

# WHEN PROTESTANTS PROTESTED

*Reconsidering the Historic Reformed  
Repudiation of Romanism*



D. Scott Meadows, Pastor  
Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed)  
Exeter, New Hampshire

September 2005

# WHEN PROTESTANTS PROTESTED

## RECONSIDERING THE HISTORIC REFORMED REPUDIATION OF ROMANISM

D. Scott Meadows, Pastor  
Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed) of Exeter, New Hampshire

September 2005

### ABSTRACT

*A major change has occurred in the spirit and relationship of evangelicals with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). Its dramatic nature appears more readily from a review of the historic Protestant antipathy against Romanism and modern Protestant appreciation for the RCC. This old antipathy crystallizes in a provocative statement generally held by earlier Protestants: "The Pope of Rome is the Antichrist," a statement with nuances and a rich exegetical and historical defense rarely understood or appreciated today. The fact that so many Protestant leaders have affirmed this for so long challenges us to reexamine our own position. A recent modern poll shows that the spirit of historic Protestants has not become altogether extinct. One's attitude toward the RCC may well be an accurate measure of how well the label "Protestant" really applies to him. As long as the RCC continues to oppose the distinctive Protestant and biblical doctrines of sola Scriptura and sola fide, a fundamentally positive Protestant-Romanist relationship is ill-advised and quite impossible. Will the Protestant reader stand boldly against the RCC?*

"The times they are a-changin'." So sang Bob Dylan amidst the sixties' social revolution, and so we may say of recent trends within evangelicalism and its general attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church (RCC).

Admittedly when it comes to fallen human nature, nothing really changes. The Preacher observed:

That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us (Eccl 1.9-10).

Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For you do not inquire wisely concerning this (Eccl 7.10).

Not just hippies have advocated licentiousness, nor just modern Protestants friendliness toward the RCC.

### Can't You Feel the Theological Rumbling?

Still, there are seasons when the number and publicity of advocates increase. We are living in days when a spirit of ecumenical cooperation between the RCC and self-professed evangelicals, some even of a Reformed identity, is growing. Obvious examples include the several "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" documents (now five) which began to be produced in 1994 with the participation of Chuck Colson and J. I. Packer,<sup>1</sup> prevalent praise for the late Pope John Paul II,<sup>2</sup> and the warm welcome some evangelicals gave to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" (1994), "The Gift of Salvation" (1998, on the gospel and justification), "Your Word Is Truth" (2002, on Scripture and tradition), "The Communion of Saints" (2003, on "the nature of our life together" as "communion in the *communio* of the life of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"), and "The Call to Holiness" (2005, "ways in which our communities and their individual members must foster and embody holiness"), available at <http://www.firstthings.com/collections/coll-ECT.html>

<sup>2</sup> "Weblog: 'Antichrist' No More: Evangelicals Praise Pope," *Christianity Today*, April 4, 2005, available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/114/21.0.html>

<sup>3</sup> "My Contact with the New Pope" by Peter Jones, Scholar in Residence and Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Westminster Seminary California, available at [http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article\\_detail.php?821](http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_detail.php?821)

For example, Billy Graham has a long track-record of strong support for the Roman Catholic Church and its popes.<sup>4</sup> Interviewed by Larry King on April 2 this year after John Paul II had died, Graham responded to the question, “There is no question in your mind that he is with God now?,” by saying,

Oh no. There may be a question about my own, but I don’t think Carol Wojtyla, or the Pope—I think he’s with the Lord, because he believed. He believed in the Cross. That was his focus throughout his ministry, the Cross, no matter if you were talking to him from personal issue or an ethical problem, he felt that there was the answer to all of our problems, the cross and the resurrection. And he was a strong believer.<sup>5</sup>

That this represents nothing less than a seismic shift of the prevalent attitude in evangelical and Reformed Christians over a period of centuries becomes the more readily apparent when the former consensus of Protestant Reformers and their immediate successors including the Puritans is considered, and some of us find it alarming. The contrast between their views and today’s apparent consensus is stark and startling upon first discovery. The almost universal judgment of our Protestant forefathers toward the RCC was that it was a false and apostate church, and their characteristic attitude toward it was intense antipathy. Their confessions of faith and other writings clearly, explicitly, and forcefully repudiated leading Romanist doctrines and the institution propagating them. Romanism was such a great concern that one could deduce a fairly comprehensive summary of Rome’s errors from a study of what the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, and the 1689 London Baptist Confession affirm and deny. Not everything they say is a swipe at Rome, but a substantial part is, maybe even a preponderance. Claiming adherence to such a Protestant confession while nurturing a fundamentally positive attitude toward the RCC would seem to be a great and obvious inconsistency. Friendliness toward the RCC could be warranted theoretically, but it must necessarily part with the Protestant confessional ethos. The concept of “truth in advertising” is an application of the Ninth Commandment, and nowhere is it more important than in the religious realm. A man may be a friend of Rome or a Protestant, but not both at the same time in the historical sense.

#### What Was a “Protestant” After All?

It is helpful to consider the origin of the term “Protestant.” Ironically, a good succinct explanation is from a Roman Catholic source. The reader must appreciate that it is expressed from a RCC point of view, but the basic facts appear to be undisputed by Protestants.

The Diet of the Holy Roman Empire, assembled at Speyer in April, 1529, resolved that, according to a decree promulgated at the Diet of Worms (1524), communities in which the new religion [pejorative; the old, biblical gospel—DSM] was so far established that it could not without great trouble be altered should be free to maintain it, but until the meeting of the council they should introduce no further innovations [reformations—DSM] in religion, and should not forbid the Mass, or hinder Catholics from assisting thereat.

Against this decree, and especially against the last article, the adherents of the new Evangel [not new, but the one and only true gospel—DSM] — the Elector Frederick of Saxony, the Landgrave of Hesse, the Margrave Albert of Brandenburg, the Dukes of Lüneburg, the Prince of Anhalt, together with the deputies of fourteen of the free and imperial cities — entered a solemn protest as unjust and impious. The meaning of the protest was that the dissentients did not intend to tolerate Catholicism within their borders. On that account they were called Protestants.

In course of time the original connotation of “no toleration for Catholics” was lost sight of, and the term is now applied to, and accepted by, members of those Western Churches and sects which, in the sixteenth century, were set up by the Reformers *in direct opposition to the Catholic Church* [viz., the RCC, emphasis mine]. The same man may call himself Protestant or Reformed: the term Protestant lays more stress on antagonism to Rome; the term Reformed emphasizes adherence to any of the Reformers.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> “Billy Graham’s Tragic Romeward Run,” most valuable for its primary source quotes and available at [http://cnview.com/on\\_line\\_resources/billy\\_grahams\\_tragic\\_romeward\\_run.htm](http://cnview.com/on_line_resources/billy_grahams_tragic_romeward_run.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/BibleStudyAndTheology/Perspectives/ANS\\_PopeGrahamCaviezel.asp](http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/BibleStudyAndTheology/Perspectives/ANS_PopeGrahamCaviezel.asp)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12495a.htm>

The proposition that “Protestant” and “Reformed” are interchangeable terms is interesting, but historically the latter may have become narrower, associated with Calvinists in particular, and generally excluding Lutheran, Anglican, and Episcopal denominations, generally rejecting as they do the regulative principle of worship and having somewhat more in common with Romanism. The term “evangelical” without qualification has become so diluted now it is almost useless as a badge of conservative and biblical Christianity. This paper is especially intended for those who consider themselves Protestant, Reformed, and conservative evangelicals.

Historian James A. Wylie presents a sympathetic account for the origin of the term “Protestants:”

At Worms, Luther stood alone; at Spire, the one man has grown into a host. The “No” so courageously uttered by the monk in 1521 is now in 1529 taken up and repeated by princes, cities, and nations. Its echoes travel onwards, till at last their murmurs are heard in the palaces of Barcelona and the basilicas of Rome. Eight years ago the Reformation was simply a doctrine, now it is an organization, a Church. This little seed, which on its first germination appeared the smallest of all seeds, and which Popes, doctors, and princes beheld with contempt, is a tree, whose boughs, stretched wide in air, cover nations with their shadow.

The princes renewed their Protest at the last sitting of the Diet, Saturday, 24th April. It was subscribed by John, Elector of Saxony; Philip, Landgrave of Hesse; George, Margrave of Brandenburg; Ernest and Francis, Dukes of Luneburg, and the Count of Anhalt. Some of the chief cities joined the princes in their protestation, as Strasburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, Constance, Reutlingen, Windsheim, Lindau, Kempten, Memmingen, Nordlingen, Heilbronn, Isny, St. Gall, and Weissenburg. From that day the Reformers were called Protestants.

On the following Sabbath, 25th April, the chancellors of the princes and of the Protestant cities, with two notaries and several witnesses, met in a small house in St. John’s Lane, belonging to Peter Muterstatt, Deacon of St. John’s, to draw up an appeal. In that document they recite all that had passed at the Diet, and they protest against its decree, for themselves, their subjects, and all who receive or shall hereafter receive the Gospel, and appeal to the emperor, and to a free and general Council of Christendom.

On the morning after their appeal, the 26th, the princes left Spire. This sudden departure was significant. It proclaimed to all men the firmness of their resolve. Ferdinand had spoken his last word and was gone. They, too, had spoken theirs, and were gone also. Rome hoists her flag; over against hers the Protestants display theirs; henceforward there are two camps in Christendom.<sup>7</sup>

J. H. Merle D’Aubigne relates essentially the same account.<sup>8</sup> Philip Schaff confirms it further and makes these helpful remarks:

From this protest and appeal the Lutherans were called Protestants; with good reason, if we look at their attitude to Rome, which remains the same to this day [sometime before 1910]. It is the duty of the church at all times to protest against sin, error, corruption, tyranny, and every kind of iniquity. But the designation, which has since become a general term for evangelical Christians, is negative, and admits of an indiscriminate application to all who dissent from popery, no matter on what grounds and to what extent. It must be supplemented by the more important positive designation Evangelical. The gospel of Christ, as laid down in the New Testament, and proclaimed again in its primitive purity and power by the Reformation, is the basis of historical Protestantism, and gives it vitality and permanency. The protest of Speier was based objectively upon the Word of God, subjectively upon the right of private judgment and conscience, and historically upon the liberal decision of the Diet of 1526.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> [The History of Protestantism](http://www.whatsaiththescipture.com/Voice/History.Protestant.v1.b9.html#CHAPTER%206), Volume First, Book Ninth, Chapter 15, “The Great Protest,” available at <http://www.whatsaiththescipture.com/Voice/History.Protestant.v1.b9.html#CHAPTER%206>

<sup>8</sup> [History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century](#), Book 13, “The Protest and the Conference. 1526-1529,” Chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> “The Second Diet of Speier, and the Protest of 1529,” [History of the Christian Church](#), Vol. 7, Ch. 8, § 115.

### Where Have All the Protestants Gone?

Is it possible that Protestants in our generation have lost so much of their historical character the label is no longer warranted? Where is the protest against Romanism? Any vigorous protest today seems a lonely relic, a “blast from the past,” out of step with modern sensibilities and discretion, even terribly fanatical, antiquated, and downright uncharitable.

A few influential evangelical leaders have sounded the alarm concerning trendy ecumenism with Rome, including R. C. Sproul, D. James Kennedy, and John MacArthur.<sup>10</sup> MacArthur in particular does not leave us wondering about his stance on the RCC and even his judgment about the late pope’s eternal destiny:

One question that has been raised or alluded to repeatedly is this: “Is the Pope in heaven?” Numerous people have asked me that question. I’m always tempted to reply: “Is the pope Catholic?” After all, the pope was the number-one purveyor of Roman Catholic doctrine. The gospel he believed was no more sound than the gospel Rome has always taught. It is not the gospel of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

Another outspoken advocate of old Protestantism is Richard Bennett, a former Roman Catholic priest, now converted and a Reformed evangelist. His expertise on Romanism is conspicuous at his website, “Berean Beacon.”<sup>12</sup> He has helpfully summarized some RCC errors in a chart comparing quotes from Scripture and from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994, CCC) on topics including the basis of truth, salvation by grace alone, the nature of faith, Christ’s atonement and place as sole Mediator between God and man, God’s unique holiness, idolatry, and communion with the dead.<sup>13</sup>

### Can You Think of Anything Worse to Say to a Catholic?

“The pope is the Antichrist.” We can hardly imagine any more strident statement of opposition to the pope and the RCC than this. Further, is there anything that would be harder for a RC to hear and accept than this? Yet if it is true, silence is not golden.

The old Protestants widely held to some sense of the provocative proposition, probably not what we today would initially suspect. Consider a smattering of old quotes from respected Protestant leaders of the past.

**Martin Luther** (1483-1546): If there were nothing else to show that the Pope is Antichrist, this would be enough. Dost thou hear this, O Pope! not the most holy, but the most sinful? Would that God would hurl thy Chair headlong from heaven, and cast it down into the abyss of hell! Who gave you the power to exalt yourself above your God? . . . God has commanded to keep faith and observe oaths even with enemies; you dare to cancel this command, laying it down in your heretical, antichristian decretals, that you have power to do so; and through your mouth and your pen Satan lies as he never lied before, teaching you to twist and pervert the Scriptures according to your own arbitrary will. O, Lord Christ! look down upon this, let Thy day of judgment come and destroy the Devil’s lair at Rome. Behold him of whom St. Paul spoke (2 Thess 2.3-4), that he should exalt himself above Thee and sit in Thy Church, showing himself as God—the man of sin, and the child of damnation. What else does the Pope’s power do, but teach and strengthen sin and wickedness, leading souls to damnation in Thy name?<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See transcript of interview entitled, “Irreconcilable Differences: Catholics, Evangelicals, and the New Quest for Unity,” available at <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/ECTDOC.HTM>

<sup>11</sup> “What Did John Paul II Actually Believe?,” available at <http://www.selfhaters.org/viewtopic.php?p=193&sid=859e4a39aab43dcac2cce77781288917>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.bereanbeacon.org/>

<sup>13</sup> “A Summary Chart of the differences between Biblical Truth and Catholicism,” [http://www.the-highway.com/rcsummary\\_Bennett.html](http://www.the-highway.com/rcsummary_Bennett.html)

<sup>14</sup> First Principles of the Reformation, available at [http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Luther0155/FirstPrinciples/HTMLs/0224\\_Pt04\\_Address.html](http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Luther0155/FirstPrinciples/HTMLs/0224_Pt04_Address.html)

**Thomas Cranmer** (1489-1556): Referring to the prophecies in Revelation and Daniel, he said, “Whereof it followeth Rome to be the seat of antichrist, and the pope to be the very antichrist himself. I could prove the same by many other scriptures, old writers, and strong reasons.”<sup>15</sup>

**John Knox** (1505-1572): Knox wrote to abolish “that tyranny which the pope himself has for so many ages exercised over the church” and that the pope should be recognized as “the very antichrist, and son of perdition, of whom Paul speaks.”<sup>16</sup>

**John Calvin** (1509-1564): To some we seem slanderers and railers when we call the Roman pontiff “Antichrist.” But those who think so do not realize they are accusing Paul of intemperate language [in 2 Thess 2], after whom we speak, indeed, so speak from his very lips. And lest anyone object that we wickedly twist Paul’s words (which apply to another) against the Roman pontiff, I shall briefly show that these cannot be understood otherwise than of the papacy.<sup>17</sup>

**Roger Williams** (1603-1683): He spoke of the pope as “the pretended Vicar of Christ on earth, who sits as God over the temple of God, exalting himself not only above all that is called God, but over the souls and consciences of all his vassals, yea over the Spirit of Christ, over the Holy Spirit, yea, and God himself . . . speaking against the God of Heaven, thinking to changed times and laws: but he is the son of perdition (2 Thess 2).”<sup>18</sup>

**Westminster Confession of Faith** (1646, original wording): There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof: *but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God* (XXV.6, American revisions omit italicized text).<sup>19</sup>

**Savoy Declaration** (1658): There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome in any sense be head thereof; but it [he] is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God, whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming (XXVI.6).<sup>20</sup> Corresponding language of the **1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith** is identical (26.4).

**Cotton Mather** (1663-1728): The oracles of God foretold the rising of an Antichrist in the Christian Church; and in the Pope of Rome, all the characteristics of that Antichrist are so marvelously answered that if any who read the Scriptures do not see it, there is a marvelous blindness upon them.<sup>21</sup>

**John Wesley** (1703-1791): On 2 Thess 2.3, he wrote, “In many respects, the Pope has an indisputable claim to those titles [man of sin, son of perdition]. He is, in an emphatical sense, *the man of sin*, as he increases all manner of sin above measure. And he is, too, properly styled, *the son of perdition*, as he has caused the death of numberless multitudes, both of his opposers and followers, destroyed innumerable souls, and will himself perish everlastingly. He it is that opposeth himself to the emperor, once his rightful sovereign; and *that exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped* - Commanding angels, and putting kings under his feet, both of whom are called gods in scripture; claiming the highest power, the highest honor; suffering himself, not once only, to be styled God or vice-God. Indeed no less is implied in his ordinary title, ‘Most Holy Lord,’ or, ‘Most Holy Father.’ *So that he sitteth* - Enthroned. In the

---

<sup>15</sup> Works, Vol. 1, pp. 6-7, cited at <http://www.challies.com/archives/000338.php>

<sup>16</sup> *The Zurich Letters*, p. 199, cited at <http://www.swrb.com/newbooks/newbT.htm>

<sup>17</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.VII.25, Battles translation.

<sup>18</sup> Taken from *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*, Vol. 3, p. 52, by Leroy Froom.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.opc.org/documents/WCF\\_orig.html](http://www.opc.org/documents/WCF_orig.html)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.v.i.i.html>

<sup>21</sup> Taken from *The Fall of Babylon* by Cotton Mather in Froom’s book, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Vol. 3, pg. 113, cited at <http://www.historicist.com/articles2/delusion.htm>

temple of God - Mentioned Rev 11.1. *Declaring himself that he is God* - Claiming the prerogatives which belong to God alone.”<sup>22</sup>

**Charles Hodge** (1797-1878): “The common opinion, however, among Protestants is, that the prophecies concerning Antichrist have special reference to the papacy. This conviction is founded principally on the remarkable prediction contained in Paul’s second epistle to the Thessalonians.” Following this, Hodge defends the opinion in great and strongly-argued detail, suggesting it was his own judgment. Then he describes the Roman Catholic doctrine of Antichrist and concludes that modern Protestant teaching in this area is more similar to the RCC view than to the early Protestants.<sup>23</sup>

**C. H. Spurgeon** (1834-1892): It is the bounden duty of every Christian to pray against Antichrist, and as to what Antichrist is, no sane man ought to raise a question. If it be not Popery in the Church of Rome, there is nothing in the world that can be called by that name. If there were to be issued a hue and cry for Antichrist, we should certainly take up this Church on suspicion, and it would certainly not be let loose again, for it so exactly answers the description.<sup>24</sup>

**R. L. Dabney** (1820-1898): For Presbyterians of all others to discount the perpetual danger from Romanism is thoroughly thoughtless and rash. We believe that the Christianity left by the apostles to the primitive church was essentially what we now call Presbyterian and Protestant. Prelacy and popery speedily began to work in the bosom of that community and steadily wrought its corruption and almost its total extirpation. Why should not the same cause tend to work the same result again? Are we truer or wiser Presbyterians than those trained by the apostles? Have the enemies of truth become less skillful and dangerous by gaining the experience of centuries? The popish system of ritual and doctrine was a gradual growth, which, modifying true Christianity, first perverted and then extinguished it. Its destructive power has resulted from this: that it has not been the invention of any one cunning and hostile mind, but a gradual growth, modified by hundreds or thousands of its cultivators, who were the most acute, learned, selfish, and anti-Christian spirits of their generations, perpetually retouched and adapted to every weakness and every attribute of depraved human nature, until it became the most skillful and pernicious system of error which the world has ever known. As it has adjusted itself to every superstition, every sense of guilt, every foible and craving of the depraved human heart, so it has travestied with consummate skill every active principle of the Gospel. It is doubtless the *ne plus ultra* [the most extreme example of its kind] of religious delusion, the final and highest result of perverted human faculty guided by the sagacity of the great enemy.

This system has nearly conquered Christendom once. He who does not see that it is capable of conquering it again is blind to the simplest laws of thought. One may ask, Does it not retain sundry of the cardinal doctrines of the Gospel, monotheism, the trinity, the hypostatic union, Christ’s sacrifice, the sacraments, the resurrection, the judgment, immortality? Yes; in form it retains them, and this because of its supreme cunning. It retains them while so wresting and enervating as to rob them mainly of their sanctifying power, because it designs to spread its snares for all sorts of minds of every grade of opinion. The grand architect was too cunning to make it, like his earlier essays, mere atheism, or mere fetishism, or mere polytheism, or mere pagan idolatry; for in these forms the trap only ensnared the coarser and more ignorant natures. He has now perfected it and baited it for all types of humanity, the most refined as well as the most imbruted.<sup>25</sup>

**D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** (1899-1981): This system, known as Roman Catholicism, is the devil’s greatest masterpiece! It is such a departure from the Christian faith and the New Testament teaching, that I would not hesitate with the Reformers of the sixteenth century to describe it as “apostasy.” . . . There is no difficulty about this; this is a counterfeit, a sham; this is a prostitution of the worst and

---

<sup>22</sup> Wesley’s Notes.

<sup>23</sup> Systematic Theology, “§ 6 - Antichrist,” III.812-836. Excerpt attached.

<sup>24</sup> “Pray for Jesus,” sermon #717 in the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol. 12.

<sup>25</sup> “The Attractions of Popery,” available at <http://www.biblebb.com/files/rcc-attractions.htm>

most diabolical kind. It is indeed a form of the antichrist, and it is to be rejected, it is to be denounced; but above all it is to be countered.<sup>26</sup>

### Do You Still Respect Your Forefathers?

Obviously, these are not men and confessions on the fringe, but at the center of historic Protestantism—men upon whose broad shoulders we stand, and subordinate standards we still affirm. How do we respond to their statements? When we read of this old Protestant belief that the pope is the Antichrist, do we dismiss it out of hand? Do we smugly disregard the historic Reformed repudiation of Romanism because of self-assured confidence in our greater charity and superior discernment?

Before indulging such feelings, we really ought to consider carefully the nature and basis for this formerly widespread Protestant belief. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, / It is folly and shame to him” (Prov 18.13). While we would not be guilty of “Protestant traditionalism,” an ironic counterpart of the RCC error, where “precedents” in previous ecclesiastical judgments are accepted by an implicit faith in spiritual ancestors, yet we must also be exceedingly cautious about jettisoning important ideas that held such great sway among so many theological giants. We should withhold our consent only if they lack solid Scriptural support, and disagree only if they are against Scripture. Even if the evidence fails to hold one’s conscience about all the particulars, surely if one is truly Protestant he will judge their overall concern about Romanism to remain valid.

Let us reconsider then, with all sincerity, sobriety, and earnestness, our predecessors’ intense antipathy to Rome, and judge each one for himself whether to embrace it in our own day.

### What Exactly Is the Antichrist, Anyway?

What did Protestants mean when they said the pope is the Antichrist? We must not think of this eschatological figure in terms like those popularized by Hal Lindsay, Jack Van Impe, Tim LaHaye, and other modern purveyors of sensationalistic prophecy. Whatever one may think of the year 1948, UPC codes as a mark of the beast, and the Tri-lateral Commission, these were far from the minds of the Westminster divines and their associates. Standard theological dictionaries present helpful summaries.

The Reformers equated Antichrist with the papacy, as had some medieval theologians—Gregory I, who taught that whoever assumed the title “universal priest” was Antichrist’s forerunner; Joachim of Floris, and Wycliffe. Luther, Calvin, the translators of the AV, and the authors of the Westminster Confession concurred in this identification.<sup>27</sup>

16th-century Protestants developed the idea that the major biblical accounts of antichrist refer to a specific historical entity, but not to an individual man. Instead, they identified antichrist with an institutional succession of men over several centuries: the Roman papacy. This remained the dominant view until the 19th century.<sup>28</sup>

It is not too difficult to find historic explanations and defenses of the old Protestant view. Some are long and elaborate. For example, Francis Turretin, well-known because of his magisterial *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, a three-volume work representing Protestant scholasticism, had also written a substantial essay in Latin, only recently translated into English and entitled “Seventh Disputation: Whether It Can Be Proved the Pope of Rome Is the Antichrist.”<sup>29</sup> Turretin answers in the affirmative with 50 sections, four appendixes, and extensive footnotes. It makes a fascinating study of the topic and demonstrates convincingly that this doctrine was their strong conviction after extensive study and debate, even if one were to dissent from the conclusion.

A more accessible case is made by the Rev. Henry Wilkinson, “sometime Canon of Christ Church, and Margaret-Professor of Divinity, in the University of Oxford,” in a sermon entitled, “The Pope of Rome Is Antichrist,” one of the Puritan sermons preached from 1659-1689 during the famed morning exercises at Cripplegate” by 75 ministers of the gospel in or near London. Even this one sermon on the topic is 25 pages of

---

<sup>26</sup> From a sermon entitled, “Roman Catholicism” available at <http://www.sounddoctrine.net> (attached).

<sup>27</sup> In loc., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell, ed.

<sup>28</sup> In loc., *New Dictionary of Theology*, Ferguson, Wright, Packer, eds.

<sup>29</sup> Available at <http://www.iconbusters.com/iconbusters/works-turretin1.htm>

small print, but a modern paraphrase and abridgement is planned for the near future for educating today’s Christians about this topic.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps most valuable among Wilkinson’s remarks for this essay is his explanation of what his contemporary fellow Protestants intended in their infernal identification of the pope:

The enemy [mentioned in 2 Thess 2.3, 8] is set forth as if he were a single person: but it is not so to be taken in this place; for it is frequent in scripture to set forth a body politic, or a kingdom or state, by a particular person or *individuum*. In Dan. vii. 1-13, there be four kingdoms or monarchies, which were in a succession one after another in the world, deciphered by “four great beasts;” which are interpreted to be four kingdoms, or “four kings;” (verse 17;) and the fourth beast is called “the fourth kingdom;” (verse 23;) and the Vulgar translation renders verse 17, “four kingdoms:” so that each beast signifieth a multitude of men in a succession under one government for several ages; and so consequently the head and horns signify the power and sovereignty of such a kingdom for a long time in succession.

So we find the state of the primitive apostolical church set forth by a woman in travail, (Rev. xii. 1, 2,) and by a woman in the wilderness. (Verses 6, 14.) So the two-horned beast, (Rev. xiii. 11,) which is the same with “the false prophet,” (Rev. xvi. 13; xix. 20; xx. 10,) doth not signify a single person or succession of single persons, (suppose the popes,) but *a body of deceivers under one head or government* [emphasis mine].

It is generally agreed by Protestant writers, that the pope [in this sense—DSM], as head of that Antichristian state which is here described, is pointed at in this place: or that the Papacy, head and members, in a succession making up one body politic, is that monster which they call “Antichrist.” It is on all hands agreed on, that wherever we find all these characters, together with the circumstances set down in the text, to concentre, that must be the Antichrist, who was to be brought forth into the world before the second coming of Christ. He tells us of one to come, a strange one, a monstrous one, such an one as never was before; and, that you may not be mistaken in this prodigious one, he gives us the lively portraiture of him.<sup>31</sup>

#### Would You Be Interested in a Modern Poll?

In a recent poll I created on a website called “Sermon Audio,” almost two-thirds of respondents affirmed their belief that the Pope of Rome is either the Antichrist (23% of 354 total votes) or an antichrist (41%).<sup>32</sup> The remainder either voted that he is a false teacher but not an antichrist (16%), that comparing him to the Antichrist is not [warranted] by Scripture or history (8%), that he is the Head of the Church (5%), or did not care to vote on this topic (7%).

Admittedly, those participating in this survey were probably not a typical cross-section of evangelicals today. Full members of the SermonAudio service, that is, those allowed to broadcast sermons, must affirm SermonAudio’s articles of faith which include (paraphrased): 1) a high view of Scripture, 2) the Trinity, 3) high Christology, 4) necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, 5) Christ as the only Savior, 6) two ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, 7) rejection of World Council of Churches and ECT, 8) Christ’s visible and personal return, and 9) salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Survey participation went beyond full members to mere visitors to the website. That accounts for the 5% answer above. Nevertheless, most participants were likely to appreciate the ministries of SermonAudio full members.

Survey participants were also allowed to post messages on this topic, and they finally amounted to 82 printed pages before the editor stopped accepting posts. The very first message posted was prophetic: “Put on your asbestos suits. It’s going to get VERY hot in here soon!” (John from San Jose, CA). My overall impression of the posted comments are that most participants did not seem to realize what the old Protestants meant by the controversial proposition. They tended to interpret it as a statement about Pope John Paul II (while he was still living) or about a specific future pope as an individual yet to come.

<sup>30</sup> This ambition belongs to D. Scott Meadows.

<sup>31</sup> Puritan Sermons, Vol. 6, pp. 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> [www.sermonaudio.com](http://www.sermonaudio.com). Survey question: “Is the Pope of Rome that Antichrist, that Man of Sin, as stated in the old Protestant confessions?” Survey conducted July-September 2005.

### When Is a Protestant Really a Protestant?

It seems that today we only have a limited number of possible responses to these things. What follows is an attempt at a comprehensive list in order of decreasing RCC antipathy:

- A. Historic Protestants were *exactly* right; the pope of Rome is *the Antichrist* and the RCC is a false, apostate “church.”
- B. Historic Protestants were *essentially* right; the pope is *an antichrist* and strong antipathy for the institution of the RCC is warranted.
- C. Historic Protestants were *only temporally* right; today their views and spirit are no longer valid because modern Protestants and the RCC now share so much on essential doctrines.
- D. Historic Protestants were *flat wrong* in point of fact and spirit; we should repudiate their sinful divisiveness, recognize the RCC as a true church, and embrace our RCC friends as Christian brethren.

With sincere respect for every man’s prerogative to judge for himself, I believe only options A or B are biblically, historically, and theologically tenable.

It seems mainstream evangelicals today would probably feel more comfortable with options C or D. The position taken by ECT definitely embodies option D. The historic walls separating these “Protestants” from the RCC have almost completely fallen down. They seem to identify more readily with the RCC than with historic Protestantism.

### Could the True Church Lack a Solid Foundation *and* a Saving Message?

The basis for my own judgment in favor of A or B is complex, but I keep coming back in my own mind to two great truths that were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation: *sola Scriptura* or the “formal principle,” and *sola fide*, the “material principle.” We assume your intimate familiarity with both.<sup>33</sup>

*Sola Scriptura* is a foundation upon which all other doctrine rests. Without a firm commitment to this principle, all manner of doctrinal apostasy is possible and virtually inevitable. The RCC itself may be the grandest illustration of disastrous consequences when a people look elsewhere for a standard of truth.

*Sola fide* is an important part of the substance of Scripture’s saving message about Jesus Christ. Luther famously called this the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. There is no true gospel without it, and any opposing it set themselves against Christ Himself, incurring the terrible anathema of Gal 1.8-9.

When he was 80 years old, the late Dr. John Gerstner wrote a booklet entitled, “A Primer on Roman Catholicism,” in which he distilled in simple terms the essence of the Protestant/Romanist contention on justification’s relation to faith and works in which he said:

Romanists believe that faith is essential [to justification], just as Protestants believe that faith is essential. They do not think it is *sufficient* for justification, but they do not believe that justification can come about *apart from faith*. . . . The Council of Trent stressed the fact that faith is necessary as the root of the good works which we do for justification. *Roman Catholicism teaches justification by works alone, but not by works that are alone*. . . . The Reformation insisted that *justification is by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone*. Justifying faith is working faith. . . . As we know, Protestants in general, and the Reformed in particular, say [the RCC position on justification] is not the true doctrine. It is not the saving justification of Holy Scripture [original emphasis].<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Suggested resources on these two topics, among countless excellent materials, include *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*, Godfrey, White, Sproul, Armstrong, MacArthur, Ferguson, Beeke, and Lanning, published by Soli Deo Gloria; *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by Which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls*, MacArthur, Sproul, Beeke, Gerstner, and Armstrong, also published by Soli Deo Gloria.

<sup>34</sup> “A Primer on Roman Catholicism,” pp. 14-15, Soli Deo Gloria Publications.

Dr. Gerstner mentions the nuance that “Rome formally attributes all ‘merit’ to Christ,”<sup>35</sup> dismissing it as not materially affecting a fair charge against the RCC of teaching a heretical view of justification.

Modern official RCC documents, most notably the CCC, reveal that she remains unequivocal and firm in her opposition to both faith-commitments which have been so basic to all of Protestant thinking, recent ecumenical dialogue notwithstanding. Specifically, the CCC (1994) maintains a stand against *sola Scriptura*:

Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence (#82).

CCC also contradicts *sola fide*. This comes out most clearly in a section on merit:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God’s wisdom (#210).

Such errors hardly concern evangelicals any more. Michael Horton makes a devastating remark about “Evangelicals and Catholics Together:”

My own criticism of the impressive initiative known as “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT) some years ago was not that such dialogue should not exist or that real consensus on many issues was impossible from the outset, but that the consensus reached affirmed agreement in the gospel while acknowledging disagreement on justification, merit, purgatory, indulgences, and the redemptive intercession of anyone other than Christ. Yet, in step with other recent agreements, here it is only the evangelicals who have moved, accepting the view that justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone is not essential to the gospel.<sup>36</sup>

### Will You Hoist Your Defiant Flag?

My beloved Protestant brothers, if we do not recognize the above RCC statements as serious corruptions of the fundamentals of our biblical faith and the only true gospel, how we have fallen! If we hold essentially the same doctrine as our Protestant forefathers because we believe it is biblical, and since the RCC still holds to the Council of Trent written in the 1500’s to foster the counter-reformation, how could a dramatic shift in the relationship of Protestants to the RCC, plainly visible in many of our fellow evangelicals, possibly be warranted?

Alas! Unwarranted or not, it has happened. “The times they are a-changin’,” and this ecumenical earthquake ought to shake us out of our lethargy. Will we stand firm against this measure of apostasy or collapse with our unstable fellows? Are we still willing to identify with Luther, Knox, Calvin, the historic Reformed confessions, and more recently Hodge, Spurgeon, Dabney, and Lloyd-Jones in their intense and principled opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and its dangerous apostasy? Consider Lloyd-Jones’ charge to us all:

There are innocent people who are being deluded by this kind of falsity, and it is your business and mine to open their eyes and to instruct them. Not only that, it is as we stand foursquare for the truth of God that we shall be entitled to pray with fervor and with confidence for the blessing of the Holy Ghost upon us. It is as we stand on the Scripture and its truth that the Spirit of God, I believe, will descend upon us in a mighty revival. And nothing less than such a revival can shake that horrible institution, that great “whore” which calls herself “The Church of Rome.” May God give us enlightenment and understanding of the times in which we are living, and awaken us ere it be too late.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> “Can We Be Confessional and Catholic?,” *Modern Reformation* magazine, September/October 2005, Vol. 14, Issue 5, available at <http://www.modernreformation.org/mh05unity.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Ibid.