

In need of a pope? Protestants and the papacy: Protestants and the papacy

by [D. Stephen Long](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

Do protestants need the papacy? Given the recent fascination with the pontificate of John Paul II and with the election of Benedict XVI, it would seem that the papacy is on the Protestant horizon in a way that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago. This may be the result of savvy marketing, the omnipresence of CNN, the celebrity status of John Paul II or a penchant for the exotic. But I think something more is going on. It is the papacy itself that fascinates us.

Protestants find ourselves in the odd situation of seeing a need for the papacy. Our fate seems linked with it. Three reasons in particular emerge for why Protestants need the papacy.

The first reason is a negative one: Protestants need the papacy because we must have something to protest *against*. Protestantism is a 500-year-old tradition of protest and dissent against tradition.

What began as an effort to reform the institutional Catholic Church has become its own institution in need of reform. But how does one dissent against a tradition of dissent? Every act of dissent merely reproduces the tradition; there seems no way out of these conservative tentacles, which become increasingly more reactionary even under liberal guise.

The final logic of this version of Protestantism can only be that each individual makes up his or her own religion, which will then be defined over and against every other individual's religion. In other words, what holds this tradition together is that it is *against* something. This kind of Protestantism needs an object against which it dissents for its own identity. If there were no papacy, no tradition, no doctrine, no common moral teaching against which to protest, it would lose its identity. As we learn from Nietzsche and Freud, such a reactionary movement must secretly desire

the very thing it hates for the sake of its identity.

There are also two positive reasons Protestants need the papacy: for the sake of the unity of the church, and for the sake of truth grounded in love.

The papacy offers an impressive visible manifestation of the church's unity. Christians must seek the unity of Christ's body in a visible way through the church. Both scripture and tradition so clearly bear witness to this claim that I need not argue for it here. When it comes to visible unity, it is time for us Protestants to admit that we have failed. We are disunified beyond repair and cannot solve our divisions through our traditionally Protestant resources. Perhaps it is time to look to the papacy for the necessary visible manifestation of Christian unity; perhaps it alone provides the necessary unity of the church through a subjective and personal reality that mirrors that of Jesus Christ himself.

Christ left us no written sources, no legal contracts or juridical means of unity. Instead he mediates God's presence to us in and through human flesh. Perhaps the papacy bears witness to this reality better than other instruments of unity (to trade on an Anglican term).

I would not deny that Protestants already share to an extent in the Catholic unity. In fact, this is the official teaching of the Catholic Church itself. Its catechism states that "one cannot charge with the sin of separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers." Those of us who came to love God through these separated communions are correct to declare our faith in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." Holy scripture, the ancient confessions, baptism, liturgy and the common life of faith, hope and love all function in part as instruments of unity.

But none of these instruments of unity have worked to avoid practices of ever-repeating and deepening division and schism. Could this be because these means are primarily objective and juridical? Because they assume no "fleshly" mediation? Perhaps we have tried to find unity through means that do not express as well as they could the reality of Christ's incarnation.

Objective and juridical means lack the human reality of the papal unity. They cannot express affection. They do not pronounce blessing and benediction. They cannot ask for forgiveness for past errors or make claims for truth. They do not grow frail, show

the wear of time, and die. All this the pope can do. He can be loved in a way that these other instruments of unity cannot. This is what struck me in the events that transpired in St. Peter's Square over the past few weeks.

Of course, the other instruments of unity do attract our love and devotion. But they are more easily used than loved. What we have seen in the funeral of John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI is the possibility of loving the faith as a human gift that is received, and in that very reception acknowledging its contingency and fragility.

Hugo Rahner once wrote, "All the churches who wish to withdraw from the unity of the church dogmatically first of all seek refuge within the state but soon are absorbed by the state and fall with it." This is why, he suggested, "the guiding role of the papacy is needed."

Can those of us who are Protestants deny this accusation? Could we ever see in our own churches the transnational, multicultural and multiclass expression of love and joy we witnessed in St. Peter's Square? If not, then how can we refuse to acknowledge the beauty of the papacy?

The final reason Protestants need the papacy is to avoid the subordination of truth to power that so characterizes the modern era and its totalitarian politics. We have lived through an era in which it was assumed that every truth claim was finally nothing but a disguised appeal for power. The great hermeneuts of suspicion taught us to look upon truth with this posture, and it is difficult to free ourselves from it—to abandon ourselves to the possibility that truth might be more basic to our lives than the will to power. We fear we will give up something significant if we give up this posture. We fear that the stance of assuming truth or goodness is more basic than power will inevitably lead not to unity but to an improper totalizing or fascism, and this some Protestants seem to fear more than the loss of truth itself.

John Paul II taught us to risk truth and not be content with the modern assumption that peace can only be had when we confess power as the most basic reality of our lives. He was not alone in bearing witness before the world to "the splendor of truth." This has been a common witness of the papacy in the modern era, and contrary to all expectations of those who thought that the suspicious posture was necessary for the sake of peace, the posture of suspicion produced more violence than the assumption of a basic and foundational truth and goodness.

This is the beautiful scandal of the papacy: it is an institution that proclaims that truth is more basic than power even when those of us weaned on a (Protestant) hermeneutics of suspicion can only see the papacy as a contradiction.

To see the beauty of truth requires a Protestant rethinking of the papacy. This does not mean denying that truth and power are always linked, but it does mean rejecting the notion that the former is always vitiated by the latter. Even where we still disagree with what the Catholic Church pronounces, we will have to address the truth of what is pronounced and not simply dismiss it as a sinister play for power.

Don't get me wrong. I have no romantic illusions about the papacy. I understand its historical legacy and the legitimate reasons why Protestants separated from the Catholic Church. But Catholics themselves acknowledge this history as well. "Serious dissensions appeared," the Catholic catechism tells us, "and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church—for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame." The Catholic Church has acknowledged contributing to the ruptures that divide us, ruptures that are always sin. We Protestants must now reciprocate and name our sin in dividing Christ's body. Can we do this without rethinking its unity in the primacy of the bishop of Rome? I do not think so.

At one point in history, to be a Protestant was explicitly or tacitly to will an end to the papacy. I think many Protestants can now confess that was a mistaken view. Both the church and the world would sorely lack a necessary witness if there were no papacy. If being a Protestant means willing the end to the papacy, then I find myself no longer capable of willing such an act.

This stance does not require abandoning what is good in Protestant traditions. I for one cannot leave my separated Wesleyan communion behind. The hymns, doctrine, discipline and liturgy of that tradition gave me faith and taught me to love God. But neither can I will an end to the unity the papacy clearly produces throughout the world.

So what is to be done? Only two possibilities seem to present themselves. Either we try to find a place for our separated communities from within the Catholic Church or we find a place for Catholic unity from within our separated communities. Neither can be accomplished without willing the visible unity the papacy embodies.