

Papa Don't Pope

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# PAPA DON'T POPE



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*To the memory of Martin Marprelate,  
who has probably never had a book dedicated to him.*



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# Introduction



**G**iven what Solomon said about no end to the making of books (Eccl. 12:12), adding yet another one might seem to require an explanation. This is particularly the case when the book concerned is a theological demarcation, seeking to set down clear lines of distinction between a classical Protestant vision of theology and the church and a Roman Catholic understanding. Don't we have enough disagreements in the world already?

Well, yes, we do have plenty of disagreements; we are running a surplus. But we do not yet have nearly enough *clear* disagreements. Before we can move from disagreement to agreement, there is an in-between step of making the disagreements plain. If we simply jump from one to another, or attempt

to fix everything with an ecumenical group hug, we run the risk of sewing a new patch on an old garment with the result of just making everything worse (Mk. 2:21). This, by the way, was not a three-ingredient mixed metaphor; it was rather three metaphors condensed *seriatim*.

There are catholic reasons for expressing disagreement, in other words. I am not interested in just being disagreeable, and I see no future in stirring up mud. The church where I am privileged to labor confesses the Apostles' Creed on a weekly basis and, that being the case, every week we all say we believe in the "holy catholic church." Consequently, in publishing a book like this, I wanted to make sure that it was understood at the outset that there is a plain, and very catholic intention behind it. Put another way, true catholicity begins with defining catholicity.

So why write a book like this? Of course, one reason would be to address the particular topics outlined in the various chapters—personal interpretation, apostolic succession, *sola Scriptura*, and so on. But there is a larger reason for it, a reason behind the particular differences over particular doctrines. For the modern mind, the word *Protestant* conjures up images of protests, and for us that means marches, placards, chants, and so on. It makes you think

of a group of the theologically disgruntled, united only by what they are *against*. But the original use of the word *Protestant* came from an appeal at the Diet of Speyer in 1529. An accommodation had been made for the evangelical believers just a few years earlier, and as it happened Charles V was seeking to put a stop to that accommodation. The princes who were supportive of the Reformation appealed to him not to do this. Here is one of the things they said in that appeal:

“We are resolved, with the grace of God, to maintain the pure preaching of God’s holy Word, such as is contained in the biblical books of the Old and New Testaments, without adding anything to it that may be contrary to it. This word is the only truth; it is the sure rule of all doctrine and of all life, and can never fail or deceive us. He who builds on this foundation shall stand against all the powers of hell, while all the human vanities that are set up against it shall fall before the face of God.”<sup>1</sup>

My hope is that by reading this book, some might catch a vision of that original Protestant

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1 Quoted by Joel Beeke, “The Protest at Speyer,” *Leben Magazine* 4, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 2008): 9 (<http://www.leben.us/volume-4-volume-4-issue-4/266-the-protest-at-speyer>).

“protestimony,” for that is where it all begins. To affirm certain things certainly entails denying their contraries, but a healthy spiritual movement must always begin with the affirmations. The Reformation was just that sort of positive movement of the gospel, and it is my hope to keep that reality in view even while we discuss the doctrines that such affirmations might exclude.

This kind of clarity is also very helpful in a day when classical Protestants frequently find themselves on the same side of cultural battles as devout Catholics are—say, on the right to life or on the issues swirling around the homosexual agenda. But there still remains a difference between allies and co-belligerents. Allies are fighting against the same enemy you are, and largely for the same reasons. Co-belligerents are fighting against the same enemy, but for reasons that differ, sometimes wildly. Just the other day I had a brief and very enjoyable moment of fellowship on the sidewalk of our small town. A traditionalist Catholic named Judith stopped me with, “Excuse me, are you Doug Wilson?” I indicated *yes*, never quite sure how these things are going to go. She introduced herself, and said that she generally doesn’t get on with Calvinists, but all this homosexual business was

*terrible*. She apparently appreciated a stand I had taken on same sex mirage in our local paper. It is my conviction that working through the issues in this book will help Protestants and Catholics work together in those areas where they *can* work together. Good fences make good neighbors.

We can know, for example, that when the pope says something entirely reasonable in the teeth of the secular establishment, we ought to agree with it. It is important to understand that we are agreeing *materially*—on the subject under discussion. But there may well be a formal element in there (his understanding of papal authority) that we must reject even while we applaud the contents of his statement.

This is related to the next obvious question. Who is this book for? The book is intended for anyone with honest questions about any of the topics addressed. That might include both decided Protestants and wobbly ones, with the same kind of breakdown on the Roman Catholic side of things. In short, I want to write about these topics for anyone interested in reading about them—and I suspect there are more than a few in that category.

Of course, a word must be said about the title *Papa, Don't Pope*. What is it supposed to mean? “Papa” is what my grandkids call me, and “popping” is what

happens when someone swims the Tiber, as they say. But as this book makes plain, that is hardly likely. And the phrase also riffs off that old Madonna song, "Papa, Don't Preach." So the best explanation is that we were horsing around at Canon one day some months ago when somebody said that, and it stuck. You kind of had to have been there. The details are foggy, and so we have to ask you to trust us. It was funny at one time.

The book has obvious limitations, beyond those created by virtue of having been written by me. The Reformation began almost five hundred years ago, and built a great civilization in the course of its development over the subsequent centuries. Issues related to its theological foundations are obviously enormous. This is a tiny book, a pamphlet really, and makes no pretense of covering the subjects I am addressing in any kind of exhaustive depth. But while it cannot be exhaustive, and did not try to be, my hope is that it *can* be suggestive. I pray that it might help some who read it to mark out some lines for fruitful future discussion.

Classical Protestants tend to say *Soli Deo Gloria*. Roman Catholics might prefer *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*. May God hasten the day when we can all say *amen* to both.

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SECTION 1

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UNITY





## CHAPTER I

# A Protestant Vision for Unity



**T**he vexed question of church unity is like the woman in the gospels—the more the physicians treat her, the worse she seems to get. In large measure, this is because church leaders (naturally enough) tend to place the locus of unity in *government*. But we need to reexamine this. Of course, governmental unity among all Christians is certainly to be desired, but is it the foundation of all unity or an instrument that will be used by God to advance that unity? Is governmental unity the foundation or the final fruit of a biblical striving toward unity? Fortunately, the Bible tells us where to look for the answers to these questions.

The same Paul who tells us to labor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace also tells us the *basis* of that unity. He tells us that we as Christians are to walk in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians (Eph. 4:1). Our demeanor in this is to be one of humility and patience (v. 2). With this attitude, we are equipped to obey his next command, which is the command to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (v. 3). This unity is to be *kept* by us, not *created* by us. Armed with the right attitude, assigned the right task, what we now need is the right foundation. What foundation does Paul declare as the basis of this unity?

There is already one body because there is one Spirit. There is one hope of our calling. Only one Lord. Only one faith. Only one baptism. And above, through and in us, there is one God and Father (vv. 4–6). In heaven is the triune God, and on earth we find a common confessed faith and a common baptism—Word and sacrament. It is striking that there are no governmental bonds referred to here; the bonds are of another nature entirely. He does not list one holy father in Rome. Nor does he say one ecumenical headquarters in New York. He does not refer to summit leadership conferences in Colorado

Springs. When Paul is appealing to Christians to maintain the unity they already have, he appeals to them on this basis—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Of course, this does not mean that the ministry is irrelevant to this question of unity. In the next breath, Paul goes on to say that the one Lord ascended into heaven, and from that exalted place He gave the gift of godly ministry to men: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). The reason He did this was so that these officers would labor in the perfecting of the saints, building up the body of Christ *until we all come to the unity of the faith* (vv. 12-13). The task before these officers is the presentation of a perfect man, a Church that has grown up into the measure of the fullness of Christ (v. 13).

This means the saints are exhorted to have an attitude of humility and patience as they endeavor to preserve that measure of unity they already have, a unity created by the Spirit of God. At the same time, they clearly do not yet have the *full* measure of the unity that God intends for His Church. Because of the unity we have, we are to strive for the unity we do not have.

In summary, Paul teaches first that we have a unity that must be preserved. He also teaches that we

do not yet have full unity, for that is the pastoral and eschatological goal of those faithful officers, given by Christ, who labor in the Church. And the unity we already have is a unity based upon the unity of God, the unity declared in baptism in the triune Name.

Faithful pastors therefore advance the work of true unity. Unfaithful teachers disrupt that unity and so their lying ministries must themselves be disrupted. As unity grows under a faithful ministry, we are no longer children, tossed to and fro by televangelists, or carried about by every contradictory wind of doctrine to blow out of the magisterium. The work of true unity is not advanced by an irenicism that tolerates the “sleight of men” (Eph. 4:4). A shepherd who tolerates wolves is a shepherd who hates his own sheep. A shepherd who loves his sheep is one who fights the wolves. And the wolves in sheep’s clothing don’t like this, not at all, and so they always raise the great cry—*unity!*

In dealing with this threat, faithful pastors do not declaim from the pulpit about “wolves abstractly considered.” They name names, like Hymaneus and Alexander. And that is why it is treachery to the cause of true unity to refuse to point out obvious departures from the faith—regardless of the honored position of the one departing: “If we or an angel

from heaven . . ." (Gal. 1:8). If there really were an unbroken magisterium, a united confession going back to the apostles, a unanimous consent of the fathers, no one would be more excited about it than I. But when such authority is claimed, and cannot be established from the Scriptures, and contradicts itself in a thousand ways even when evaluated in accordance with its own principles, a faithful minister can only label it as a deception.

But pastors are to labor to this end of unity by speaking the truth *in love*, in order that the already unified body might become unified. We are growing up into our head, the Lord Jesus Christ. From Him, the whole body is being joined together—and the picture here of being joined and compacted as every joint supplies is an image of being knit together *in the womb* (Eph. 4:15–16). There is an essential unity in an embryo, but there is also a much higher unity toward which the embryo is growing. Many complaints about the “disunity” of the Church are actually complaints about how God knits in the darkness of the womb. We look over His shoulder and have the temerity to criticize what He is doing there. But we must go by what the Word says, and not by what we see.

So as we grow up toward this unity, to extend the metaphor, we necessarily fight false teachers

who want to introduce their birth defects into the process. As we love one another in all humility and stand for the truth in love, we advance the cause of unity in truth. God directs how this process will finally culminate. Our task is not to oversee the whole process, but rather to be faithful and obedient in our small portion of it.

We therefore affirm a doctrine of apostolic succession, but this is not a succession of ordinations. That is not the basis of unity. Rather, it is a succession of baptisms, and all that those baptisms represent. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. (There will be more on this in Chapter V: Authority and Apostolic Succession.) But we receive our inheritance from our Christian past, and we perpetuate it as we evangelize nonbelievers and bring up our children in the faith. We do so by means of Word and sacrament, preaching and baptism. This is the unity we have received from God. As we recognize that all covenant members have received this common inheritance, this gives us the foundation from which to work on improving that unity. We are an embryo in the womb. To look for full governmental unity *now* is to look for a kid in the second trimester to grow Aaron's beard, so that the oil can run down it, to use a grotesque image.

Although I don't have time to argue for this fully here, this is why the postmillennial vision is so important. Postmillennialism argues (on exegetical grounds) that the Church will see days of glory in the future far surpassing anything we have seen up to this point. Postmillennialism argues that the *Church is in fact still an embryo*, and that we will one day be a perfect man.<sup>2</sup> We are not yet that perfect man. Assuming that this is God's decree and that someday this *will* come to pass, then I am obligated as a faithful servant to work and labor in the direction of that decree. I want to show why this is so important for classical Protestants. Without it, there is no way to keep Protestant churches from disintegrating into a sect mentality. If God has no plan for the Church in history, then *we* need not have one. If there is no *telos* toward which we are growing, then we need not have any regard for it. In another variation of this, if the "perfect man" that the Bible talks about is manifest only in heaven, then there is no pressing need to strive toward that perfect man on

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2 It needs to be said here that I understand that many solid Protestants are not postmill like I am, and so this line of argument will not seem as compelling to them. And I should also acknowledge that John Henry Newman appeals to the "embryonic" argument also, and so a separate discussion has to be developed there. In the meantime, before the church grows into a full eschatological glory, all Protestants have a different understanding of what constitutes true unity, an understanding that encompasses all of church history.

earth. (See my book *Heaven Misplaced* for a further discussion of this.)

Consequently, in my view, the error of Protestant sects is that of assuming that God has no earthly plan for the history of the institutional Church and that there is no embryo at all. What you see around you is what God wanted from the beginning, which is to say, a fragmented, scattered collection of churches. All things will be put right in heaven, they affirm, but in the meantime the earthly pandemonium is actually a design feature.

But the contrary error of Rome is that of assuming the embryo is already fully grown in all essential respects. But this leads to an *a priori* inability to see a new historic work of the Spirit. The historic Protestant looks at the current problems and affirms that God is sovereign over all such apparent impediments. The sin *will* be dealt with, and some things that looked like a bad business to us will actually be revealed as having a larger divine purpose. When God wants to knit a perfect man throughout the course of a sinful, fallen world, He does so. The fact that He knows what He is doing should be apparent to us by now. But we continue to write Him off, as though His prophecies on this subject will somehow fall to the ground.



This means that I believe in the eventual reunion of all covenantal communions. This extends even to the Jews, as Paul notes in Romans 11. If wild olive branches could be grafted into the cultivated tree and yet grow, what will happen when the natural branches are grafted back in? Life from the dead. The only communions that will not be grafted back into the one olive tree will be those communions that no longer exist. The church in Ephesus had her lampstand removed, and the church is no longer there at all. No one is there except for the tourists among the ruins.

Paul expressly warned the church at Rome that she was vulnerable to the same judgment that befell the Jews, and that she had to guard against the hubris that set the Jews up for their fall. I do not believe they heeded the warning, just as the Jews did not. But this does not slow God down any—let God be true and every man a liar. If Rome was cut out, she can be grafted back in. If Rome was not cut out, but only radically cut *back*, she will flourish and bear evangelical fruit once again.

So this is what I mean by eventual reunion: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one church.



## CHAPTER II

# Love the One You're With



I was once in a conversation with a group of friends, and the subject of the Scottish covenanters came up. I forget exactly how we got there, but one friend was not sure how much actual sympathy he had for the covenanters, thinking that there was more than a little fanaticism in their stand. Courage and martyrdom are all very well, but would it have hurt anyone to take a more moderate and sane stand in the face of persecution? My response to him lies at the heart of my thoughts here. I want to address obedience and the affections. Another way to speak of this is in terms of covenant loyalty.

I think his comment was misplaced precisely because he was in large measure right. In other words, covenant loyalty understands the concept of social and corporate justification. (Individual justification by imputation is the subject of Chapter XII.) I am quite prepared to believe that many die-hard Protestants down through the years have been fanatical, unwieldy, and hard to deal with. Sometimes this was due to their righteousness, the kind of person of whom the world was not worthy. You probably would not invite the Tishbite to a wine and cheese *soiree*, or Jenny Geddes either, for that matter. Sometimes it was due to them being right in a wrong kind of way. But such angularities do not keep them from being *my* people. Having a crazy uncle in the attic does not undo the bloodlines—he is still my uncle. Sometimes I support my uncle, sometimes oppose him, but he is always my uncle.

I mentioned in my discussion with my friend that the same principle applied to our understanding of the early church. In the many waves of persecution that swept over the Church, one effect of this was that moderate and tempered responses were not elicited from the ranks of the faithful. Origen's mother had to hide Origen's clothes so that he would not run outside to get himself arrested in order to be

martyred. In the frenzy of pagan persecution, did all early Christians behave as though they were being invited to a game of lawn tennis? Not a bit of it. Consequently, in the early history of the Church there were many fanatics—but they are my people nonetheless.

The same could be said of asceticism, particularly the Syrian strain of it. For example, people sat on the top of poles for decades to avoid worldliness. Men and women would live together in celibate marriage, which caused consternation at different church councils like Elvira and Nicea. John Chrysostom, during his monkish stay up in the mountains, did not lie down, ever, for two years. He slept standing up, a fairly common practice among the monks. What good did *that* do? Well, during that time Chrysostom memorized the Old and New Testaments. In short, the first four centuries of the Church are filled with some glorious weirdos. In fact, one of the charges brought against John Chrysostom at the Synod of the Oaks was that he had called Epiphanius a babler and a little weirdo.

Now, all these people, being Christian, are in the covenant together with me, over against the Hindus, say. Because of this, I have to “answer” for them in some sense. Because of the covenant link, I

have obligations. Those obligations range from full support to manic opposition, depending on the circumstances. But whether I support or oppose them, our shared baptisms in the triune name mean that we have a shared identity. Triune baptism is never false—let God be true and every man a liar. An unsympathetic observer would say that I am “making excuses” for people I agree with, and that I am inconsistently hard on those I disagree with. No, I am simply saying that “identity with” or “lack of identity with” is the necessary context for all forms of support or opposition. I have a shared human identity with a Hindu (*imago Dei*) which would become obvious, for example, if we were working together to get people out of a burning building. I have a shared Christian identity with anyone baptized in the name of the triune God, which would be obvious over against Muslim terrorists. But other complicating factors can get thrown into the mix, like national and cultural identities, which sometimes are promoted to a level they should not enjoy. An American atheist and an American Christian might have an easier time of it sharing a meal in a restaurant than the American Christian would with a Bantu Christian.

Now every such group “justifies” those inside, and refuses “justification” to those outside. I am not here

speaking of justification in the theological sense as it applies to individuals. I am speaking of the impulse that makes us say, silently, "Yes, my sister is ugly, but *you* can't say that." In other words, "you" are outside the group or family and have no standing to bring a charge. The charge may be true, but "you" still do not have standing. This impulse to social justification is apparent everywhere—in racial hatreds, in nationalist collisions, and in religious disputes such as the one we are examining. Those in the "justified" group are judicially innocent, though they may be acknowledged as personally guilty. This is why we hear things like, "Yes, so and so did thus and such, *but . . .*" The *yes* acknowledges the personal guilt and the *but* leads into some acknowledgment of his social position among "the justified." Thus, a green activist will say, "Yes, shooting loggers is a bit extreme, but we have to remember our forests are being decimated." The activist may genuinely be appalled at what his fellow green did, but that identity is still there, and he must function within the boundaries of this social justification—because the only alternative is going over to the other side. When this justification mechanism is operating on all cylinders, it can swallow the most horrendous and indefensible activities—which is what I see in the case of the suicide

bombers in Israel. A bomber could kill everyone at a six-year-old's birthday party, and the explanation would still follow. "Our group disavows this action, *but . . .*"

As sinful as some forms of this craven excuse-making are, other forms of justification are inescapable. This is because it is impossible to opt out of the system entirely. As we discuss the issues surrounding the Reformation, nobody comes at it as a disinterested party or "objective" historian: We justify according to the side that has our affections. I hope I have not muddied up a relatively simple point.

Say I were having a discussion with a Protestant on the threshold of conversion to Catholicism. (Now for the record, the issue between such a person and me is not the same as it would be if I, raised Protestant, were discussing this with someone raised Catholic.) In such a situation, he and I are members of the same denomination and come under the same authority. He has come to a threshold of conversion, which means that his affections have moved elsewhere. (I am using "affection" in this sense of the social justification that I am describing, not in the sense of personal affection for particular individuals.)

This is why he and I could compare the following sentences and see striking similarities.



"Yes, I agree that the Catholic church has been wracked with sexual scandal, but . . ."

"Yes, I agree that Protestant churches are shot through with individualism, but . . ."

If we climb into our respective propositions, we could play paradigm bumper cars all day long and not get anywhere. This is why I would want all this to lead up to an appeal to his remaining Protestant affections, which, because he is not a machine made out of stainless steel, I know are still there.

Because his affections have significantly moved, I believe that he is vulnerable to the temptation to justify what he is moving to in the sense I have already described above. Because his affections have moved, he justifies certain things, and has come to love a certain *idea*.

But I want to bring this idea down to earth with a thud. Over the course of my life I have spent a lot of time around Roman Catholics—my dearest friend in the Navy was the Catholic lay leader. (I was the Protestant lay leader.) I do not believe my judgments are those of an uninformed bigot. I have certainly been around Roman Catholics long enough to have a sense of their spiritual pulse, generally speaking. Doctrine aside, I am speaking of incarnational living—the level of Marian obedience. Given this

incarnational reality, if he continues to pursue the course he is on, who will his children marry? What will the character of *their* faith be like twenty years from now? Will his grandchildren love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ with heart, soul, mind and strength? Will they grow up in the faith in a way that goes beyond a mere assent to certain propositions? Will they love God in daily practical ways? I hope so, and I even think it possible. But if I were to measure by my experience, to embrace that possibility as a *likelihood* would be the triumph of hope over experience. Such a person may feel this to be an unfair *ad hominem*, but I do not intend this in an insulting way at all.

Bishop Sheen once sent a manuscript to the printers, and when the galleys came back to him, he noted that *Heaven* and *Hell* were all reduced to the lower case, *heaven* and *hell*. He dutifully corrected them, and sent it back. He got into a tussle with his editor over this, and his editor asked him why he wanted them in the upper case. "Because," said the bishop, "they are *places*. You know, like Scarsdale." I would ask such a man, as one who must give an account for his soul, and the souls of those in his household, "Where are you taking them? Where are you taking your grandchildren and great-grandchildren?"

## CHAPTER III

# The Ultimate Letter to Rome



Once we get past our agreement that perseverance in the faith should be considered a good thing, the doctrine of perseverance creates a large number of questions. Some of the disagreements that arise out of this are extremely subtle, so it is important to define our terms very carefully at the outset.

According to the historic Reformed faith, the elect of God cannot fall away. This is not because they are made out of stainless steel—they are as frail as the non-elect and can in fact be broken. But the Word of God cannot be broken. If God has spoken