

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 8: Dealing with Doctrinal Differences

by John M. Frame

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.

Doctrine

"Doctrine divides, experience unites" is a common slogan today, but it is deeply misleading. No doubt there are many doctrinal disagreements in the church. Indeed, when we think of the reasons for continuing denominational divisions, we naturally think first of doctrinal differences as a reason. But we cannot brush doctrine aside as a mere impediment to unity, as many users of that slogan would like to do. A doctrinally indifferent church is a church which does not care about the gospel message; for the gospel is precisely a doctrine, a teaching, a narrative of what God has done for our salvation. Indeed, any church worthy of the name must be doctrinally united, in the sense of being fully committed to one message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is indeed that doctrine which unites us in our love for Christ; and it is our foolish trust in our own experience that leads us to compromise that message. Doctrine unites, experience divides!¹

What is this "gospel" to which we must all be committed? It is summarized in John 3:16; 5:24; Acts 2:38ff.; 16:31; Rom. 3:23ff.; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; Eph. 2:8ff.; Tit. 3:4-8; 1 Pet.3:18; 1 John 5:11ff. and elsewhere. But the concepts in these verses are intimately related to those of other passages of Scripture, and they to still others, and so on. Ultimately, our commitment, and the doctrinal basis of the

¹ I admit I am being a little cute here. A more balanced perspective is that true doctrine unites, and genuine experience of God through the Spirit of Christ also unites. Distortions on either side lead to division. A simple factual analysis of the situation will show that both doctrine (e.g. the Calvinist doctrine of predestination) and "experience" (e.g. the charismatic experiences of tongues and prophecy) can become items of disagreement by which churches are divided.

church, is the entire Bible. It is not enough, however, for a church merely to confess the authority of Scripture. Many cults, for example, are doing that today, but are certainly not preaching the authentic gospel of Christ. Therefore we must have in the church not only a common confession of biblical authority, but also some measure of common agreement as to what Scripture teaches.

In Defense of Tolerance

I say "some measure." I do think it is unreasonable to require agreement on *every* doctrinal point within the church. It may well be doubted whether such total agreement can ever be achieved among human beings until the Last Judgment. To put the point that way is to make it seem obvious; most Christians would concede it. Sometimes, however, Christians talk as if total agreement were not only possible, but a prerequisite to fellowship. "The pretribulation rapture is God's truth! We may not compromise it! We must exclude anyone who denies it." This kind of talk makes sense only on the assumption that *everything* in Scripture is a test of orthodoxy, that no disagreement is to be tolerated on any matter. Once we agree that some toleration is legitimate, then certainly we cannot simply assume that the pretribulation rapture, or anything else, is a test of orthodoxy. Certainly on that assumption, the mere fact that Scripture teaches a doctrine is insufficient to prove that that doctrine should be used as a test of orthodoxy. Those wishing to show that it is must offer additional argument.

But why should there be toleration?² Even if we don't accept the pretribulation rapture, we can understand the point of those who would make it a test of fellowship. If God teaches the pretribulation rapture, who are we to deny it? And if the church is to guard God's truth, surely it must guard this truth also. Extending the argument, it would seem that the church must be totally agreed on every doctrinal matter.

Ah, but nobody really believes that. Even people who insist on uniformity within the church as to pretribulationism generally allow for some areas of permissible disagreement. Every church I know of tolerates disagreement on the reasons for God's rejecting Cain's sacrifice in Genesis 4:5, the meaning of the "mark" in Genesis 4:15, the exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4, the length of Israel's stay in Egypt (Exod. 12:40ff.; Acts 7:6), the reconciliation of the numbers in Kings and

² There are two questions here. One is, What can be tolerated within the membership of the church? The other is, What can be tolerated among the official teachers of the church? In what follows, I am thinking primarily of the second question. The first is also important, but I think it can be dealt with in parallel ways. Of course, our answers to the two questions will not necessarily be the same.

Chronicles, the nature of "baptism for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29,³ or of "sin unto death" in 1 John 5:16. When you think about it, you can see that every denomination recognizes a great many teachings of Scripture about which sincere Christians may arrive at different conclusions.

Scripture itself explicitly warrants tolerance within certain limits. Of course, Scripture speaks very strongly against heresy or false teaching. Those who preach "another gospel" are accursed (Gal. 1:6-9). Those who deny resurrection eliminate the Christian hope (1 Cor. 15:1-34). Those denying the truth or teaching falsehood receive strong rebukes (2 Thess. 2; 3:14ff; 1 Tim. 1:3ff.; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 2:14-19; 3:1-9; 4:3-5; Tit. 3:9ff.; 2 Pet. 2; 3:4ff.; 1 John 2:22ff.; 4:1-3; 2 John 7; Jude); God's people are urged to maintain the truth. But these instances of "false teaching" are all either denials of the basic gospel of grace, or else they are (as 1 Tim. 1:3ff.) foolish speculations which distract us from Christ. These condemnations are not directed against merely incorrect opinions, as if every such incorrect opinion deserved condemnation. (If that were true, we would all be condemned, for we all, most likely, hold some incorrect opinions.) Indeed, some kinds of disagreements, such as the disagreement over idol food in 1 Corinthians 8, are *not* to result in anyone's condemnation, but in mutual forbearance (cf. Rom. 14; 15).

Here I must differ with Thomas M'Crie, whose defense of church unity I commended earlier in the present volume. M'Crie grants that some doctrines are more important than others, but then he adds,

"It is not, however, their comparative importance or utility, but their truth and the authority of him who has revealed [the doctrines], which is the proper and formal reason of our receiving, professing and maintaining them. And this applies equally to all the contents of a divine revelation."⁴

He continues,

"Whatever God has revealed we are bound to receive and hold fast; and whatever he has enjoined we are bound to obey; and the liberty which we dare not arrogate to ourselves we cannot give to others. It is not, indeed, necessary that the confession or testimony of the Church [meaning by this that which is explicitly made by her, as distinguished from her declared adherence to the whole Word of God] should contain all truths. But then any of them may come to be included in it, when opposed or endangered; and it is no sufficient reason for excluding any of them that they are less

³ Mormonism has a very definite doctrine about "baptism for the dead." That is one of the things that makes Mormonism a cult, rather than a church.

⁴ M'Crie, op. cit., 110.

important than others, or that they have been doubted and denied by good and learned men.”⁵

M'Crie evidently believes that once a consensus develops in a denomination over *any* biblical teaching, no matter how major or minor that teaching may be, the denomination may legitimately add that teaching to its Confession of Faith (though it is not obligated to do so) and thus prohibit any contrary views on pain of church discipline. Any doctrine, by that route, could become a test of orthodoxy. That could include interpretations of the sin unto death, baptism for the dead, or whatever.

I think that at this point M'Crie is simply wrong. For one thing, he ignores the fact that Scripture itself urges mutual tolerance in some areas of disagreement, as we have seen. On the basis of Romans 14, I would say that it would be very wrong for a denomination to forbid vegetarianism in its creed and subject vegetarians among its members to judicial penalties. The mere fact that God's Word rejects the claims of the vegetarians is no reason to exercise formal sanctions against such people. M'Crie evidently fails to distinguish between our obligation to affirm what we think Scripture teaches (which includes the entire content of Scripture) and our obligation to exercise formal ecclesiastical discipline to test and maintain orthodoxy (an obligation which does not pertain to every teaching of Scripture). But that distinction is important; and if we observe it, there are some doctrinal differences that we may and must tolerate within the church, in the sense that those matters are not to be tests of orthodoxy.

I also reject the argument that says that since all biblical doctrines are interconnected, so that to reject one is implicitly to reject all the rest, therefore all must equally be regarded as tests of orthodoxy in the church. Surely there is a logical interconnection, though one may question how far it extends. To deny the deity of Christ, for example, logically entails (with a few other premises) a denial of the efficacy of the atonement. I doubt if any such momentous implications attach to one's view of baptism for the dead or (contra many) of the millennium. But even if there is a much tighter logical connection than I am able to see at the moment, the question still remains as to how much logical consistency is necessary to qualify one for church membership or church office. Logical consistency, after all, is something that is learned over time. Developing a logically consistent system of biblical doctrine is not a perfectly simple task; it has been the life work of some very great minds. It is an area in which most all of us have some growing to do. To say that all doctrines of Scripture are tests of orthodoxy is to say that each church officer, or even each member, must have achieved such a system from the outset. Such a requirement seems to me to be obviously absurd and without any scriptural warrant. Indeed, even apostles were inconsistent at times (Gal. 2). Thus, we must accept the fact that Scripture permits doctrinal tolerance up to a point.

⁵ Ibid., 111.

Why does the Bible authorize this kind of tolerance?

1. It does so because it recognizes that each believer is subject to growth in his understanding, and that even leaders in the church have some growing to do. That growth is a process; we may not demand that a church member or officer have all spiritual knowledge from the outset of his life or ministry. As it is with individuals, so it is with the church as a whole. Certainly God calls the church to guard all of his truth, once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). But there are some areas in which the church simply cannot say it knows what that truth is! A study of history reveals that the church has grown very gradually in its understanding of Scripture. In every age, the church has been ignorant of important matters. In the first three centuries, formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity were accepted as orthodox, which after the fourth century would be universally rejected as heresy; likewise doctrines of the person of Christ before Chalcedon. It is very difficult to find anyone between Paul and Luther who had a clear understanding of justification by faith. The church's understanding of "covenant" really began in the seventeenth century. Is it not possible that we too are ignorant of some matters which future generations of Christians (or perhaps no one before the eschaton) will come to understand? If so, it would make sense to tolerate various opinions in these areas⁶ until the church is able to reach a unity of mind. In my view the church in the year A.D. 200 would have been wrong to require of its ministers a fully wrought-out understanding of the Trinity – even if the proposed formulation happened to be right – for there was at that time no consensus. There had not been sufficient clear teaching in the church on this subject so that those deviating from a norm could be charged with rebelliousness. Although the doctrine of the Trinity was in the Bible, there was a sense in which, as of A.D. 200, God had not *taught* that doctrine to the church.

2. Scripture also recognizes that there are different levels of difficulty within God's revelation itself. Even Peter says that Paul's letters contain things that are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16).⁷ The biblical requirements for church membership, even for the eldership, do not include intellectual brilliance. It may very well be, as Cornelius Van Til argued, that the doctrine of the Trinity resolves

⁶ Within some limits, of course. If someone thinks the "sin unto death" is jaywalking, I would question his competence as an exegete. If he thinks the "sin unto death" is joining the PCA, then I would suspect something seriously wrong with his theology

⁷ This fact does not conflict with the Protestant confession of the clarity of Scripture. Clarity in this context simply means that the way of salvation in Scripture is plain enough to be understood by unlearned people as well as by scholars. I would add the provision that Scripture is "clear" in such a way that we may never blame our disobedience on its relative obscurities. But it is not necessarily clear enough to give every reader an instantaneous, fully adequate, systematic theology.

the philosophical question of the One and the Many; but it would be wrong for a church to require its members or elders to understand, confess or endorse that proposition.

3. Another factor which somewhat limits our understanding of the Bible is the cultural and historical distance between ourselves and the biblical period. On the general level, there is our ignorance of biblical languages, customs and so on. More specifically, it is clear that the readers of 1 Corinthians, for example, knew some things that we don't know (and are not likely to find out). 1 Corinthians is evidently a response to a letter which the church wrote to Paul. The Corinthians may have remembered the precise contents of that letter; we can never do that. The Corinthians evidently knew what "baptism for the dead" was. We are not in their position. The same logic pertains to doctrinal issues like infant baptism. In the first century, that problem was easily solved. If anyone had a question, he could simply look up the nearest apostle and inquire as to the apostolic practice. We cannot do that. Nor, since the Reformation, do we acknowledge any single source as an accurate transmitter of apostolic tradition.

4. Another reason for tolerance is that some matters in Scripture (pace M'Crie) are just not important enough to be used as tests of orthodoxy. Here we must be careful, for who are we to declare something in God's Word unimportant? Yet, the Lord himself distinguishes between weightier and less weighty matters in God's revelation (Matt. 23:23). We are speaking here, not of absolute importance but of relative importance (i.e. compared to other teachings of God's Word), and we are seeking to determine that importance, not by subjecting Scripture to our autonomous standards, but by comparing Scripture with Scripture, by listening to what Scripture itself takes to be important. Baptism for the dead, even if we do come to understand what it is, is not central enough in Scripture, is not closely enough connected to the central message of Scripture, to be a test of orthodoxy.

Now I think God understands all this (pardon the understatement). He knows that there are levels of importance in Scripture and that we are historically removed from the scriptural milieu through no fault of our own. He knows that Scripture is difficult at points and that growth in knowledge is a process. He does not, therefore, expect either church members or officers to know and affirm specifically every teaching of Scripture. And if he does not expect this, we must not demand it either. There must be some room for different opinions on matters in which these factors play a role.

When a church teacher holds to a respectable interpretation of, say, the "sin unto death," which we personally believe to be erroneous, we generally do not (and should not) conclude that this error disqualifies him as a teacher. We are still free to regard him as sound and edifying. Indeed, on such matters, most of us would concede the strong possibility that we *might* be wrong (even if we sincerely believe we are right) and that the teacher in question might be right.

That would not be the case if, say, in my PCA church he taught a Roman Catholic view of justification.⁸

We must ask seriously what doctrinal differences should be tolerated in the church in our own time. That is a difficult question to answer, contrary to those who assume without argument that, say, the pretribulation rapture must be a test of orthodoxy. It is difficult, first, because to my knowledge no one has ever studied the question in a truly systematic way. Many have asked what doctrines are true; few if any have asked from distinctively evangelical premises⁹ how much diversity the church ought to tolerate.

Second, the question is difficult because the answer is historically variable. If my earlier argument is correct, views tolerable in the church in the year A.D. 200 are not necessarily tolerable in the year 2000, since God continually teaches his church new things out of the Scriptures.

Third, the question is particularly difficult because of the scourge of denominationalism. The more divided the church is, the less able it is to study the Scriptures *together*. The great Trinitarian formulations of Nicaea and Constantinople were the fruit of discussion throughout the entire church (even the Novatianists and the Donatists were not totally excluded from the dialogue). But as the church became more divided, the developing of a church-wide consensus became more and more difficult. Adversarial relationships among denominations led Christians to take less seriously the theological developments in other denominations. Lutherans rarely learned from Calvinists, or Catholics from Anabaptists, or Independents from Eastern Orthodox. Young theologians growing up in these traditions have been hardened against serious consideration of other positions by hearing constant polemics and by having little first-hand knowledge of the other views. From God's point of view, the situation may be described thus: God has been teaching different denominations at different rates.

When study of "covenant" began in earnest in the seventeenth century, it was largely limited to Reformed circles. Now, three centuries later, we are seeing the fruit of that study in many denominations. Most theologians today admit that "covenant" is a central category of biblical theology. We can be thankful for that

⁸ Even here it is theoretically possible that we could be wrong; but the pervasiveness and central importance of justification by faith in the New Testament leads us to give it a presuppositional status. See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 134ff.

⁹ Liberals have, of course, written much in support of theological tolerance. (Mainly tolerance of liberal ideas: they have not, characteristically, urged their churches to tolerate ideas which they stigmatize as fundamentalist.) But their accounts are largely unacceptable to evangelicals because they presume an indifference to doctrine, an indifference to what we regard as God's revealed truth.

process. But my guess is that had the church been united, the dissemination of this knowledge would have taken much less time.

There are signs that some in the Roman Catholic Church are rethinking, sympathetically this time, the doctrine of justification by faith. Personally, I am delighted that this is happening. But I very much regret that it could not have happened 400 years ago.

Part of the problem is the imbalance of gifts from one denomination to another. Some denominations may have an overabundance of scholarly and spiritual theological talent, and so they learn God's lessons at a faster rate.¹⁰ Other denominations may be gifted in other ways, but slower to learn theological doctrines. Another part of the problem may be that God teaches different things to different denominational groups. He has taught Polish Catholics and Chinese Christians many things about dealing with the gospel's adversaries that he has not taught the rest of us. God taught the Roman Catholics about the terrible evil of abortion long before that concern took hold within Protestant evangelicalism. At present, East African Christians seem to have had much more experience with, and insight into, revival than have Christians living elsewhere.

The tolerance I advocate should not be confused with doctrinal indifference. My argument is not that doctrine in general is unimportant or that the church should tolerate an unlimited number of different views. Nor do I think tolerance is good in itself, an attitude to be cultivated in all church matters. Rather, even the amount of tolerance I advocate is based on our limitations, limitations we hope to overcome as God gives wisdom and strength. The ideal is not a tolerant church in which all views are given equal respect (i.e. doctrinal indifference). Rather, it is a church in which all are agreed on the truth so that tolerance of opposing views is unnecessary. But we have not reached that ideal yet; we may not reach it until we are in heaven. At the present stage of history, there must be tolerance simply because there is no alternative.

Back to the Future?

In an earlier draft of this book, I suggested what I called my "back to the future" proposal, which would involve uniting all Christians under one church government doctrinally based on the Scriptures and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381. That creed was the last creed that was agreed to by the one, true church and which is acknowledged by virtually all Christians to this day. That would, in effect, take us back before A.D. 451, before

¹⁰ Am I being presumptuous if I state my feeling – or prejudice! – that such is the case in my own, Reformed, branch of the church? By the way, I do see this as a mixed blessing, for in my view the Reformed community would probably be better off with fewer intellectuals and more people with other sorts of gifts.

the major schisms. Then we could study Scripture together, hopefully without the atmosphere of party spirit, pressure and fear that has surrounded such discussions in the past.

The assumption of the proposal is that since God has been teaching different denominations at different rates each group should be willing to wait, in effect, for the others to catch up. Presbyterians should seek to teach their view of predestination to the whole church, so that the whole church could pass judgment on it, before that doctrine is given creedal status.

This proposal, I think, would not be disastrous for the church. As I indicated earlier, the church existed for 300 years before agreeing on a definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Similarly, it took 450 years for Christology, 1500 years for an adequate formulation of justification by faith, and still longer for an adequate doctrine of predestination. Yet, during these waiting periods, churches were being planted, souls saved, believers taught, the poor cared for. People can, after all, come to salvation with very little if any intellectual grasp of theology. People can be saved (i.e. justified by predestinating grace through faith) without being able to *articulate* the doctrines in view. Someone who trusts Christ exclusively and entirely for forgiveness and salvation surely belongs to Christ, whether or not he is able to articulate the nature of that trust.¹¹

However, even in the previous draft I had to admit that this proposal is not a very practical one. The chances of our agreeing to accept it are very slight indeed. And if we did accept it, we would still have a lot of growing to do before we could listen to one another without the antagonisms of our denominational past. I merely mention it to indicate some of the issues that would have to be considered if reunion were our goal.

And, to be honest, I must say that I really do not want, even in principle, to endorse the proposal. I really do not want to be part of a church which is unwilling to subscribe to the New Testament doctrines of justification and predestination. In this modern period, attempts to preach the gospel without acknowledging those scriptural truths are confusing. We can do much better than that, for God has taught some of us how. I would not want to be in a church where, for even a while, ministers were free to disagree with these teachings. These truths are too precious to be lost in an ecumenical shuffle. Their loss would not be a disaster, as I said earlier, but it would be crippling in the present context. Perhaps I am here admitting that I am not as ecumenical as I claim to be. If so, may God teach me a better way. But I am sure that reunion worthy of

¹¹ I am helped here also by my Reformed conviction that infants can be regenerate. They would be even clearer examples of such "inarticulate" faith. I realize that not all evangelicals would accept this doctrine, but I suggest they consider the implications of 2 Sam. 12:23; Ps. 51:5; Luke 1:15,44; and Acts 2:39 in their contexts.

the name will not appear on a basis of doctrinal indifference, but on a basis of greater doctrinal insight, granted by God to the whole church.

Another argument against "back to the future" is the existence of theological liberalism in many denominations today. As I have said earlier, I believe, with many evangelicals, that liberalism (in its many forms, including "neo-orthodoxy") is not Christianity, but another, humanistic religion expressed in Christian language. Any worthwhile proposal for reunion would need at the same time to exclude liberal elements. But if we adopted the "back to the future" proposal, I suspect that many liberals would join in. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, to be sure, is supernaturalistic enough to exclude liberalism; but I doubt if it is sufficiently detailed to refute the subtleties of language which liberals use to conceal the radicalism of their theology.

I raise the "back to the future" proposal, therefore, not as a serious plan for reunion, but as a way to stimulate our thinking toward a more practical plan. I don't wish to tolerate those who deny justification by faith or biblical predestination; but there may be room for tolerance on some other matters that we often take for granted. Perhaps it is impractical to suggest that we all merge into one church and then study the Scriptures together on the contested issues. But surely at the very least we ought to promote cross-denominational Bible study in all of these areas. Such Bible study should avoid partisanship and political maneuvering; it should be informed on all sides by a spirit of love, gentleness, teachability. Do I believe that we can thereby make some progress on issues which have been contested for hundreds of years? By God's grace, yes, I do.

There will be some more specific practical proposals in the last chapter of this book. Practical steps are not my strong suit, however. What I hope to do in this book is to communicate a vision to others who can implement that vision far more effectively than I can. Hence a few more "perspectives."

Perspectivalism in Doctrine

As we seek to engage fellow Christians in cross-denominational dialogue, it is important for us to keep in mind certain fundamental facts about the Scriptures and about theology. For one thing, Scripture itself is a wonderfully rich, many-faceted book. It does not fit the pattern that has become stereotyped in our systematic theologies. Rather, it contains narrative, poetry, wisdom literature, apocalyptic, law, epistle. Within those books are many types of language: indicatives, imperatives, interrogatives, performatives, treaties, parables, exclamations, literal, figurative, allusive, vague, precise, solemn, humorous, denunciation, encouragement, general, specific, etc.

"Teachings of Scripture" or "doctrines" are found in various places in Scripture and are learned in various ways. Sometimes they are stated fairly straightforwardly, as in Paul's epistles. Even here, however, we must remember that Paul does not (even in Romans) intend to write what we would call a systematic theology. He is dealing with the needs of particular churches. The doctrinal truths of Paul's letters must be carefully extracted, to make sure we are rightly applying his "occasional" thoughts to our general theological questions. In other parts of Scripture, we need to use even more exegetical caution. Narrative teaches doctrine, but it does so in a different way from parable or epistle or wisdom literature. Many doctrinal disagreements arise out of failure (by one party or both) to exegete carefully, taking into account the sort of language found in Scripture.

It is also interesting to note another form of richness in Scripture: God seems to delight in teaching the same thing in many different ways. He gives us two accounts of the Kings of Judah: one in Samuel-Kings, the other in Chronicles. He gives us four accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry, death and resurrection: the four Gospels. He gives us a prose account of the Red Sea crossing (Exod. 12-14) and a poetic account (Exod. 15, but also several psalms). The doctrine of faith appears in the life of Abraham, in the epistles of Paul, in Hebrews 11, in James 2. Truths about the nature of God are repeated under different symbolic portrayals: God as warrior, as shepherd, as king, as artisan (creator), as wisdom teacher, as deliverer, as nurse, and so on. The same is true for Christ, for salvation, for the nature of the church. Why all this repetition?

Well, it isn't really repetition. Each time Scripture "repeats" something, it gives fresh illumination. It presents the old truth from a new angle. In one sense, the whole biblical message is presented in Genesis 3:15. But God was not satisfied to leave us with only that early formulation of the good news. He wanted us to explore its aspects, to meditate, to see it from many angles.

These "angles" I am in the habit of calling "perspectives." As in my earlier use of the term in this book, a "perspective" is a viewpoint on something. Since we are finite beings and cannot see everything at once as God can, it is important that we at least see the truth from as many different perspectives, as many different angles, as we can. In an earlier book, I went into some detail as to the bearing of this principle on theology.¹² Here let me simply say that it is especially important to multiply perspectives when we are discussing doctrine cross-denominationally.

We should at least consider the possibility that some doctrinal differences are the result of two parties coming to the scriptural text from different

¹² *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) (henceforth DKG). See also Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

perspectives. I think that the seventeenth century controversy between supra- and infralapsarians is certainly a controversy of this sort.¹³ Certainly I would not say that all doctrinal differences can be described that way. Certainly the more serious divisions are not *mere* differences in perspective. Rather, in most of these controversies, one or both parties is simply in error.¹⁴ Still, in most of these controversies, there is an element of perspectival difference as well as elements of error. Certainly the Arminian comes to the question of predestination with a different focus from the Calvinist. He is interested primarily in maintaining human responsibility and freedom. The Calvinist, on the other hand, is interested more in maintaining the sovereignty of God. Both concerns are scriptural; one might say that they are both legitimate "perspectives" from which to view the issues. Combine this perspectival difference with a difference (somewhere) of truth vs. error, and you have a debate on your hands.

Vern Poythress recommends, and I concur, that in situations like this we try to "pre-empt" the other person's fundamental concerns. Rather than going on and on about the sovereignty of God, the Calvinist should seek to show that his view does better justice to human responsibility and freedom. The Arminian should seek to show that his view results in a credible doctrine of divine sovereignty. I do believe that we will be more likely to see our own errors if we make an effort to consider the issues from the perspectives of others. Certainly this is required if we are to show biblical love for one another in the process of theological discussion. And certainly we will maximize our understanding of Scripture if we are able to see the same truth from a maximum number of perspectives.

Subscription

Creeks, I believe, are a valid and important way for churches to present to the world their understanding of the biblical message.¹⁵ A denomination rightly exerts theological discipline by requiring some allegiance to these standards. But there have been many kinds of subscription through history. One may distinguish subscription by officers from subscription by all church members, subscription to every "jot and tittle" of the creed from a more general subscription to the "system of doctrine" found in the creed, and so on.

In my view, only a very minimal subscription should be required of church members in general. The conditions for church membership should be no narrower than the Scriptures' conditions for belonging to the kingdom of God. Anyone who can make a credible profession of faith in Christ should be welcomed into the church (together, I must add as a paedobaptist, with his/her

¹³ See *ibid.*, 264ff.

¹⁴ Note that perspectivalism is not relativism.

¹⁵ See DKG, 225ff., 304-310.

children). "Credible profession" is not a precise concept. It should normally¹⁶ involve the willingness to confess that Jesus is one's own Lord and Savior: that Jesus, who is both God and man, died for the sins of his people to bring them forgiveness, and that he now has full authority over our lives as the resurrected, living Lord (cf. the biblical summaries of the gospel mentioned in an earlier chapter). Of course, it is quite proper to determine through questioning the extent to which a person really understands what he is saying. But it would surely be wrong to assume that no one can make a credible profession without mastering Hodge's *Systematic Theology*. It is also proper to examine the life of a candidate for church membership, at least enough to determine if it is consistent with his profession of faith. But it should not need to be pointed out that such an examination must be satisfied with far less than perfection. A profession of faith is a claim to follow Jesus, not a claim to have reached our ultimate destination.

Some groups have argued that because a church must be unified in its confession, every member of the church should be expected to subscribe to the church's doctrinal standards. But in churches with fairly elaborate doctrinal standards like the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Heidelberg Catechism, this sort of policy would restrict church membership only to the highly intelligent; for only they are capable of intelligently subscribing to such documents. This would be a very narrow criterion, far narrower than that of Scripture itself.¹⁷ Lack of such a policy need not bring disunity. A congregation is united by its faith, not by its intelligence. And there is no reason why a congregation might not leave the more important decisions in the hands of those who do subscribe to its standards, so that the lack of universal subscription would not lead to any deterioration in its commitment.

Among church officers, it is legitimate to expect them to subscribe to confessional statements, for the issue with them is not their faith as such (as in the case of members) but their qualifications to teach and make decisions for the church. Even here, however, we must be careful what form the subscription takes. If the church requires its officers to subscribe to every "jot and tittle" of the confession on pain of ecclesiastical discipline, then the confession becomes in principle unamendable.¹⁸ Anyone wishing to amend it would on that very account be subject to discipline. An unamendable creed becomes, in effect, the

¹⁶ I say "normally" to set aside cases of severe mental retardation, people without hearing or speech, etc.

¹⁷ Donald Macleod points out that "The three thousand converts at Pentecost, the Ethiopian Chancellor and the Philippian Jailer were certainly not indoctrinated to the level of the Three Forms of Unity," "Ecumenism: Lessons from Vancouver '89," *Outlook* (Dec., 1989), pp. 15-18; quote from p. 16. The "Three Forms of Unity" are the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt, which are the usual doctrinal standards of Reformed churches in Europe.

¹⁸ At least unamendable by subtraction; it could be amended by addition, or by a change which leaves all its present doctrinal commitments intact.

equivalent of Scripture, thus Scripture itself loses its unique authority in the church. Thus, there must be some leeway, some at least momentary tolerance, some legroom for people who conscientiously believe that something in the confession is unscriptural. The arrangement may be such as to force the church into a re-examination of its doctrines, or on less important matters (see earlier discussion) it might simply lead to a permitting of differences in these areas.

We ought to do some more thinking about what doctrines really are non-negotiable. The Evangelical Free Church requires professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School to hold a premillennial eschatology; but it permits latitude on the differences between Calvinists and Arminians. In my view that indicates a rather large overestimation of the importance of millennial views and a large underestimation of the importance of the doctrine of predestination. But perhaps I am wrong. The whole question of what is and what isn't tolerable within the church has never been systematically analyzed.

As we do such analysis, it should be with a view to the effect it will have on a biblical ecumenism. Obviously, the more "non-negotiable" doctrines we have, the more difficult it will be to merge our denominations with other bodies. And the stricter our formula of subscription, again, the more difficult it will be to enter organizational union with other churches. Of course, it is more important to be biblical than to be maximally available for church unions. But ecumenism is also a biblical goal, and it may work to help keep us from needlessly overcommitting ourselves in areas where Scripture allows some tolerance of diversity.

Copyright © 1991 by Baker Book House Co. Published by Baker Book House. Used with permission. All rights to this material are reserved. This material is for personal use only and cannot be published in any form without written permission. This material is not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in any form or in other media either in whole or part, or mirrored at other web sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.