He was demanding that the majority accept minority positions as a condition of union. But that isn't even remotely fair, let alone scriptural. Of course, church constitutions, like civil ones, often contain special considerations for minority rights, and that is often proper. But even those can fairly be determined only by majority vote.

God's way is that such issues should be resolved *in* the church, not over pre-merger negotiation tables. The proper order is first to unite (if we can do so in good conscience) and then to deal with those problems that are not matters of conscience.

Problems of Conscience

I have said, however, that we should reject mergers that would involve us in sin. What sorts of things do I have in mind?

In discussing the nature of a true church in Chapter Twelve, I used (with some supplements and explications) the reformation criteria of the preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and discipline. Certainly, if a merger proposal is not to create problems of conscience, it must involve nothing but true churches. But beyond this, recall that many true churches have fallen prey to serious errors in doctrine and practice. I would not advocate union with any body that required me to teach error or to do something I regard as sinful.

To give an example, I would never advocate that my PCA merge with the large, mostly liberal Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. Though I grant that there are many godly people in the latter denomination and, indeed, some fine congregations, my fellow PCA elders and I could not conscientiously accept the present requirements of PCUSA eldership. For example, the PCUSA requires elders to subscribe to a Book of Confessions, including the Confession of 1967 which legitimizes Barthian theology within the church. Further, the weakness of the ordination vows in the PCUSA raises questions about whether any substantial (formal!) theological discipline can be accomplished within that denomination. And the denomination requires ministers to participate in the ordination of women elders, which I, like most in the PCA, believe to be an unscriptural practice.⁵

Now, if it were possible to protest these unscriptural practices within the PCUSA with reasonable hope that these policies might be reversed in the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline, then it would not be wrong for us to join the PCUSA while conscientiously refusing to follow its policies in these areas (assuming that they would accept us as members under such conditions). But we should recall that the mark of "discipline" is needed in order to reverse such errors. The important question, then, is whether there is adequate discipline in the PCUSA to reverse these errors. At the moment I am inclined to say no.

In a sense, then, questions about the Word and sacraments reduce to questions about discipline. If there is sufficient discipline, errors in the other areas

⁵ Indeed, the denomination *requires* congregations to elect a certain quota of women elders. PCUSA discipline is, in my view, extremely weak in enforcing biblical orthodoxy, but very strong in enforcing this *unbiblical* practice.

can be dealt with; if there is not sufficient discipline, even agreements on Word and sacraments cannot be expected to continue.

Therefore the most important question when contemplating merger is: *Can we trust the courts of a united denomination?* If we can trust the courts of a united denomination, then we can work out disagreements of doctrine and practice, together with the more trivial kinds of concerns (the "yes, but can she cook?" questions) discussed in the last section. If that italicized question can be answered yes, then we ought to unite; if not, then no, at least for now.

In my view, then, this is the *only* question that ought to be "on the table" prior to merger. All other questions, insofar as they have some legitimacy, are wrapped up in this one.

Joining and Receiving

Some years ago, representatives of three small Presbyterian bodies (OPC, PCA, RPCES) met to discuss the possibility of union. It was assumed that if these bodies wished to unite they would first have to go through a period of negotiation to determine the nature of the new united church. No one looked forward to such negotiations; typically they would take years, deal with all sorts of trivia, seek to overcome all sorts of petty objections. But one of those at the meeting had a bright idea. One representative asked the others, "What if we simply asked to *join* you?" The idea caught on, and the concept of "joining and receiving" was born. Indeed, that concept led to union between RPCES and PCA in 1981. The OPC was left out of the 1981 union but was given a second chance, which it turned down in 1986.⁶

"J&R" is an exciting concept, one which fits very well into the reconciliation model I have been advocating. It says, "If you can do it conscientiously, then simply join, and afterward work out your problems, as God intended, in the councils of the church, not around an interdenominational negotiating table. It is a promising model for those situations in which problems of conscience are not likely to be raised, usually where two or more denominations are very close to one another in doctrine and practice. In general I find it far superior to the negotiating table procedure, both for theological and for practical reasons. It is faster, more efficient than the other, and it adequately represents the biblical urgency of union.

It does not necessarily succeed, of course. The 1986 attempt failed because some in the OPC developed (in my view unjustified) problems of conscience, and because others elevated non-conscientious problems to an

⁶ Actually a majority of the assembly voted in favor of union, but a 2/3 vote was required and the total was considerably lower than that proportion.

unbiblically high level of priority. But it was a worthy attempt, and I would recommend consideration of it in other evangelical circles.⁷

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⁷ It was to the J&R method of union that my friend mentioned earlier objected, claiming it was like a "corporate takeover." I still believe my reply to him was sufficient.