

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 17: May We Ever Leave a Church?

by John M. Frame

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After all this emphasis on the importance of unity, some may be troubled with the question of whether or not one is ever justified in leaving one church (or denomination) to join another. You might think that I believe (as some have written) that a person must stay in his church for the rest of his life, barring a large geographical move.

Actually, however, my view is toward the opposite extreme. I believe that there are many legitimate reasons for moving between churches and between denominations. Indeed, I believe in very liberal emigration procedures. The walls between denominations and churches ought to be very low. My hope is that so many will move back and forth from one denomination to another that in time it will be difficult to tell the denominations apart!

As to the justifications for such transfers, I have referred to them from time to time in earlier chapters, but I would like to present them more explicitly here. In a sense, this chapter is something of a digression, not part of the overall argument in favor of church union. Those who want to follow the argument narrowly defined should skip this material and move on to the next chapter. I do, however, feel some obligation to pause here in order to gather together some loose ends. So, as in the last chapter I gave some "Guidelines for Church Union," I will in this chapter give some "Guidelines for Church Division."

When is it permissible to leave one body and join another? First, I believe that it is almost never right to leave one denomination in order to *start* a new one. There are plenty of denominations around already! These have a wide variety of theologies, practices, and styles. Surely one is not being very thoughtful if he cannot find a single one that honors his concerns. Why should we ever create a *new* division in the body of Christ, a *new* barrier to reunion?

In terms of the above principle, I believe that both OPC and PCA have erred. Both denominations broke away from their previous denominations and started new ones. Neither was justified in my view. The founders of the OPC, granted that they had just cause to leave the PCUSA, could have joined the Christian Reformed Church, the United Presbyterian Church of North America, the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Synod, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church or others. The founders of the PCA could have joined the already existing OPC or some of the other bodies mentioned. (The United Presbyterian Church of North America no longer existed when the PCA founders left the PCUS.)

Why did they not join already existing bodies? It's hard to say. My guess is that they did not want to endure the shock of the unfamiliar in addition to the other shocks they were receiving. They wanted a fellowship pretty much like the ones they left, minus the grievance which brought the break. That motive, of course, is not scriptural.

The argument they used, however, was this: "our previous denomination, whether through apostasy as such or just through committing grave sin, has relinquished its right to the allegiance of God's people. It is our purpose to be the *continuance* of our former denomination's testimony." Thus, one of the early names for the PCA was the "Continuing Presbyterian Church." But to be the "continuing" body, they could not join some already existing denomination.

I hesitate to describe this argument as a bad one, pure and simple. I suspect it would have seemed a lot more plausible to me if I had been in on the founding of one of these denominations. Yet, at this moment, while I understand the sentiment underlying this concept, I must reject it as unbiblical. Scripture doesn't call us to "continue" the testimony of old, wasted denominations. It simply calls us to testify for Jesus. The PCUS, of which the PCA saw itself a "continuance," was itself a mere denomination, a split in Jesus body. A split in Jesus' body is not a fit subject for Christian celebration, or even perpetuation. The PCUS and the PCUSA broke with one another during the Civil War. That split should not have occurred, in my opinion.¹ Therefore, in my view, the PCUS should never have existed. It does not deserve to be "continued" by its evangelical successor.²

If there are any exceptions to this rule I do not know of them. Therefore, I would urge those who have good reasons for leaving a church body to join an already existing denomination rather than starting a new one.

¹ Remember Jeroboam: political division does not necessitate religious division.

² Of course it is legitimate to honor the work that God did through the PCUS. But that can be done without "continuing" the denomination as such.

But when is it legitimate to leave one church/denomination and join another? I think there are many legitimate reasons, but also many potential dangers.

In many cases, such transfer is a minor matter. When a church member is transferred to another city and for some reason or other prefers to join a church of a different denomination (one fairly close to the first in doctrine and practice) he or she rarely undergoes any criticism at all. When the pastor of a church accepts a call to be pastor of a church in a different denomination (again, of the same doctrinal family), he rarely arouses any opposition. That is the way it ought to be. Denominations are not New Testament institutions, but divisions *imposed upon* the New Testament church. In the New Testament, apostles, prophets and church workers (like Aquila and Priscilla) moved freely from place to place, ministering to different churches. We should have the same freedom to do that today, even when such moves require us to cross denominational barriers.

People sometimes argue that interdenominational transfer is a breaking of vows or a betrayal of fellowship, but I cannot see any value in that sort of argument. Of course, people often take vows when they join a church, but those vows never include the promise that one will remain a member of that church/denomination for life. Nor is one who seeks transfer necessarily "betraying" anything, anymore than did the Apostle Paul when he said good-bye to the Ephesian elders and went on to Jerusalem.

It is sometimes said (indeed, I once used to say this) that one ought not to transfer in order to escape from some interpersonal problem in the church. It is true that people sometimes leave a church in order to avoid having to confront a brother or sister about a difficult situation according to Matthew 18 and Matthew 5. That, of course, is wrong. We must settle our differences in biblical ways. Still, one can settle differences with a brother in a biblical way without remaining in the same congregation or denomination with him. Thus, whether there are unresolved interpersonal problems is irrelevant to the question of whether someone can/should leave.

I also once said that one should never leave a church or denomination in order to flee possible discipline. But I have changed my view on that matter also. When one is under discipline by one denomination, he has the right to appeal to the Christian church beyond that denominational limit, just as during the New Testament period there were (I believe) courts of the whole church to which such a one might make his case. When someone under discipline leaves one church to join another, he is in effect making an "appeal" of his conviction to another part of the body of Christ. That second part may uphold the initial discipline, or they may question it. In either case, it seems to me that justice is being done, albeit in a very imperfect way.

I also used to say that one should never leave a church if that church needs him/her in order to survive. But from God's point of view, no human being is indispensable. If he wants a weak church to keep going, he will supply the gifts that church needs. On the other hand, I have come to the view that it is not a tragedy when a tiny, stagnant, sick church folds up and dies. It is better for the members of such churches to be part of living, dynamic fellowships than to stay forever in a situation where they are constantly discouraged and, most likely, not being properly fed.

So, today I can think of no circumstances in which one would be forbidden to leave a church or a denomination. If one makes such a change, e.g., because he prefers the preaching in the new church, that may be a perfectly legitimate expression of need. Perhaps the first pastor's sermons were too simple or too difficult. We need to be where God's Word addresses us meaningfully (otherwise we could worship in a language unknown to us!). Perhaps one wishes to make a change because another church has a better Sunday school. To put it that way may seem to cater to the oft despised "consumer mentality," but this may simply represent a desire to have better teaching for one's children – and that is a perfectly scriptural desire.

Some denominations erect very unscriptural barriers against transfer, especially when it is a congregation rather than an individual which is seeking to make a move. Some denominations hold that they have a "proprietary interest" in their congregations, even to the point where the congregation's property is "held in trust for the denomination." The PCUSA has even taken congregations to secular courts (directly violating 1 Cor. 6:1-11) to maintain its supposed property rights. But no matter what the secular courts may say, the New Testament gives no such proprietary rights to any denomination. One might make a case to the effect that congregational property is held in trust for the *church*. But as we have seen, "denomination" and "church" are not the same thing. So much confusion is caused by the inability to distinguish these two concepts!

Indeed, from an ecumenical point of view (to rejoin the main drift of this book), it would probably be best if there were more frequent transfers from one denomination to another, of both individuals and congregations. We need to tread down the denominational barriers over and over again. Perhaps then they will eventually fall so low that they won't ever be noticed again.

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