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# Book Reviews

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## Evangelical Reunion

John M Frame,  
Baker, 1991, 185 pp, £7.10

When anyone writes on a controversial subject like evangelical unity, it causes a stir. When a leading theologian steps into the arena the shock-waves are bound to be greater.

John Frame has created something of a stir, at least in his native America, with the publication of his latest book. This was inevitable since the book was born as Frame emerged from deep personal involvement in inter-church discussions between two of the major evangelical Presbyterian denominations in the USA, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America - Frame refers to these discussions throughout the book. Their outcome has, if anything widened the gap between the denominations concerned and therefore polarised opinions with regard to Frame's position. Hence reviews of the book which have so far appeared tend to reflect, at least to some extent, the interests of the various parties to these discussions (Cf Richard B Gaffin Jr in *New Horizons*, June 1992 and Cornelius P Venema in the March edition of the magazine of the Christian Reformed Church.).

The dangers inherent in writing a book under such circumstances are obvious - objectivity is bound to be impaired - but Frame acknowledges this. He uses the preface to give some biographical background which indicates his personal involvement. In fact in a strange sort of way this becomes one of the strengths of the book. As he says himself, despite being a systematic theologian he is not attempting a systematic

treatment of this issue as he writes. Rather, he sees the book as a 'cry from the heart' (p 12). It is helpful to bear this in mind, regardless of our personal perspective on these issues. It is the case that no-one can be truly objective in this area. We are all too much involved and have too much to lose. It brings home the fact that theology can never be done in a vacuum - in the rarefied atmosphere of the ivory towers in the seminaries and theological colleges of the world. The Word can never be understood in abstraction from the world with all its complexities.

### Setting Parameters

In his first chapter Frame sets out a Biblical basis for understanding the nature of Church unity. Beginning in Eden he traverses Old and New Testaments, gleaning principles of unity and factors which have impaired it, ending up with a section on Church government and how it has been affected by division.

This chapter is perhaps more crucial to the book and its acceptance than might normally be the case. No matter how uncomfortable the reader may feel as he listens to the rest of what Frame says, if the author is right at this point, then the thrust of what he goes on to say is valid. Every reader will feel uncomfortable as he reads on (and I daresay the author at times felt uncomfortable as he wrote on) because things we hold dear are being challenged. Frame is challenging the validity of denominations and in so doing strikes at the heart of sins within God's family that Christians are reluctant to acknowledge as sin. (He considered giving the book the title *The Curse of Denominationalism* (p 46) but decided against it because of its

negative overtones.)

Frame goes on in the second chapter to survey the history of division within the Church. He is not exhaustive, he is at times subjective, his summary is nevertheless useful. This leads into a chapter entitled 'Towards a Post-Denominational View of the Church', where the author is perhaps at his most radical. He advocates a view of the Church which, in practice as well as theory, transcends denominational boundaries. He goes as far as to challenge those denominations which use the word 'Church' (as opposed to 'Churches') in their title (p 44). Gaffin in his review takes issue with Frame on this point in the light of New Testament usage of *ecclesia* when it refers to a group of churches.

The following two chapters provide a very constructive and fair critique of denominationalism. Frame outlines 14 ways in which denominations have damaged the Church and suggests ways in which attitudes to denominations can be brought into balance. Even if the basic thesis of the book as a whole is rejected, these two chapters alone provide a valuable basis for self-examination by Churches.

### **Dealing With Obstacles to Unity**

The sixth chapter leads into the second major section of the book, 'Some Roads Back to Unity.' Thomas McCrie, a Scottish minister, published a book entitled *The Unity of the Church* in 1821. Frame draws heavily on this work and the implications of different eschatological views on attitudes to church unity and then proceeds to offer a variety of 'perspectives' on denominations. (These are intended to show that denominations are less important in practice than they are often deemed to be in principle.)

Chapter 8 begins the process of sugges-

ting concrete ways in which denominational differences might be dealt with. This includes a helpful section on 'A Biblical Basis for Tolerance' (pp 88-90) and a comment to the effect that the more divided the Church becomes, the less able she is to study the Scriptures. Here Frame refers to the great Councils that have given the Church some great formulations of the faith throughout her history (p 90).

The following four chapters take up obvious objections that cry out for an answer. How are differences of practice, history, government and priority going to be dealt with? This leads to some interesting offerings, not least on the Baptist-Paedobaptist controversy (pp 100-102).

Again, chapters 13 and 14 are ones which stand in their own right as needing to be etched on the heart of every Christian: how we are to deal with attitudes and assumptions. It is so often at this point that believers nurse their sin so protectively and proliferate the wounds that have divided God's family over the centuries.

There are then three chapters which seek to evaluate difficulties felt at different levels in the Church situation as it stands at present. They are helpful in so far as they raise issues that must be dealt with before significant confidence be built up and progress made.

### **A Call for Action**

The book ends with two chapters that provide significant help and encouragement to Churches and Christians who mean business when it comes to Biblical ecumenism. It is to such that Frame is really appealing in all that he says, those he describes as 'potential ecclesiastical revolutionaries' (p 16).

'Short of Union, What?' (Chapter 18) pulls us back from the dizzy and seemingly unattainable heights of what the

Church ought to be, yet fails to be, and focuses more realistically on what she can begin to be. Among other things there should be serious thought given to 'Partial Unions' (p 159). There are a significant number of churches that are so close in doctrine and practice that it is a sin for them not even to be talking about union.

Then chapter 19, 'What do we do now?' Well, Frame suggests 34 things we can be doing now, one of which is to 'Find three good jokes about your own denomination or tradition and share them with your fellow members'! (p 168). At the behest of Jay Adams (p 12) the book concludes on the commendable note of being doers as well as hearers of the Word.

### **The Heart of the Matter**

It was said at the beginning of this review that **Evangelical Reunion** is a controversial book. Because it is, it would not be hard to go through it with a fine-toothed comb and identify many weaknesses of detail and opinion. For example, Frame's attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church is far too soft and arguably out of touch with reality (p 91). He is not, however, interested in 'jot and tittle' agreement with the finer points of his views. He is more concerned with finding broad agreement on the major principles of Church unity which he is setting out and the concomitant action that should accompany such agreement.

Some have dismissed what he says as being naive and one can well appreciate why - he seems to be dreaming of the impossible. But the same could be said of the Bible's teaching on sanctification. From the perspective of this world 'being perfect even as the Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48) is a pipe dream. Yet we are not absolved from aiming for that standard.

The unity of the Church is a vital aspect of our corporate sanctification. No matter how elusive it may seem we are simply not permitted to stop pursuing it. The 'Spare no effort...' of Ephesians 4:3 carries more force than many Christians or Churches care to admit. The evangelical community is being destroyed this century by what Donald Macleod has aptly described as 'the small-business mentality', churches are too content to be isolated and live with the horizons of pygmies.

If Frame's book does nothing else, it ought to rouse evangelicals from their guilty lethargy and stimulate some healthy thinking and action in the arena of inter-Church relations.

*Rev Mark G Johnston, BA, MDIV*

### **Making It Happen**

*John Harvey-Jones*  
*Collins, 266pp, £12.95*

A review of a secular book in a journal like this has to be explained. At a recent conference of Christian leaders one man with experience in business management and associated courses remarked that it was interesting how secular thinking is in some aspects beginning to arrive, by force of experience and unwittingly, at principles, long ago given us in Scripture.

This book is sub-titled *Reflections on leadership* and is said to be 'a radical and refreshing philosophy of leadership, and one with a proven track record'. While reading it I noted well over fifty principles for guidelines, many of which could easily have been deduced from the Bible and all of which are to be recommended for consideration and application by Christian leaders.

A church is not a business organisation and an eldership is not a board of managers. Even the title 'Making It Happen

pen' grates on the minds of those who believe only the Spirit of God can make things happen in churches. Our aim is spiritual, not material, wealth. We are not in competition with others for their downfall, rather we are fighting Satan with a view to lifting those who are under his sway. We are not limited to human wisdom, expertise and resources, but we can 'spoil the Egyptians', and in some matters 'the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light' (Luke 16:8).

It may well be that people who have been harshly treated by their firms in recent times find it hard to believe that any good can come from a secular source. As in many other fields, the findings of the thinkers take time to filter through to practical application. The fact is that here, at least, we are reminded of principles of leadership that many of us Christian leaders have never deduced from Scripture, or if we have done so have failed to apply them. Had we done so there would have been less pastoral breakdowns than, alas, there have been. About once every four pages I paraphrased what I had read and here are some of the results, along with some application:

*1 Apparent success can be deceptive and leaders should subject it to serious investigation.*

The acclaim of the people when Jesus rode into Jerusalem did not deceive him, but many of us would have looked no further. We must not assume that when progress has been made by others they must inevitably be guilty of some false doctrine or questionable method. But we should beware of assuming all is well with us when we appear to be advancing!

*2 There is no future if there is no genuine caring for the people.*

Too often we give the impression that the church exists for its own benefit. John tells us in 1 John 3:18, 'let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth'. There is no substitute for the positive programme of caring for those in financial, material, physical, mental as well as spiritual need.

*3 If leaders are to be trusted they must make their thinking and intentions clear.*

If the people do not trust us we cannot lead them, but that trust is often undermined by poor communication and failure to make sure the people have understood what we are saying to them. Paul was accused of lacking in clarity but his reply was 'When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, 'Yes, Yes' and 'No, No'?' (2 Cor 1:17). Good leaders actually ask the people if they have understood, just as Jesus did (Mt 13:51).

*4 Good leaders will not lay themselves open to the charge of manipulation.*

Leaders exist to seek by all means to arrive at answers to problems. That is right. But the danger is that when we want to persuade the people of the rightness of our conclusions we can easily give them the impression we are determined to have our own way by one means or another. This leads to resentment and distrust. (Observe Mt 20: 25-28; 2 Tim 2: 24-25; 1 Pet 5:3).

*5 Good leaders will subject their own performance to rigorous scrutiny.*

This not only applies when there is little progress. Regular but not frequent self-examination by leaders individually and in the group is time well spent (1 Tim 4: 15-16).

There is a lot more of the same. It is certainly true that the Bible is sufficient for our needs as leaders, but sometimes

we need books like this one by John Harvey-Jones to open our eyes to things we have not noticed or taken seriously enough.

*Pastor Clifford Pond*

## **An Angry God?**

*Eryl Davies*

*Evangelical Press of Wales, 1992, 163pp, £4.95*

Subtitled: 'What the Bible says about Wrath, Final Judgement and Hell', this is a disturbing book and yet one which should be widely read amongst Christians and especially those called to preach the gospel. It is a book that troubles the heart and the conscience, and will leave the reader feeling ill at ease with himself. Indeed, it could be described as a *tremendous* book, in the more literal sense of that over-used word - it causes trembling. Which of us who has even a grain of compassion can contemplate the final state of the impenitent, cast forever into hell, there to endure the righteous wrath of God, without feeling a sense of awesome dread and a burning desire to tell to every man that 'best news' the lost can ever hear? It was just this that Paul felt when he wrote, 'Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men'. The book is out of character with the easy-going, this-world centred, 'everything now' evangelicalism of our times. Its concerns are with eternity, the world to come, human destiny and the judgement of God. We are too preoccupied with time; we think too little of eternity. We have low views of God and consequently light views of sin which, as Tozer says, are 'the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere amongst us'.

Dr Davies writes against the background of the growing popularity of annihilationism and conditional immortality

amongst evangelicals, but the interrogative form of the title must not be taken to imply any uncertainty in the author's mind that the Bible teaches that the impenitent will receive in hell eternal punishment for their sin. He sees 1974 as the watershed in the history of the doctrine of eternal punishment - the first chapter is devoted to this point. In that year IVP published John Wenham's *THE GOODNESS OF GOD* (re-published in 1985 as 'The Enigma of Evil') - a popular book by an established evangelical author issued by an evangelical publisher, in which conditional immortality is put forward as a possible and more satisfactory alternative to eternal punishment. So the die was cast and a signal was given to the evangelical fraternity that the nature of hell was an open question.

Other books followed, by far the most significant of which was *ESSENTIALS* by John Stott and David Edwards. For some years it had been known that Stott was agnostic on the issue, but now he finally admitted that he found the concept of eternal punishment in hell 'intolerable', and saw annihilation as a more acceptable alternative.

The book proceeds to examine the issues carefully. The opinions of others are treated with honesty and respect, with the result that the case made is very powerful and convincing. Chapter 2 contains a history of the doctrine of hell from the 17th century to the present day and is followed by two chapters which examine various modern forms of universalism. Chapters 5 to 8 and 11 were first published in a smaller book entitled *THE WRATH OF GOD*, and deal with the Wrath of God and the Day of Wrath (that is, the final judgment), an examination of the Biblical words used for hell and a study of its nature and duration. On the concept

of 'hell-fire', Dr Davies refers to Jonathan Edwards' stress on the centrality of God for heaven and hell. 'God will be the hell of the one and the heaven of the other . . . 'tis the infinite Almighty God that shall become the fire of the furnace'. There is some discussion on how literally we should take the *fire of hell*. I like Packer's comment: 'Clearly, we are in the world of imagery here, for fire and the darkness are both picturing the same condition, one of painful and hopeless desolation; and equally clearly, what is being pictured is a condition that is unimaginably dreadful, one that is worth any labour and any cost to avoid' (THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT).

Chapter 9 takes up the matter of the immortality of the soul. Is man immortal, or is immortality a benefit which God bestows on those who believe on his Son? Dr Davies concedes that 'The orthodox doctrine of the soul's immortality is Biblical but we have not always described and expressed it with sufficient distinctiveness or scriptural precision.' The conditionalists accuse the orthodox defenders of immortality of being influenced more by Greek philosophy than Biblical theology, but the charge cannot be made to stick. It is a basic assumption of the Bible that the soul survives death. Job's question, 'If a man die, will he live again?' is as old as mankind. Prof R A Finlayson argues in his valuable little book *GOD'S LIGHT ON MAN'S DESTINY* that the Bible is concerned with the 'continuity and accountability of personality'. 'If the resurrection involves the resuscitation of a personality that is discontinuous with the man that lived in this life, it is very difficult to understand how personal responsibility can survive.' Chapter 10 takes up more objections to hell and examines three kinds of objec-

tions: observational, exegetical and theological. The final chapter is entitled *Hell: Its Challenge* and seeks to show how such a solemn and fearful truth as this should affect us. Indeed the book is throughout practical in its concern, and properly so. What kind of wretched men are we if we can consider such awesome realities and not be moved by them?

The faithful maintenance of the Biblical doctrine of hell as endless punishment is important for a number of theological and practical reasons:

1. For the reality of God's judgment on sin. Paul Helm writes, 'Scripture teaches that the impenitent wicked will suffer (Luke 16:23). But it is impossible to suffer if one does not exist.' (THE LAST THINGS quoted in this book).

2. The idea that God's judgment on the wicked is annihilation must have implications for the work of Christ on the Cross. What was the judgment and wrath that he bore there on the Cross? Did it not consist in the conscious suffering of Divine abandonment, with all its darkness and anguish and sorrow and pain? Surely the Cross tells us something about hell?

3. The doctrine has implications for missionary work. We gladly acknowledge that the gospel preacher is primarily a preacher of good news to the lost and those who must otherwise endure the just punishment for their sins. For many today the idea of annihilation is not too disturbing - it is what they have come to believe and even hope for - 'When I die I rot'. As someone has said, 'What men fear is not that death is the end, but that it is not'. We have to warn men that their sins have eternal consequences for them - consequences of God's holy displeasure, of which they will be conscious for all eternity.

*Rev Neil C Richards*

## The Roots of Christian Freedom

*The theology of John A T Robinson*

Alistair Kee

SPCK, 190pp, £8.95

John Robinson (1919-1983) was a prolific writer and contributed articles/reviews to many journals and papers; he also wrote 23 books and contributed chapters to other books as well. His speciality was New Testament studies and 8 out of his 23 books were major works on NT subjects such as *THE BODY: A STUDY IN PAULINE THEOLOGY* (1952), *TWELVE NT STUDIES* (1962), *REDATING THE NEW TESTAMENT* (1976), *CAN WE TRUST THE NEW TESTAMENT?* (1977), *WRESTLING WITH ROMANS* (1979), *TWELVE MORE NT STUDIES* (1984) and *THE PRIORITY OF JOHN* (1985). Robinson's other books tended to be more controversial and sceptical and included *BUT THAT I CAN'T BELIEVE!* (1967; here he systematically reinterprets major Christian doctrines in a symbolic, non-literal way) and his more famous *HONEST TO GOD* (1963) then *IN THE END GOD* (1968). Robinson was a competent scholar and an influential theologian yet he was an enigma in some respects. Although an Anglican clergyman (and Bishop of Woolwich for a time), he was radical in his theology but more conservative in some of his conclusions in New Testament studies (eg the earlier dating of John's Gospel, which he strongly advocated).

Alistair Kee's book is a real help to those who want to understand Robinson's writings and theology. The opening chapter concentrates on the main

details of the life of John Robinson. This is the only chapter not written by Kee (Eric James is the writer) and is the weakest, consisting of just 6 pages with only the barest of biographical information provided.

Kee then divides the book into three sections: Part One is called *Biblical Exploration* and summarises and documents Robinson's teaching on the 5 subjects: The Gospels as Recorded, John and Judaism, The Relevance of Paul, Redating the Testament, Trusting the Bible. Kee's observation in this section is accurate and perceptive. Although at times Robinson's conclusions were 'conservative' yet 'this does not mean he was simply a conservative. He could hold or come to hold positions regarded as conservative, but on grounds which were entirely critical. This is nowhere better illustrated than in his Johannine corpus . . .' (p 18).

Part Two is entitled *Theology Exploration*; here, Kee again gathers together and clarifies Robinson's more controversial teaching on The Personality of God, Honest to God, The Divine Field, The Humanity of Christ and the Inclusive Christ. *Social Exploration* is the title of Part Three which tackles crucial ethical issues like Morality Old and New, and Being a Christian in the Third Wave.

The main value of the book is that it provides a convenient introduction to, and also a reliable summary of, Robinson's theology; its appeal will be limited yet it is undoubtedly a further aid for the serious student of contemporary theology.

*Dr Eryl Davis MA BD, ETCW*