

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 19: What Do We Do Now?

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I have said that I am not the practical sort of person who can set forth an efficient program for achieving the unity I have advocated. At this point, I feel with a peculiar intensity the need for gifts that God has given to other believers than myself. However, I have made a few specific suggestions that may deserve consideration, and I have a few more to share now. Let me close this volume by assembling from the body of the book various concrete suggestions that should advance the cause of reunion, adding here and there a few others that occur to me.

1. Cultivate new ways of thinking (both theoretically and practically) about the church that avoid the temptation to confuse "church" with "denomination" (Chap. 3).

2. Avoid thinking of your denomination as a kind of "home team" ("denominational chauvinism") that you will always support against the others no matter how untenable its positions and actions (Chap. 5).

3. Pray that God will speed his own reunion plan to completion (Chap. 6).

4. Get involved in situations (neighborhood Bible studies, chaplaincies, etc.) where you are forced to share fellowship and/or ministry with Christians from other traditions. Allow the sense of unity that you gain from such experiences to color your view of the church (Chap. 7).

5. Recognize that doctrinal toleration is unavoidable, and therefore ask seriously to what extent it might be extended (or reduced!) in our denominations, to draw each denomination closer to Christians outside it (Chap. 8). For example, the Evangelical Free Church might well consider whether it is really helpful to require professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School to subscribe to

premillennialism. Are they really so sure of that teaching that they can justify insulating the denomination from alternative views, especially when they allow tolerance concerning matters such as predestination and the subjects of Baptism? (And what good are they doing themselves and their theology students by preventing them from studying with godly scholars who hold other views?) At the same time, always seek to distinguish proper tolerance from theological indifference.

6. Look somewhat differently at other denominations who disagree doctrinally with your own: not as people who have rejected God's truth,¹ but as people who have not been taught by God as we have, who perhaps have not had a fair opportunity even to consider (in an unbiased atmosphere) the teachings which we cherish (Chap. 8).

7. Engage in doctrinal discussion less polemically, seeking to do justice to the legitimate concerns of the other side, remembering that the great gulf is not between believers of different convictions, but between believers and unbelievers (Chap. 8).

8. Be open to what God has been teaching other denominations (Chap. 8).

9. Ask God for the right combination of commitment and teachability. Be willing then to admit that some of what your denomination believes might be wrong and that God may have given insight to some other branch of the church (Chap. 8).

10. Seek the involvement of other denominations when there are doctrinal disputes in your own. Seek to turn doctrinal debates into occasions for the whole church, or as much of it as possible, to study together (Chap. 8).

11. Consider some degree of increased toleration by explicit agreement, as a means of union between church bodies. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church has declared itself open to various views considering women elders and charismatic gifts. In my view, the EPC is actually too tolerant in these particular areas, but I do see other areas in which this strategy might be wisely implemented. For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America are largely agreed on everything except that the latter denomination uses Psalm versions exclusively in worship. Certainly these bodies ought to merge, explicitly allowing each congregation to make its own decision in this matter, or perhaps even providing for some exclusive-Psalm-singing presbyteries (Chap. 8).

¹ All of us do, of course, sometimes reject God's truth, and denominations sometimes do that corporately. My point is that this is not the only reason for doctrinal disagreement, and it is wise for us to consider other reasons as well.

12. For now, refrain from writing new creeds. I say that most reluctantly, for there is a need for churches to direct new affirmations and denials to contemporary situations. A truly ecumenical creed, one to which Christians of all denominations would subscribe, would be an excellent development. (I do applaud recent creeds by para-church groups like the International Council for Biblical Inerrancy and the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Unfortunately, however, most contemporary creeds are limited to one denomination, and no denomination has the right to speak for the one, true church. Further, once a denomination adopts a new creed, the new creed separates it more sharply from other denominations that have not adopted it. Union with other denominations is, therefore, made more difficult.

13. Escalate the fight against theological liberalism. There will be no union worthy of the name unless it excludes those who will not place themselves under the supreme authority of God's Word. The process of isolating and excluding liberal teaching from our churches is one that may, and ought to, begin now. Twenty-five years ago, it was widely taught that once a denomination had become infected with liberal teaching it could not be brought back to the truth. Since that time, however, evangelical movements in several denominations infected with liberalism have made good strides toward biblical reformation: the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church are some examples. It can be done! And once the confusing influence of liberalism is removed, we will see much more clearly to deal with those real doctrinal differences that remain. There is no room for unbelief in the one, true church of Jesus Christ.

14. In general, respect the discipline of other churches and denominations. When someone seeks to join your church in order to escape discipline somewhere else, don't simply welcome him in with no questions asked. Take the trouble to do some investigating. It may be the judgment of your church that the discipline of another church was unfair or unnecessarily harsh, and it is not wrong so to disagree with another body in the absence of a higher court to resolve the matter decisively. But don't let your zeal for grabbing a new member interfere with your responsibility to the whole church of Jesus Christ.

15. Read what others say about your denomination and/or theological tradition – and not just to refute them.

16. Consider revising the subscription vows taken by officers in your church/denomination to encourage the balance between doctrinal unity and healthy doctrinal change discussed in Chapter 8.

17. Mute polemics as much as conscience permits.

18. Do not insist on re-baptizing or re-ordaining people who enter your denomination from another orthodox (Nicene Creed) body (Chap.9). When

someone claims that he has been baptized or ordained, take his word for it, unless you have strong evidence to the contrary.

19. Find three good jokes about your own denomination or tradition and share them with your fellow members.

20. Practice open communion (Chap. 9).

21. Develop a form of worship that welcomes believers from other traditions (Chap. 9).

22. Forgive personal and corporate injuries done to you by those of other bodies (Chap. 10).

23. Don't worry so much about details of church government; worry more about the spiritual qualities of those who govern (Chap. 11).

24. Follow the servant model whenever you are in a position of authority (Chap. 11).

25. Be more self-critical of your own and your denomination's priorities (Chap. 12).

26. Consider the possibility that the differences between your denomination and others may be to some extent differences in priority or emphasis rather than substantive differences (Chap. 12).

27. Maintain a biblical balance of emphasis in your church's preaching and teaching ministry, avoiding over-emphasizing denominational distinctives.

28. Examine yourself and your denomination to purge the attitudes listed in Chapter 13.

29. Examine yourself and your denomination to purge the assumptions discussed in Chapter 14.

30. Seek to convert your church's emphasis and mentality to an "outward facing" one, working to eliminate "ingrownness" (Chap. 15).

31. Insist that critics of other denominations bear the burden of proof under strict standards of evidence; regard those denominations as innocent until proven guilty (Chap. 16). Do not settle for gossip, no matter how much that gossip reinforces your denominational self-image.

32. Allow relatively free and easy transfer between your denomination and others, at least within your own tradition (Chaps. 17, 18).

33. Loosen unreasonable restrictions designed to make it difficult for people outside your denomination to enter the ministry of your denomination (Chap. 18).

34. Where organizational union is not a practical goal, seek the sorts of pre-union relationships described in Chapter 18.

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