

THE END OF PROTESTANTISM

Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church

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To my unborn grandchild,
who may, or may not,
be another grandson

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Acknowledgments

I have been thinking and writing about Protestant catholicity for more than two decades, but this book had a more immediate catalyst in the energetic response I received to several essays published in *First Things* magazine during 2013. *First Things* later teamed up with the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University to sponsor a public forum at Biola in the spring of 2014 on the future of Protestantism. I am grateful to the organizers of that event and to my interlocutors, Carl Trueman, Fred Sanders, and Peter Escalante, for helping me refine my thoughts about these issues. During a spring teaching session at New St. Andrews College in 2015, I had the privilege of debating these issues again with Douglas Wilson. My practical suggestions, such as they are, were inspired by the examples of Rev. Richard Bledsoe of Boulder, Colorado, and the late Pastor Tom Clark of Somerset, New Hampshire, both of whom embody local catholicity.

Over the past several years, I have been part of ecumenical dialogues sponsored by Evangelicals and Catholics Together, the Center for Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue, and the Paradosis Center at John Brown University. I am grateful for the friendships I have formed in these settings—with Matthew Levering, Hans Boersma, Chad Raith, Timothy George, Tom Guarino, Francesca Murphy, Rusty Reno, Robert Wilken, and many others—and grateful too for the opportunity to learn much from theologians outside my own tiny sector of Protestantism.

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This book is dedicated to my forthcoming, as yet unnamed grandchild, reputed to be a grandson—by the time the book is published, we’ll know for sure. I would be glad to see the grandsons evening the score with the granddaughters, though I hasten to add that it’s *not a competition*. My prayer is that he will grow up in a world where the broken church is being put together again, and I even entertain fond hopes that he will play some small role in that reunion. Regardless of what lies ahead in that regard, I have no doubt that his life will be full of challenge, and also trust that our faithful Lord will prepare him to meet these challenges and triumph through them all.

Though I do not yet know you, Noni and I love you and can’t wait to see you.

1

An Interim Ecclesiology

Jesus prayed that his disciples would be united as he is united with his Father (John 17:21). Jesus is in the Father, and the Father in Jesus. Each finds a home in the other. Each dwells in the other in love.

Jesus prayed that the church would exhibit *this* kind of unity: Each disciple should hospitably receive every other disciple, as the Father receives the Son. Each church should dwell in every other church, as the Son dwells in the Father.

This is what Jesus *wants* for his church. It is *not* what his church is.

The church is divided. It is *not* that the church has remained united while groups falsely calling themselves churches have split off. It is *not* that we are spiritually united while empirically divided.

The church is a unique society, the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit. But it is a visible society that exists among other societies.

That visible society is divided, and that means the *church* is divided. This is not as it should be. This is not the church that Jesus desires. So long as we remain divided, we grieve the Spirit of Jesus, who is the living Passion of the Father and Son.

Some will object that I am exaggerating. Some will object that we are united in many ways. All churches confess common doctrines, celebrate common rituals, have some form of pastoral care and leadership. There is unity in doctrine, sacrament, and office.

In reality, every apparent point of unity is also a point of conflict and division. We are united in confession of the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, in confessing Jesus as the incarnate Son who died and rose again. Most churches can affirm most of the *contents* of the Apostles' Creed, even if they do not adopt the creed.

Yet we are doctrinally divided. Virtually every church has added to the early creeds and made those additions fundamental to the church. Presbyterian pastors must affirm not only the early creeds but also the elaborate system of the Westminster Confession. Lutheran churches define themselves doctrinally by the Formula of Concord, a doctrinal statement used by no one but Lutherans.

Even when we affirm the same doctrine, we affirm it differently. Protestants and Catholics both confess "justification," but they mean very different things by it. Even on something as central to Christian faith as Jesus's resurrection from the dead, churches diverge. Some deny that the resurrection actually happened. Others, rightly, insist on Paul's claim that without the resurrection we are not saved.

To say that we agree on fundamentals assumes that we agree on what the fundamentals are. But we do not agree. For some, it is fundamental dogma to believe that the pope can speak infallibly and that Mary was immaculately conceived and assumed into heaven. For others, those are not only nonfundamental; they are not even true.

The church is as doctrinally divided as it is doctrinally unified, if not more so.

We celebrate the same sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. To that degree we are united. But it is a low degree of union.

We cannot agree on how many sacraments there are. We do not agree on what those sacraments do, how essential they are, whether we should call them sacraments. We cannot agree on how to perform them. We differ on how much water is needed to baptize and how much of the baptized person's body needs to get wet. We disagree about whether a baptism with only a little water is a baptism at all.

Our liturgies are wildly diverse. Some churches have formal, repetitive liturgies that change little from week to week. Other churches follow no apparent liturgy at all. In some churches the sermon is the high point of worship; in others the sermon is reduced to a brief scriptural meditation.

We disagree on whether to sit or stand or kneel at the Lord's Supper and how often we should have it. We disagree about what happens to the bread and wine and about whether we should reserve a consecrated host for veneration. The largest church in the world will not admit millions of other believers to its eucharistic celebrations. The tiniest sects of Christianity likewise refuse to commune with any but their own.

Some believe that veneration of icons is a spiritual discipline; others call it liturgical idolatry. Some believe we should offer prayers to the Mother of God and the saints; others decry it as necromancy.

The church is sacramentally and liturgically divided.

We are not united by visible authority. Most (not all) churches have pastors, but we are not united in our understanding of what pastors do. We do not agree about what makes a pastor a pastor. Pastors of some churches regard pastors of other churches as nonpastors because their ordinations are defective. We do not agree about whether bishops are necessary to the church, or what form of church polity is best.

Catholics claim that the pope is the universal bishop, which is hotly disputed by everyone else. Free churches acknowledge no authority beyond the congregation.

When it is exercised, church discipline is not respected by other churches. Excommunicated Christians can easily find another church to receive them, no questions asked.

The church is governmentally divided.

Every mark of unity is also a sign and site of division. Jesus wants his church to be one. But we are not.

How can Christians live with this contradiction? Why do we not grieve with the grieving Spirit? Should we not join Jesus in praying that the church be one as the Father and Son are one? And, having so prayed, should we not so live?

We can live with ourselves because we have created a system to salve our conscience and to deflect the Spirit's grief. We have found a way of being church that lets us be at peace with division. Denominationalism allows us to be friendly to one another while refusing to join one another. It allows us to be cordial while refusing to commune together at the Lord's table. It permits us to be civil while refusing to acknowledge that another's baptism is truly baptism, or another's ordination truly ordination. It makes us forgetful of our divisions and our defiance of Jesus.

Churches and Christians have fellowship across denominational lines. Denominational churches serve and evangelize and witness together. American Christianity has been marked by a lively interdenominational spirit of mission. God uses denominational churches and Christians to accomplish his ends.

But denominationalism is not what Jesus desires for his church. It does not fulfill his prayer. Denominationalism does not produce a church that is united as the Father is united with the Son and the Son with the Father. Denominational churches do not dwell in, nor are they indwelt by, one another. Methodist churches dwell in other Methodist churches; Lutheran churches are indwelt by other Lutheran churches. In the nature of the case, being a Methodist church means *not* dwelling in a Lutheran church. Being a Methodist church means *not* exhibiting the unity of the Father and the Son.

Denominationalism is not union. It is the opposite. It is the institution-alization of division. Our friendliness is part of the problem. It enables us to be complacent about defining ourselves not by union with our brothers but by our divisions.

Once there were no denominations. Once the church was *not* mappable into three great “families” of churches—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox.

Once there was just “the church,” then East and West, and then, over centuries, the crazy quilt of churches we know today. As the Great Schism created “Catholicism” and “Orthodoxy,” so the Protestant Reformation not only produced Lutheran and Reformed and Anglican churches but also founded the Catholic Church as a distinct Christian body. Each division gave Christians new names.

Denominationalism was not lurking under the surface, waiting for a Luther to midwife it into the world. The three “families” did not exist in seminal form prior to the various fissures that produced them. The distinctions and groupings, the territorial boundaries, the liturgical and doctrinal differences, all the topographical clues and cues by which we map the Christian world today had to be *created*.

Whatever was *once* true but is *not* true any longer is contingent, by definition. “Once” is a signal that whatever is under consideration is not a design feature. Our mapping of the church into three clusters of churches has emerged over the course of a thousand years of church history. It is in

no way essential to the church, as Jesus and the Spirit, the Scriptures and sacraments, are of the essence of the church. As Ephraim Radner has put it, the historical formations of the church have *no ontological weight*. We are what we will be, and what we will be is *one* body united by the Spirit to the Son in communion with the heavenly Father. *That* is the essence of the church.

Ecclesial maps have changed in the past. They will change again. The church as we know it had to be mapped, and so it is *remappable*.

Edit that: it is not *remappable*; it *is being* remapped before our eyes, if we open our eyes to see it. Or, edit again: it *has been* remapped, while many of us had our heads down and our eyes fixed obsessively on the frequently petty travails of our own denominations.

The church is being rearranged, and that opens up fresh opportunities for reunion, fresh opportunities to repent of our divisions and to seek once again to please our Lord Jesus. We are seeing God answer Jesus's prayer before our eyes, and that encourages us to pray and work more fervently.

This will require nothing less than death. To please Jesus, we must share his cross by dying to our unfaithful forms of church and churchmanship. We must die to the names we now bear, in hopes of receiving new ones. Reunion demands death because death in union with Jesus is the only path toward resurrection.



This book is an exhortation in the interim. I speak from within denominational Christianity to call Christians to strive in the Spirit toward a new way of being church. This is an interim ecclesiology and an interim agenda aimed specifically at theologically conservative evangelical Protestant churches. I am not addressing other churches, except tangentially. I have suggestions for Catholic and Orthodox churches, but I have a faint suspicion they do not care much what I have to say. Protestants may not care much either, but at least in addressing Protestants I can address my own tribe and appeal to them to abandon their tribalism.

I propose an ecclesiological program for the present. If it were enacted, it would move Protestant churches *toward* full reunion, toward obedience to Jesus.

Protestants should adopt a different stance toward one another, toward Catholics and Orthodox and Pentecostals and other new movements in

Christianity. I propose that Protestants pursue internal reforms that, I argue, will bring their churches more in line with Scripture as well as with Christian tradition. My agenda will make Protestant churches more catholic, but that is because it will make them more evangelical. The two go together because catholicity is inherent in the gospel.

I call this ecclesiology and this agenda “Reformational Catholicism,” which I have composed in four movements. The first movement lays out a vision for the Reformational Catholic church of the future, arguing that it expresses a biblical and a Reformational paradigm for the church. The second movement focuses on denominational Christianity in the United States. While acknowledging that God has used denominationalism to extend his kingdom, I argue that it suffers from fundamental flaws and inhibits us from manifesting the unity Jesus desires.

We *know* we are not condemned to denominational Christianity in perpetuity. In a biblical intermezzo, I show how the Creator God regularly tears down the world and reassembles it in new ways.

The third movement argues that God is remapping the global church and that the American denominational system is collapsing in the process. I argue that this opens an opportunity for Reformational Catholicism.

In the fourth movement, I offer some guidelines to theologians, pastors, and lay Christians who want to enact this interim ecclesiology in the hope of ultimate reunion.



This amounts to a call for the end of Protestantism. Insofar as opposition to Catholicism is constitutive of Protestant identity; insofar as Protestants, whatever their theology, have acted as if they are members of a different church from Roman Catholics and Orthodox; insofar as Protestants define themselves over against other Protestants, as Lutherans are *not*-Reformed and Baptists are *not*-Methodist—in all these respects, Jesus bids Protestantism to come and die. And he calls us to exhibit the unity that the Father has with the Son in the Spirit.

To persist in a provisional Protestant-versus-Catholic or Protestant-versus-Protestant self-identification is a defection from the gospel. If the gospel is true, we are who we are by union with Jesus in his Spirit with his people. It then *cannot* be the case that we are who we are by differentiation from other believers.

The Father loves the Son and will give him what he asks. He does not give a stone when Jesus asks for bread. When Jesus asks that his disciples be one, the Father will not give him bits and fragments. The Father will give the Son a unified church, and the Son will unify the church by his Spirit. That is what the church will be. It is what the Son and Spirit will make of us as we follow, worship, and pray. It is what we will be, and we are called by our crucified Lord to die to what we are *now* so that we may become what we will be.