

I Still Must Protest

By Todd Pruitt

I am a Protestant. There is no getting around it. And since “evangelical” has lost all meaning in the church today I find myself turning once again to that word birthed in the religious and political turmoil of the 16th century: Protestant. The Protestant Reformation was a movement of protest. It was a protest against the moral squalor and theological error that had come to characterize the Roman Catholic Church. The selling of indulgences to finance the new and extravagant St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, widespread immorality and biblical illiteracy among the highest levels of Church leadership, and of course the tragic departures from biblical doctrine were the sparks that ignited the fires of reformation.

From those early years of reformation was birthed the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist denominations. It led to the founding of new institutions of higher learning, new political movements, fresh missionary zeal, and the colonizing of the New World. There were also an untold number of martyrs offered in the fires of the Roman Church. From England to France to Italy Protestant “heretics” were burned to death. The roots of resentment ran deep and the divide seemed insurmountable.

In recent years however there has been renewed interest among certain evangelical and Roman Catholic leaders to forge a new unity between the long divided churches. At the forefront of this movement is a group called Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). Its leaders are serious heavyweights like Charles Colson of Prison Fellowship and Richard John Neuhaus a former Lutheran turned Roman Catholic priest. I respect both of these men a great deal. In fact, I am an enthusiastic reader of *First Things*, the magazine edited by Fr. Neuhaus. The purpose of ECT is to achieve as much unity as possible between Catholics and Protestants. They seek to maximize the emphasis on those points in which the two groups agree while not denying where differences persist. Their goals are, in my mind, noble. I support efforts to bridge whatever gaps are “bridgeable.” However, I believe the efforts to bring a deep and lasting unity between Protestants and the Roman Church are naïve.

Don’t misunderstand. I love unity. More importantly, our Lord loves the unity of His people and even prayed for it. “The glory that You have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one...” (John 17:22). The implications of this prayer extend far beyond local congregations. The unity of the church universal is a lasting concern of our Lord. In the Apostle’s Creed we rightly confess our belief in “one holy catholic church.” Evangelicals not raised in a confessional church are often made squeamish by those words. But the little “c” catholic in the creed is not a reference to Rome. “Catholic” means universal. To say that one believes in the one holy catholic church is to affirm that God has filled His world with worshipping communities of Christ-followers. It is to affirm that the church extends far beyond our own little local body of believers. This is a source of encouragement. God will not be without a witness. He

will spread His church to the utter most parts of the world. For this reason, Christians are happy to recognize true churches wherever it pleases the Lord to raise them. It also grieves Christians when the church universal becomes divided.

The divide between Roman Catholics and evangelicals is lasting testimony to man's fallen state. The proliferation of denominations among Protestants is almost mind boggling. In fact, Rome points to the number of different denominations as proof that the Protestant Reformation yielded nothing but division within Christ's body. However, sentimental notions of unity should not keep thoughtful Christians from asking whether the existing divisions represent necessary doctrinal fences or are merely pointless quarrels. The fact is, doctrine divides at least as often as it unites. Even in the Roman Church there are deep divisions and various factions. There are liberal Catholics, charismatic Catholics, feminist Catholics, fundamentalist Catholics, "Vatican II" Catholics, and those Catholics that insist that the Latin Mass is the only legitimate mass. So for all Rome's boasting in their unity, theirs is a house divided.

Please understand that I am not "anti-Catholic." I have no doubt that there are many sincere Christians in the Roman Church. I also believe that we can and should cooperate with one another as much as possible. However, to do so without also acknowledging why we differ is to deny that such vital issues as the sole sufficiency and authority of Scripture, Justification by faith alone, and the imputed righteousness of Christ are not important.

In the days ahead I will be writing a series of articles for my blog site outlining the essential differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics. I encourage you to check out the blog. It can be accessed through Metro East's website. It is called "1517" and is usually posted on the home page of www.metroeastbaptist.com. If you don't see it on the home page then go to the "Tools for Growth" column and click on "Links." You will see a link to "1517."