

**EVANGELICAL REUNION**  
**Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity**  
**Chapter 6: God's Plan for Reunion**

by John M. Frame

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In Part One, I tried to show how denominationalism emerged out of the one, true church of the New Testament, and how that development is contrary to God's will. Now I shall try to sketch some ways by which the situation might be remedied, some steps which may in time work to restore the unity of God's church.

My title for Part One, "*The Road to Denominationalism*," is more confident than my title for Part Two, "*Some Roads Back to Unity*." The first part is historical, and I believe it is fairly clear from history how we have gotten into our present predicament. However, the way back to unity is not nearly as clear to me. I think it is clear that God wants his church to be united and that he will bring about its unity in his own time. But what of human responsibility? What can *we* do? Here I can only suggest some possibilities, some thoughts that *may* be of help. But I cannot say that I know whether, when or how God may choose to restore unity in his church.

Like Part One, Part Two represents a very individual point of view, one doubtless in need of correction from others in the body. I haven't had many precedents to guide me along this road, hence the perhaps excessive (for a theological work) use of the first person singular pronoun.<sup>1</sup>

One important step is for us to recognize what sorts of things continue to keep us apart and to develop a proper biblical understanding of those barriers to union. That biblical understanding may give us the insight and motivation to judge others more fairly. We may then be more willing to recognize weaknesses in our own traditions and to set aside, at least tentatively, the assumptions about

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<sup>1</sup> But see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 319-322, where I argue that theology must always be a personal response to God's grace.

other traditions derived from our historical polemics. Or, alternatively, while continuing to affirm the superiority of our own traditions, we will discover more effective ways of persuading others of our convictions. In either of those ways, unity will be enhanced.

In the next chapters, I shall discuss some of the major causes of continuing divisions and some ways in which we may be able to draw closer to one another.

This chapter, however, will focus on the one fact that is certain: God himself intends to unify his church, and therefore the reunion of the church is his work. M'Crie says,

A happy reunion of the divided Church is promised in the Word of God. It is implied in those promises which secure to the Church the enjoyment of a high degree of prosperity in the latter days – in which God engages to arise and have mercy on Zion, to be favorable to his people, pardon their iniquity and hear their prayers, cause their reproach to cease, and make them a praise, a glory, and a rejoicing in all the earth; in a word, in which he promises to pour out his Holy Spirit and revive his work. God cannot be duly glorified, religion cannot triumph in the world, the Church cannot be prosperous and happy, until her internal dissensions are abated, and her children come to act in greater unison and concert. But when her God vouchsafes to make the light of his countenance to shine upon her, and sheds down the enlightening, reviving, restorative and sanctifying influences of his Spirit, the long delayed, long wished-for, day will not be far distant. It will have already dawned.<sup>2</sup>

It will be noted that M'Crie is a postmillennialist. For those who reject this point of view, his argument can be reconstructed to point to a time *after* Christ's return when the unity of the church is restored. However, (1) even amillennialists and premillennialists must leave open the *possibility* that God might perform this work before the end of this age; surely they cannot prove that God will not do this. (2) Even if God's sovereign reuniting of the church will not be completed until the return of Christ, partial unions of various kinds are still possible. (3) The normal scriptural pattern is what scholars call the "already and not-yet:" that is, the blessings promised in the New Heavens and New Earth are already present in seed form. Salvation, for instance, is both future and present (and past) in the New Testament. Therefore, even if complete unity is delayed until the return of Christ, we ought to be able to see the beginnings of that unity in the church today. (4) Scripture presents the New Heavens and New Earth as a guide for our decisions here and now. If we truly look forward to the righteousness of the last days, we should be seeking it now (Matt. 6:33; 2 Pet. 3:13ff.; 1 John 3:2,3). So if

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<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 57-58.

we really look forward to the reunification of God's people, we should be seeking it here and now.

This complication, however, should not obscure the force of M'Crie's overall point: God intends to remove the effects of sin from his church, and therefore also to remove disunity which, as we have already seen, is always the result of sin.

M'Crie also mentions a number of specific texts in which God promises the reunion of his people. Many of these are in the Old Testament (Pss. 60:1ff.; 85:3ff., 10ff.; Isa. 52:8; 56:8; 11:12ff.; Jer. 31:1,6,10; 33:6ff.; Ezek. 37:19-22; Zeph. 3:9). One may refer these to God's gathering Israel out of exile and reuniting them in the Promised Land. Still, it is important to remember that this ingathering is a picture of what God intends to do through Christ in gathering people from all nations into his church. In the Old Testament itself, there are prophecies of unity that cannot easily be assimilated to the post-exilic return of Israel to Palestine. In Zechariah 8:20-22 we learn that "many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord." Compare with this the passage in Isaiah 19:16-25 concerning the future conversion of Egypt and Assyria, at which time "the Egyptians and the Assyrians will worship together. In that day, Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth." That vision of an internationally unified church certainly anticipates the New Testament period, the time long after the Jewish exile.

That God intends to reunite the *New Testament* church is also evident in those texts which speak of reunion under the Messianic Son of David (e.g. Ezek. 37:22,24; Mic. 4:3; Zech. 9:10). Jesus is the "Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6; cf. Ps. 72:7), who makes peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20). It is he who prays for the unity of his church (John 17:21).<sup>3</sup> The church's contentions and divisions await the word of the Son so that "the Spirit be poured on us from on high" (Isa. 32:13ff.). And indeed we learn from the New Testament that it is the Spirit who creates in us those qualities of character most conducive to unity (e.g. John 16:13; Rom. 1:4; Gal. 5:22-26; Eph. 4:3).

"God prepares the way for union," M'Crie continues,<sup>4</sup> "by reformation, and the revival of real religion." This is the difference between true and false peace (2 Kings 9:19-22; Jer. 6:14, 8:11). God's reunion will come about, not by compromise of the truth or indifference to God, but by a revival of devotion to Christ and his truth. Note the connections between reformation and unity in

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<sup>3</sup> As I indicated earlier, God *has* answered Jesus' prayer by creating that unity which already exists in the church. But there is more unity yet to come – another example of the "already and not yet." God always accomplishes his will; but for some mysterious reason he doesn't always accomplish it *immediately*. Often he accomplishes it over a slow (to us) historical process. Similarly, God always answers the prayers of his Son; but he doesn't always do that immediately either. In some ways, aspects, degrees, God has yet *fully* to answer the prayer of his Son.

<sup>4</sup> Op. cit., 70.

Isaiah 19:18,21,24; Jeremiah 3:14-17; Ezekiel 11:18ff.; 20:37-40; 36:23-27; Zephaniah 3:9. Note the same connections in the story of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4; 2 Chron. 30:11-26), and in the return from exile (Ezra, Nehemiah).

The reader will profit from following M'Crie further: "God sometimes facilitates and prepares the way for union by removing the occasions of offense and division,"<sup>5</sup> he argues, and then later, "God prepares the way for union in his Church by causing the divided parties to participate in the same afflictions and deliverances."<sup>6</sup> His biblical observations in these areas are edifying.

At least one thing is evident from our brief survey of biblical materials: the unity of the church is a major theme of Scripture, and God himself intends to accomplish this union. Refer also to my discussion in Chapter One, which seeks to show that organizational disunity is contrary to God's will. Surely, as God intends to remove all other forms of sin from his people, he intends also to remove this form.

We can be thankful then, that God's sovereign power stands behind the movement toward church unity, weak as it may appear from a human viewpoint. God will surely bring it to pass, in his time.

What of our time? God's eternal intentions are secret to us. I do not know how much unity God intends to give to the church in this age, any more than I know what degree of moral maturity God intends to bestow upon the church in the next ten years. Yet, in both cases, I believe God blesses efforts to achieve when those efforts are rooted in his grace. He honors those who seek his goals, even when, for his mysterious reasons, he withholds from them success in their own time (cf. Deut. 29:29). Protestants honor Wycliffe and Huss, though their movements were unsuccessful by human standards. Thus, I believe that God honors those who work for church unity, even when their efforts bear no apparent fruit.

As I argued earlier, God's sovereignty is not opposed to human responsibility. Rather, the former undergirds the latter. We are encouraged to seek God's kingdom because we know that God himself is bringing his kingdom to the earth. We also know that God's sovereign plan regularly makes use of human agents to accomplish the divine goals. So it is evident that God wishes us to do what we can to rid the church of its divisions. In the coming chapters I shall be making suggestions as to what human beings can do. But let us never forget that the work is "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech. 4:6).

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 82.

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