

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 7: Denominations in Perspective

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Maturity involves learning to see things in proper "proportion" or "perspective." Little children tend to get very upset over things that in later life will not disturb them at all. The reason seems to be that as we grow older we tend to take larger and larger contexts into account. Even as adults we still spill orange juice, but compared to the great questions of human existence we feel that the spill is not worth fussing about. We still may wonder, as children do, why we have to comb our hair each day, but that is no problem at all compared to others that we experience in adult life.

It is important that we also learn to see our denominational traditions in broader contexts, from different angles, in different settings. It is easy enough for us to be denominational chauvinists when we never encounter anyone from any other tradition. It is not so easy when we meet real, flesh-and-blood fellow Christians from other branches of the church. This is especially the case when God calls us to stand together with them against unbelief. In this chapter, let us imagine ourselves in various situations which might lead us to question some of our normal assumptions.

A Neighborhood Bible Study

My wife once regularly attended a neighborhood Bible study with women from Roman Catholic, Charismatic, Arminian, Dispensational, and Episcopal backgrounds, as well as some fellow Presbyterians. However, it never became a doctrinal battleground, she says, because the study always focused on the text of Scripture. The women sought to avoid technical theological jargon and tried simply to do justice to what the Bible taught.

Certainly they studied some passages that were heavy with doctrinal content. Romans 9 was one. When the group read Romans 9, Calvinist and Arminian together marveled at God's control of history, including his control of the human heart. When they got to chapter 10, all with one accord were challenged with the responsibility of human beings to preach the gospel. No one insisted on the dogmatic terminology of "free will" on the one hand, or of "unconditional election" on the other. Romans 9 and 10 spoke for themselves, as it were, and bound these Christian women together in praise and fellowship. All sincerely and warmly received the scriptural message.

Perhaps someone will say that they missed something! A Calvinist might reply that unless we bring in the theological concept of unconditional election, we cannot possibly understand Romans 9, and that therefore the ladies in question were rejoicing in ignorance. An Arminian might say the same thing about "free will." But if God did not inspire Paul to write the words "unconditional election," why should we insist that those precise words, or the words "free will," are necessary to express his meaning?

I have no doubt that the women understood Romans 9 and 10. Would the theological terms have helped them get a *better* understanding? Perhaps in some Bible studies, but not in this one. In this particular case, introduction of technicalities would have produced unnecessary quarreling, which certainly would not have been the response that the Apostle Paul (and God, the ultimate author) intended the text to evoke. And the use of such terms might have exaggerated the extent to which Paul himself had a technical theological purpose in writing these chapters. I have no doubt that an avoidance of technicalities in this particular context gave the women a *better* understanding of the passages than they would have had otherwise.

Paul wrote these chapters at a time when the Calvinist vs. Arminian and Augustinian vs. Pelagian debates were still future. He was not trying to persuade Arminians to become Calvinists, or the other way around. While it is not wrong for us today to use these passages to help resolve these controversies, it is wrong to suggest that this is their only legitimate use, or even their chief use, or that the texts can be understood only in the context of those debates. Rather, there are other contexts to which these passages legitimately apply, and other proper uses of the texts – such as the ones Paul actually had in mind.

Certainly divine sovereignty and human responsibility are major themes of these passages. But one may appreciate both these themes without concentrating on the historical controversies over them. The ladies in the Bible study praised God's sovereignty, and they accepted the scriptural challenge to their own responsibility. And they did it without argument, without debate, simply listening to the word of God. For them, for an hour or so, the church was one.

Are there not times even in our local church life when it might be best simply to let the text speak (more or less! for we are still "explaining" it to one another) for itself? Do we always have to point out, in expounding Romans 9 and 10, how our party is right and the other party wrong? Does not that very emphasis keep us from appreciating certain nuances and emphases in the passage? Does not that practice exaggerate the importance of the historical controversy?

My wife (like me a good Calvinist) says that it is not hard to convince people of Calvinistic teachings when you avoid using Calvinistic jargon. I agree. Beyond this, there is a slogan among the Reformed that "anyone who prays for another's conversion is a Calvinist." I'm not sure where that came from; it has been attributed to Warfield, Van Til, Vos. I agree with that too. If you pray for the soul of another, then you believe that person's decision is in the hand of God, not merely a product of the person's "free agency." But many pray like Calvinists, while proclaiming Arminian theology. That doesn't seem consistent to me, but I welcome their prayers, and I'll be happy to have them pray with me for the conversion of sinners. So perhaps my wife's point can be taken a further step: there are people around who are Calvinists in one degree or another (evidenced by their words and actions),¹ who would not use the Calvinistic jargon, and who would, perhaps, even repudiate it.

It seems to me that what we call Calvinism is simply a spelling out of the heart-instincts of all believers in Christ. I can easily persuade myself that the whole church will be Calvinist eventually, if we allow people to read Scripture as it stands, without feeling that we have to rub their noses in historic controversy. There is a certain "smarty pants" theological attitude in wanting to show people of the other party that our team was right all along. We sometimes feel that we need to do that in order to make our case maximally cogent, but in fact that attitude *detracts* from the cogency of our case. We give people the impression that in order to acknowledge the biblical principle they must also acknowledge us, our denomination, our historical traditions – but this is false. Biblical principle deserves their allegiance. Our "team" does not necessarily deserve it.

The last two paragraphs, to be sure, are written from the viewpoint of a convinced Calvinist. An Arminian, however, might have written some similar statements from his point of view – e.g. that everyone is an Arminian when he urges someone to make a decision for Christ. I disagree. But the larger point is clear: people express their theology in various ways: verbal, non-verbal, technical, non-technical, consistently, inconsistently. We should not assume that the only way, or the best way, to teach Scripture is from a technical theological perspective. Sometimes people can agree on a non-technical level while disagreeing on the technical level. I cannot believe that this non-technical agreement is necessarily confused or insignificant.

¹ None of us is a "perfect" Calvinist.

Now my point is not that we can simply convert our denominations into the sort of "neighborhood Bible study" described above and thus abandon all our distinctives. My only point is that it is possible, and often desirable, to teach the word of God *without* a stress on denominational distinctives, history, etc. I am not saying we must always teach it that way. I am saying that if we experienced more of the blessings my wife experienced in her Bible study, we would have a better sense of the reality of the universal church and the relativity of denominational traditions.

The sort of unity my wife experienced in her neighborhood Bible study I have also experienced, especially in pro-life activity. In a recent rally I attended, the most eloquent speaker by far was a Roman Catholic priest, and he was at his best when he spoke of salvation through Christ alone. Oh yes: he also mentioned that he addressed Mary in prayer. He carefully explained that he did not worship Mary, but that she was part of the communion of saints, and that he desired her fellowship as he desired that of living saints in bringing his requests to God. I still do not share his assurance that Mary hears our prayers and somehow relays them to God. But in that context the distance between my views and those of the priest, on that matter anyway, did not seem terribly far apart. He was fighting – far more heroically than I, for he had been to jail often for his convictions – a battle for Jesus and for the little ones made in God's image. I have no doubt that he and I are fighting the same battle.

Before we talk about dissolving denominations into church unions, we need an influx of new vision. We need to be able to see the church/denomination relationship from various perspectives. I think that when we do this we will be able to distinguish better between church and denomination, between divine institution and temporary human expedient.

A Military Chaplaincy

Here's another "perspective." A fellow minister in my presbytery is a navy chaplain. He is a pretty strict Calvinist, zealous to maintain doctrinal purity in the church. He would, I have no doubt, strongly oppose any candidate for the Presbyterian ministry who was charismatic in his theology.

Yet in a recent report of his work as a chaplain, he shared the news that God had given him a fellow worker who was a member of the Assemblies of God. The chaplain rejoiced, for this worker was a real evangelical believer who preached the gospel. There was little if any conflict between them; the theological difference seemed small compared with the great gap between the Christian and the non-Christian servicemen.

I could not help but remark (mentally!) that my fellow Presbyterian was rejoicing in a kind of alliance that he would certainly repudiate within his

denomination. Nor would I, to be honest, want to allow free rein to charismatic theology within our Presbyterian denomination. But it impresses me that the work of God can in some situations be advanced despite differences such as these. It seems that when God's workers are in situations where they are relatively free from denominational constraints, and where they are in the front lines of the battle against Satan's wickedness, denominational differences, even theological ones, become less significant, and the unity of believers against the forces of evil becomes more so.

I am not prepared now to ask us to abandon all our denominational connections and to do all our evangelism through such ad hoc alliances. I do think, however, that the more we look outside our denominations to focus on the great needs of the unconverted, the more common ground we will find with Christians of other traditions. Some of us have learned to distinguish between "inward" and "outward facing" churches.² The former type of church is concerned largely with its own maintenance, its own integrity, its continuity with historical tradition, the nurture of its own members. The latter focuses on the world outside the church through such efforts as evangelism and missions. The two differ largely in emphasis: "inward facing" churches usually do give *some* attention to missions, and "outward facing" churches are concerned with theological integrity and Christian nurture. But often the differences in emphasis are substantial. Outward facing churches are not against the nurture of their members;³ but they are convinced that Christians grow best when they are active in carrying out the Lord's Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20. I suspect that if all of our churches were more "outward facing" (as military chaplains must be, almost in the nature of the case) we would have a more positive view of Christians from other traditions.

A Foreign Missions Viewpoint

Regularly I have observed that when foreign missionaries return home for furlough, they tend to have grown in their appreciation for Christians outside their denomination. The foreign missionary is often lonely for Christian fellowship, especially fellowship with other Christians from his home country. Denominational connection is relatively unimportant. And, as with military chaplains, the foreign missionary is of necessity "outward facing." He sees unbelief and its cultural fruits up close. To him, the great chasm is not between Baptist and non-Baptist, or Episcopal and non-Episcopal, but between believer and unbeliever. He loses, to some extent, his "denominational chauvinism."

² See C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1986).

³ The Great Commission itself, of course, requires nurture as well as evangelism: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20).

Consider yourself in such an environment. Would you not be pleased to find another Christian missionary to work with, even one with a somewhat different (but not radically different) interpretation of scripture?

This development is not toward doctrinal indifference. I have seen very few missionaries (if any) return with a lessened conviction of the importance of the Christian gospel. Indeed, most have had their Calvinist (or Baptist or Arminian or whatever) convictions reinforced to some extent. The development is rather toward a renewed appreciation of one's doctrinal tradition *along with* a greater respect for Christians outside that tradition, and a greater ability to work together with them.

This situation exists, not only in foreign countries, but anywhere that the church is small, immature, and/or threatened by powerful adversaries. It exists in the inner cities of the United States, in minority communities. It exists in corporations where a few Christians get together to pray and to seek ways of applying biblical standards on the job. It exists on university campuses where Christians of different denominational backgrounds seek to stand together against the fashionable secular humanisms of our time. My guess is that the Christians who are the most excited and zealous about their faith are those who have at some time been on the "front lines" in such environments. In such situations we sink or swim: we become more dependent on God, or our spiritual life goes into regression. In such a situation we get a clearer insight into the universal spiritual battle. We see that serving God requires effort (by grace!) and dedication. And we also see that Christians must "hang together or hang separately." On the front lines, denominational differences almost always seem less important. It is no longer Baptist versus Presbyterian, but Christian versus unbelief.

Is it not possible that we have lost perspective in our relatively comfortable home churches? Might we not look at our denominations differently if we had to engage daily in the struggle for the hearts and minds of unbelievers? Might a more outward facing mentality lead to a more genuinely ecumenical spirit?

A Home Missions Perspective

Let's face that last question more directly. I have some friends in a small mid-western community who worship in a Presbyterian church that, some years ago, faced some unexpected competition. A Presbyterian denomination different from that of my friends decided to plant a new church within the same community. There was much weeping and wailing in the first church, for they feared the new church would come in and take away some of their members. The planters of the new church had not contacted or consulted the members of the older church – in my opinion that was wrong. But I'm inclined now to think that much of my friends' weeping and wailing was out of place. I can certainly

sympathize with it, for I used to think the same way. I can remember actually being happy once when a nearby church closed its doors, for I hoped that several of their families might start coming to *my* church.

But of course in the deepest sense it wasn't my church, it was God's. And God builds his church with far more wisdom than we do. He has, I believe, led me to change my thinking about church rivalry.

Win Arn reports, "In 1900 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans. In 1985 there were only 12 churches for every 10,000 Americans. There are approximately 340,000 churches in America. Based on the best estimate and research, we could *double the number of churches* without overchurching America."⁴

My pastor, Dick Kaufmann, has graciously furnished me with the following additional statistics: There are approximately 420 evangelical churches in San Diego County. These have altogether a seating capacity of 126,000, so if each has two Sunday morning services, they could accommodate 252,000. However, there are at least 1,848,000 unchurched people living in San Diego County. The number of them that could be accommodated in the existing church buildings is minimal. Clearly, if we are to expect God to convert substantial numbers of non-Christians, we will have to increase the sizes and/or the numbers of churches greatly. Increasing the numbers of churches, i.e. planting new ones, seems to be the most successful strategy for reaching the unchurched.

Let's consider, then, what is necessary, humanly speaking, to reach San Diego County for Christ. In order to have 10 churches for every 10,000 unchurched people (slightly less than the 1985 average, far less than the 1900 average), we would need to have 1,848 new churches *now*. To have the same ratio in the year 2000, we would have to have 2,448 new churches.

Even the relatively small city of Escondido (present population, 97,000, expected to rise to 147,000 by 2000) will need many more churches if the unchurched in the city are to be reached. Kaufmann estimates that Escondido needs 83 new churches to reach the 10 per 10,000 ratio today. (Its present ratio is 4.5 churches per 10,000.) To do the same in 2000 will require 133 new churches. To maintain even the present ratio of churches to population in the year 2000, God's people would have to plant 60 churches.⁵

Statistically speaking, we are losing the battle. Arn⁶ says that in the United States Protestantism is shrinking from 2/3 of the population in 1900 to 1/3 (estimated) by 2000. Between 80% and 85% of all churches in America have membership and attendance figures which have either plateaued or are

⁴ *The Win Arn Growth Report* (Pasadena: 1986), p. 3.

⁵ Escondido's local reputation, by the way, is that it is "overchurched!"

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

declining. Churches are losing 2,765,000 people per year to nominal Christianity and outright unbelief. Between 3,500 and 4,000 churches die every year.

These statistics are sobering. For now, let us focus on the fact that little Escondido needs 133 new churches by 2000. Who will plant them? My denomination has an impressive vision for church planting, and it has excellent leadership and resources for its size in the field of home missions. Still, I don't expect that we will plant more than two churches per year in our presbytery (which includes not only San Diego County, but also heavily populated Orange County, fast growing Riverside County, and the so far sparsely populated Imperial County). Who will plant the rest? Humanly speaking, the task is impossible; but we pray that God will raise up church planters from many different denominations to join in this great effort. No one denomination can do it all; the labor must of necessity be cross-denominational.

That is why I no longer tremble when I hear rumors of another church opening across the street from mine. If the new church is outward facing, that is, if it is willing to put its major effort into carrying out the Great Commission, then we need not be rivals at all. Indeed we need one another. Another church in Escondido? We need 133!

On the other hand, if two churches are not outward facing, they can be threats to one another. If First Baptist is interested mainly in nurturing Baptists rather than in reaching the unchurched, and a new church (say, Calvary Baptist) appears on the next block, then of course First Baptist has a lot to worry about. Calvary Baptist may turn out to have a more attractive minister, livelier programs for young people, and the like, so that some people might leave First Baptist to go there. And, indeed, in that situation, one might well criticize Calvary Baptist for locating so close to another Baptist church. Far better, it seems, for Calvary to find a location where there is now no Baptist witness.⁷ But consider: if First and Calvary were both outward facing, they would welcome one another's fellowship and assistance. Neither, most likely, could share the gospel with *all* the unchurched in the town. If both churches are evangelistically oriented, and God blesses their ministries, both could become large and successful, successful in the eyes of God.

A Personal Evangelism Perspective

Another situation in which one's denominational chauvinism can be broken down is personal evangelism. Let's say that you are dealing with an unbelieving inquirer or a very young Christian, and he asks you to recommend a church for him to attend. Naturally, you would invite him to your own congregation. But what

⁷ I confess I am not sure if there are any such locations! But bear with me for the sake of the illustration.

if he lives in a different city, distant enough that attending your church would be impractical?

Our first impulse is to recommend a church of our own denomination or of another denomination fairly similar to ours. But is that always the best thing? In one city I know, there is a large evangelical independent church with a Dispensationalist pastor. The pastor is an excellent communicator of the gospel and doesn't hammer much on dispensational distinctives. He preaches mostly the positive teachings of Scripture, and communicates love for the lost and for fellow Christians of all backgrounds, while not being indifferent to what he regards as error. There is also in that city a Reformed church in a denomination closely related to my own. The Reformed pastor's theology is significantly closer to mine than that of the Dispensationalist. But the Reformed man's sermons are exceedingly obscure and highly negative. The people of his congregation seem always to have chips on their shoulders, indignant about this or that; there is very little joy in the Lord, very little welcome to people of non-Reformed background. They claim to have much theological knowledge, but most of that "knowledge" is poorly thought-out, often wrongly applied. The mentality in the church is very much "inward facing." Now, if I had only these two alternatives, which would I recommend to our inquirer? I would not hesitate to recommend the Dispensationalist. To me the question is: in which congregation can my friend best hear the gospel and see its fruits? It is clear to me that the Dispensationalist in my example *conveys far more of the truth* than the Reformed man.

This is not doctrinal indifference; quite the reverse. I send my friend to the Dispensationalist church because I know that there he will learn *more* sound doctrine, i.e. more authentic biblical content, than if he went to the church more confessionally similar to mine. My recommendation emerges out of my concern for sound doctrine; it is not a compromise of that concern.

This example is not based on unrealistic circumstances: I have often had to give advice in similar situations. And when I look realistically at the needs of the inquirer and prayerfully consider the alternatives available, I am often led beyond my own denomination, even my own theological tradition. Such considerations can help us to put denominations, even theological traditions, into better perspective.

The Early Church

The final "perspective" I wish to place before you is that of the church in the first four centuries. It was certainly a church that was concerned with nurture. People were baptized and catechized; the believers sought to meet one another's material and spiritual needs. There was much doctrinal discussion, even doctrinal controversy, from the beginning. The church was not doctrinally indifferent; it mobilized against the Judaizers described in Galatians, the

"antichrists" mentioned in 1 John 4, the later heresies of Sabellianism, Gnosticism, Marcionism and Montanism.

At the same time, the early church would have to be described as "outward facing." When the Christians were "scattered abroad" (often by persecution), they "preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). The *world* was always in the forefront of their thinking, in the nature of the case. For it was an obvious battle in those days. The world was intent upon destroying the little church, and the little church was intent upon bringing the world to faith in Christ. I believe that God used this self-understanding of the church to maintain its unity. For the Christians were vitally aware of how much – in this life and death struggle – they needed one another. The luxury of churches-made-to-order, denominations in other words, was not a live option for most of them. Novatian and Donatus were exceptions, but of course their policy of rebaptism shows that they had the serious conviction that the old church had apostatized, that it was no longer a church – a conviction rarely held or expressed by more recent founders of denominations. Schism, then, was possible in these early centuries, but only for the gravest of reasons, reasons more serious than most any of those given in modern times.

In the fourth century a Christian emperor came to the throne, and the Roman Empire became nominally Christian. Many joined the church without much knowledge or conviction about the church's teachings, and understandably the focus of the church turned more inward, though there were always some intrepid missionaries who continued to introduce the gospel to new tribes and cultures. I cannot help, however, connecting the relatively more inward-facing stance of the church with the simultaneous trend toward more power politics and excessive bickering within the church. That connection exists in a number of inward-facing bodies that I have known and been a part of, and I have no doubt that it is a universal connection. That trend was certainly evident during the fourth century Arian controversy, and to a much larger extent in the Christological controversies of the fifth century. Political maneuvering and resentment seems to have been the major reason why the Chalcedonian declaration of 451 was not approved by the Egyptians and Syrians, who thus separated themselves from the main body of believers. The same seems to have been the case with the Great Schism of 1054 between the Eastern and Western churches, and many (though not all) of the subsequent denominational divisions.

Conclusion

The first step back to unity is to learn to see our denominational differences in perspective. When we look at them from one angle, they seem very important, very imposing, worthy of being maintained forever. But from other angles (angles which arguably are more in accord with the Bible), they do not seem to be so great.

I have not established any specific conclusions in this chapter. There is nothing in this chapter, for example, that would motivate me to want to give up the Presbyterian Confessions in order for my church to merge with a non-Presbyterian church. But much in this chapter encourages me to look on other denominations (excluding, of course, cults, theological liberals and other unbelievers masquerading as Christians) in a positive way, as friends rather than as enemies, as co-laborers in Christ. And there is much here which influences me to listen to those friends with a more sympathetic and open mind, willing to be corrected even on matters which my denomination considers to be settled.

Such openness, I'm convinced, will in time be used of God to bring his church to a oneness beyond anything we have experienced in our day – a oneness not based on doctrinal indifference, but based on a fuller understanding of God's word than any of our present groups can claim to have.

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