

EVANGELICAL REUNION Appendix 2: Reunion 2000

By John M. Frame

This Appendix appears for the first time in the second edition of *Evangelical Reunion*, that is, the web version. I wish here to look briefly at what has happened in the past decade on matters discussed in the book.

Essentially, developments have been discouraging, but God's promises and the Bible's vision of the one, true church continue to encourage. As I mentioned in the second Preface, my book did not set the world on fire. It did not quite fall "deadborn from the press," as David Hume described his *Treatise of Human Nature*, but sales were pretty low, and the book did not begin a new wave of evangelical ecumenism.

Some readers encouraged me. Others offered criticisms. The critics took me to task either for (1) being too extreme, (2) departing from my tradition or the critic's, (3) setting an impractical goal. But of course, such criticisms cannot be taken seriously if my biblical argument holds. And nobody offered me a serious biblical rebuttal against any of my major theses. The fellow from Iowa who wrote, "You are all wet! Your book is a missmash!"¹ was as cogent as any other critic I heard.

The PCA and the OPC are farther apart than ever, the likelihood of union, or even joint efforts, fairly remote. Several new denominations have come into being. Two or more of them have emerged from the controversy in the Christian Reformed Church over women's ordination. Again I asked myself, are these new denominations really necessary? The former CRC conservatives could have joined the PCA, OPC, RPCNA, or any number of other Reformed bodies. Why did they start their own denomination? The only reasons I can think of is that they wanted to be part of a church that was not only Reformed in doctrine, but also ethnically Dutch and that preserved the traditions of the CRC. But were these goals really worth additional breaches in the body of Christ?

The most famous ecumenical ventures in the last ten years were discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Groups of Roman Catholic scholars came to non-official agreements with groups of Protestants, both Lutheran and American Evangelical. These agreements were highly controversial, especially among Protestants. Some Evangelicals believed that the documents "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" and "The Gift of Salvation" failed to express clearly the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone, through the

¹ This is almost the whole text of the letter. I think there was a third sentence, but I don't remember it. I'm not sure what a "misasmash" is, probably a cross between a "mishmash" and a "mismatch."

imputed righteousness of Christ. I did not sign or affirm either document, but I was somewhat disappointed at the quality of discussion about them. My book does not, by the way, urge union discussions between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics (see Chapter 15). But these doctrinal discussions deserved sharper and more sympathetic critical analysis from theological reviewers.

I should perhaps also mention what might be called the “New Confessionalism” that is gaining adherents in the Evangelical community. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, the periodical *Modern Reformation*, and the radio broadcast *White Horse Inn* are a sort of ecumenical development: a joint venture among Evangelicals from various confessional traditions (Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, etc.). But the Alliance sets itself off sharply from many Evangelicals by maintaining a distinctive stance of its own on matters controversial within the Evangelical community. It advocates a more history-centered approach to church life, worship, and evangelism. It urges greater emphasis on confessions and traditions, on the “objective” side of salvation as opposed to the “subjective.”

The Alliance is not a denomination, but like denominations it unifies many who share its distinctive emphasis and divides itself from those who don't. Is this a net gain for the unity of the church? I hope so, but the rather sharply polemic and partisan tone of its literature raises questions. I have discussed some of those questions in my “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,”² and in my paper, “Traditionalism.”³

Some in the New Confessional movement have characterized *Evangelical Reunion* as a “big tent” approach to ecumenism. They would prefer a “Village Green” model, in which Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, et al. each live in their own houses, governed strictly by their own confessions and traditions, occasionally going out on the village green to mingle with one another before returning to their homes. This way, Christians have primary fellowship with their own theological communities, but they can sometimes have cordial relations with Christians of other traditions.

Sounds good, but is it biblical? Does Scripture give us the right to regard denominations as our true homes, our true family, and rest of the worldwide body of Christ as a group of people outside the family with whom we may occasionally mingle? In my view, Scripture teaches that our true family is the whole body of Christ, not one segment of it. And if the whole body of Christ is our family, then it should live in one house, not just mingle occasionally on the village green.

² This article is published as Appendix 2 in my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), and also appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 59.2 (Fall, 1997), 269-318 with replies by David Wells and Richard Muller.

³ This essay is available in two parts at www.thirdmill.org in *IIIM Magazine Online*, Volume 1, Number 13 (May 24-30, 1999), and Volume 1, Number 14 (May31-June 6, 1999).

I think we need to do better thinking in these areas, and we need to act more boldly. But first of all, we need to pray that God will give us vision and courage, so that he will make use of our efforts to bring the body of Christ together.