

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 18: Short of Union, What?

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I could wish that this book would sell millions of copies and touch off a mad stampede among Christians toward reunion of the one, true church. However, to be honest, I really don't have the faith to believe that that will happen. More likely, the book will stimulate some reflection, some discussion, and in time God might use it, together with many other providential factors, to lead his church toward some degree of deeper oneness. Full reunion could be a long way off, perhaps not until after Christ returns.¹

Indeed, most readers of this book probably will not be in a position to wield significant influence to make major changes in the denominational configuration. Many of you are not pastors, bishops, elders or the like. I myself am a minister, but that only means that I have one vote in my presbytery and one (sometimes) in General Assembly: one vote in a denomination (PCA) that is in my opinion rather uninterested in, even suspicious of, ecumenism.

So what short-term goals should we seek, by steps however small, as means toward the long-term goal of reunion? Let me make some suggestions:

Interdenominational Cooperation

If two denominations cannot merge for one reason or another, certainly the next best thing is that they fellowship together as much as possible in order to get to know one another, to break down stereotypes, to persuade one another

¹ On the other hand: God keeps rebuking my lack of faith. If communism can collapse over a year's time, why not denominationalism?

when that is necessary, and so on. Often, where conscience permits, this would include joint ministries of various kinds.

Among the tiny Presbyterian bodies in which I spend most of my time, there is the concept of a "fraternal relationship." These relationships vary in detail, but usually churches in this relationship receive members from one another via letter of transfer without requiring any additional examination or profession of faith. Ministerial transfer is somewhat more difficult, but usually at least without any stigma. Fraternal churches also exchange pulpits with a minimum of difficulty, and they send representatives to one another's presbytery and general assembly meetings to bring greetings. Indeed, even ministers other than official representatives can be seated in the presbytery meetings of a fraternal denomination and be recognized (by vote) as "corresponding members" of the assembly, with privilege of the floor but not the right to vote.

The fraternal relationship is actually a kind of halfway union. For it presupposes that both denominations in the relationship accept the doctrinal and practical soundness of the other. Each body recognizes the soundness of the preaching, sacraments and discipline of the other; each recognizes the wisdom and other gifts to be found in the other group.

Such fraternal relationships are an excellent way of becoming better acquainted, where that is thought to be necessary. My major problem with it is that in many cases they seem to be used as an illegitimate substitute for actual union. When two denominations recognize the soundness of one another's ministry, sacraments and discipline to the extent of permitting such levels of joint ministry, one may rightly ask, "Why not go all the way to union?" What can legitimately prevent union when two bodies so freely exchange members and preachers?

Indeed I have experienced the odd spectacle of sitting in a union discussion where fellow elders criticized a *fraternal church* as "not of like faith and practice." These elders wanted to maintain the fraternal relation, but did not want to merge. But if two churches are so different in faith and practice that they should not merge, then they should not be fraternal churches either. And surely, if two churches are fraternally related, then the issue of whether they are "alike in faith and practice" is already settled. Union talks ought to focus on other matters.

Nevertheless, fraternal relations are better than nothing, and they can provide a kind of compromise when two denominations are considering union but want to overcome their skittishness first.

Another sort of pre-union relationship might be an organization of denominations (most likely within the same confessional family) which covenant together to work toward union. An example is the National Association of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (NAPARC) which meets regularly for inter-

denominational discussions and to share suggestions about pre-union cooperation. This is something similar to what I called earlier an "Evangelical COCU." NAPARC has been a useful organization, and I recommend this approach to other confessional groupings.

Para-Church Ministries

Much of the work of the gospel today is carried out not through churches and denominations, but through organizations not officially connected with such bodies, known as "para-church" ministries. Examples would be Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, independent mission boards like the Sudan Interior Mission, independent publications like *Christianity Today*, independent seminaries like Reformed Theological Seminary (where I teach), and publishers like Baker Book House without denominational connection.

Some people are very critical of such ministries, arguing that all the work of the church ought to be done by churches and denominations, not by independent groups.

I agree that only the church is appointed by God to carry out the Great Commission. Only the church has the mandate to do the work of the church. But what is the church? I have argued in this book that the church is the one, true church of the New Testament; a church which has been marred by denominationalism but which has not been entirely destroyed. The highest court of the one, true church still exists, and, indeed, it is doing its job very well! I speak of the throne of Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven who rules his church as the head of the body. And the "lowest" courts of the one, true church also still exist and still function: the rulers of the local congregations. The problem is in the middle-level courts. To whom may a local congregation appeal when they have a problem too hard for them to resolve (as in Exod. 18:26)? God's plan was to have united rule of the church within larger regional units; but that rule has broken down. Replacing it has been denominational rule. So, a church in this position cannot appeal to a court of the *church* as a whole; it can appeal only to a *denominational* court, i.e., one which rules those within a particular *faction* of the church.

Christians recognize almost instinctively, I think, that there is something wrong here. God's intention is not to restrict us to using the wisdom and other gifts only from believers in our own denomination. His intention is that *all* Christians share their gifts with one another as members of Christ's body. Denominationalism naturally, unconsciously, frustrates this purpose of mutual sharing. But do denominations have the right, beyond this, consciously to *prevent* such sharing from taking place? That is what happens when denominations

demand that we work in ministry together only with people from our own denomination. Do they have a right to demand that?

We need to recognize that in an important sense *denominations themselves are para-church organizations*. God did not authorize denominations. As we have seen, they play no role in the government of the New Testament church. Denominations are the result of human sin. It is not wrong for us to use them to approximate the sort of government ordained in Scripture. But they do not have the exclusive right to govern the ministry of God's people. Indeed, as I have argued, it is wrong for them to call themselves "churches," as in "Church of the Brethren." Nothing like a denomination is ever called a church in the Bible.

Denominations are, to put it paradoxically, para-church organizations that we have set up to govern the church and to carry on much of its ministry. But there is no reason why, in the current fractured condition of the church, *other* para-church organizations should not be formed for purposes other than basic government, uniting Christians at other levels than those of denominations.

I can agree, again, that only the church is to carry out the Great Commission. But that is very different from saying that only *denominations* may carry out the Great Commission. That second point is the one being made by critics of para-church organizations, and I think it is quite wrong. Scripture does not give to denominations exclusive rights to govern Christian ministry.

Para-church ministries are the result of an intense hunger within the church to *get together*. We know in our hearts that we don't have the resources within our individual congregations and denominations to do everything that needs to be done. We need to be able to benefit from *all* the gifts Jesus gives his body. We know that total reunion is not likely, humanly speaking, in the near future. But we rightly ask, why shouldn't we unite to meet some special needs that cannot easily be met by denominations working separately, like college ministry, city-wide evangelism, etc.?

Another argument against para-church ministries is that they are not subject to church discipline. But that is not necessarily true. Certainly the general rule is that leaders of para-church organizations are members of churches and of denominations, and therefore subject to church discipline. Doubtless there is some awkwardness in the fact that the same organization may have leaders who are members of many different churches and denominations, and that the total organization is not answerable to any church. But that is an awkwardness created by denominationalism itself, and that sort of awkwardness is certainly not a compelling argument against the concept.

Like fraternal relations, but in a different way, para-church ministries are a kind of halfway house to union. They allow us to share gifts, as Scripture provides and requires, without actual organizational union. They provide

opportunities to fellowship and minister together, opportunities which, for many, are prerequisites to union.

All in all, I encourage the development of para-church ministries. I see nothing against them in Scripture, and experience shows that God has made good use of them, for the most part. We should not, however, be satisfied with them. We should work toward the day in which a reunited church will take all its ministry responsibilities back upon itself.

And of course a warning is in order to those Christians who avoid the churches and seek to get all of their Christian fellowship and edification in para-church organizations. That too is not God's way. To paraphrase a Christian cartoon I recall from some years ago, Jesus founded a church, not a Christian coffee house. He wants his people to be under the oversight and teaching of ordained elders and to receive the sacraments.

Partial Unions

We need to think more creatively about possible steps to reunion. There are various ways short of total union that denominations can move in the direction of reunion.

Consider a union discussion between a Presbyterian body which sings only musical arrangements of Old Testament Psalms (such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America) and a body that rejects that restriction (such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). Let us say that tolerance is not an option in this case, the RPCNA representatives demanding that their convictions be maintained in their churches with the force of discipline.

In this case one solution might be to allow congregations to discipline according to their convictions on this matter, and that persons disciplined by a local congregation would not have the option of appealing to a higher court. Another possibility, more favorable to the RPNA position: group the former RPNA congregations into "Psalm-singing presbyteries" which would use their discipline to require exclusive Psalm singing in their congregations. These presbyteries would be linked to the former OPC presbyteries in a General Assembly governing both; but discipline cases over Psalm singing could not be appealed to General Assembly, and would have to be resolved at the presbytery level.

That is not really a complete church union, but it is a union for most practical purposes. Similarly, Episcopal churches could set aside certain dioceses for the enforcement of minority positions which could not otherwise be honored. Congregational churches, of course, would not have this sort of problem, since each congregation is relatively autonomous in any case, and since appeals, when possible, are handled only by ad hoc assemblies.

Voluntary Realignment

In the late 1960s, when renewed discussion began of merger between the northern (PCUSA) and southern (PCUS) Presbyterian churches, some people (mostly conservatives) proposed that instead of merger, the churches be open to "voluntary realignment." What that meant was that ministers, members and congregations would be free to join whichever of the two denominations they pleased. These people expected that liberals would leave the southern church to join the northern church, and conservatives vice versa, leaving the southern church more conservative and the northern church more liberal, but allowing both to function as nationwide bodies. That idea was never approved or implemented.

More recently, as I have mentioned, several congregations of the OPC have left to join the PCA, seeking to "realign" with others with more similar priorities. I was among them. Comments:

1. In some ways, realignment is counter-productive to eventual reunion. It leaves denominations more different from one another than before. It also often stirs up resentments within the denomination from which a group departs.

2. Normally, realignment is not desirable when it is merely a means of finding a denomination more in agreement with one's own priorities. In general, it is better to have different kinds of priorities represented in each denomination. Homemakers and breadwinners should be together. (Recall Chapter Twelve.)

3. However, these considerations must be balanced against the overriding importance of the Great Commission. If the priorities of a denomination keep someone from carrying out the ministry to which God has called him, then he ought to realign.

4. In general, it is best that realignment be made easy, as I argued in the last chapter. This is not only permitted by Scripture, but it is important to the prospect of reunion. I do believe that Christians instinctively want to "get together." When they are allowed to move easily from one denomination to another, they will tend to form large groups in which the diversity of the Spirit's gifts is maximized. That is helpful to the prospect of reunion.

Intra-denominational Policies

There are many denominational policies that need to be rethought in view of the points I have been making; many of these policies are detrimental to the prospects for reunion and have nothing to recommend them except denominational chauvinism. I mentioned some of these in the last chapter, e.g. the policy of some churches to insist that the denomination has a "proprietary interest" in its congregations. Another example: The Christian Reformed Church

requires that all its candidates for the ministry attend its own seminary, Calvin Theological Seminary, for at least one year, even if they have a seminary degree from another institution, and that they be recommended to the church by the seminary faculty as a prerequisite to ordination.² Calvin Seminary has among the most difficult entrance requirements of any seminary. These requirements make it very difficult for anyone not of CRC background to enter the ministry of the church. Doubtless this requirement was formulated at a time when the heavily ethnic Dutch church, wary of American cultural influences, desired to safeguard its future orthodoxy. Ironically, it has now happened that Calvin Seminary itself has come under fire by some in the denomination.

I will not here try to determine who is most correct in the controversy between Calvin's supporters and detractors. The very fact that suspicions exist, I think, is a problem because it shows that there is lack of trust within the body. That lack of trust, I believe, is itself related to the denomination's seminary policy. On that policy, not on the theology of the Calvin faculty, I do intend to express an opinion.

There is, for one thing, no way to keep "outside influences" out of a denomination or a seminary. Seminary professors, even those born and raised within a denomination, usually go outside the denomination at some point for advanced training. That training is often considered a necessity, for theological professors are supposed to be aware of the latest scholarship. They often receive this training at the hands of scholars with theological views that would not be acceptable in a conservative denomination. We like to hope that such advanced students have the discernment to judge rightly what in their instruction is compatible with orthodoxy and what is not, but such hopes are not always fulfilled. Where students have not been discerning, the church must be vigilant to exercise its proper discipline. But one thing is certain: those who accept such opportunities for training are going to bring back with them "outside influences," for better or worse. Otherwise, what is the point of the training?

For other reasons, too, it is impossible to keep "outside ideas" from influencing a denomination. In the modern world, information is spread rapidly and widely by many media. More seriously, God himself opposes the insulation of denominations from others; his true church is not limited to one denomination, and he wants his sons and daughters to communicate their love and knowledge freely to one another. Indeed, the best protection for denominational orthodoxy is not to bar the doors against invasion from outside, but rather to be open to what God is teaching the *whole* body of Christ through the Scriptures. Denominations need new blood, from time to time, to facilitate this process. Or, to change the metaphor, they need to be cross-fertilized by other segments of the body. Left entirely to itself, no denomination has sufficient resources to guard its orthodoxy

² In addition to my other problems with this arrangement, which shall be evident shortly, I question strongly the scriptural basis for giving to a seminary faculty virtual veto power over ordinations.

or vitality. From this isolation come problems of unorthodoxy, as well as of unjustified *suspicion* of unorthodoxy, that is, lack of trust.

Evangelical denominations that try to bar the door against the influence of evangelicals of other backgrounds, but which welcome college and seminary professors with training in institutions (usually liberal or outrightly non-Christian) outside the denomination, have the worst of all possible worlds. They open themselves on the one hand to the possibility or suspicion of liberal influence, but on the other hand they deny to themselves the help of God's gifts to the body outside their own circles.

Let us seek to break down those structures in our denominations which serve only to discourage outsiders from joining us. A denomination has the right to examine ministerial candidates, to guard the orthodoxy of its ministry. But it should not keep people out of its ministry only because they have different background, have not mastered denominational buzzwords, and/or have different priorities from the majority of the denomination.

Toward a Trans-Denominational Loyalty

Finally, I urge that we discourage the tendency in our communions toward denominational chauvinism: that is, wasting God's time promoting the interests of our denomination over against those of others.

In the events noted earlier, when several congregations moved from OPC to PCA, a lot of tears were shed. Tears are appropriate at any parting (see Acts 20:36-38). But these tears were not simply mourning the loss of close contact. Rather, they often had a different meaning.

One man wept because some of his family had been part of one of these congregations for many years, had made many contributions to it, and now their church was being taken away from them. Now they would have no place to go to church! I tried to sympathize with my brother, but I confess to some feeling of outrage. No place to go to church?! It wasn't as if the church was going defunct, or merging with a liberal congregation. It was only changing from one evangelical Presbyterian denomination to another! Surely the past contributions of this family were not going to be lost or negated. Rather, they were going to be fulfilled in a new phase of the church's ministry. The tears, I fear, were tears of denominational chauvinism – tears for which the Scriptures show no sympathy.

Another man wept because he and his church had supplied money and leadership to one of the churches that were leaving. Now, said the elder, that church is "gone." "Gone?!" I thought. Only gone to another denomination!

Another man, noting that two of those advocating the transfers taught at Westminster Seminary in California,³ proposed that the OPC establish its own seminary so that OPC ministerial candidates might not have to sit under the baleful influence of "realigners." That elder wanted a seminary which would almost uncritically support the OPC, recommending the OPC to its students above all other denominations as a place of service. In my view, that, too, is denominational chauvinism. A faculty member would have to be intellectually dishonest to present the OPC as the only legitimate home for evangelical Presbyterians, for in fact there are several other denominations which sincerely subscribe to precisely the same doctrines as the OPC and which display the other marks of the true church which we discussed earlier.

But my prize for denominational chauvinism⁴ goes to the OPC General Assembly several years ago which determined that no home missions aid be given to any congregation that fails to use the name "Orthodox Presbyterian Church" in its church name. Many of our churches had not used that name because it was not well understood in their communities and was "turning off" visitors. That particular General Assembly evidently put a higher value on denominational publicity than upon reaching communities with the gospel.

It is right to promote what God is doing in your own denomination, and to seek to attract workers and new members there. It is wrong to promote your denomination at the expense of others that have a common faith and practice.

Much more could be said on this subject, but I trust the reader has the main idea by now. Let us think of ourselves more and more as members of the body of Christ, and less and less as denominational partisans. When we make plans, let us ask ourselves seriously how these plans will help or hinder the unity of the church. And somehow, let's get together.

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³ Several other Westminster faculty members, however, were strongly opposed.

⁴ Close runner up: the elder who insisted that "not one penny" of the money given to his denomination should ever go to the support of anyone in another denomination.