

Why Does the Pope Matter to Protestants?

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THIS IS NOT my question. Rather, it was given to me in this precise form with the request to address it in front of a large body of Protestant students in a Protestant divinity school.¹ Having been received into the full communion of the Catholic Church only nine months before, I would not have had the audacity to confront a predominantly Protestant audience with this question as a private intervention of my own. But since it was, rather audaciously, given to me to tackle, I might as well take up the challenge.

As I address the question at hand, I will not occupy myself with the particular teachings and the personal witness of the most recent or the present holder of the Petrine office, nor with the dogma of papal infallibility, nor with the history of the development of Petrine primacy, nor with the personal characteristics of individual popes of recent or distant history, from the widely admired and beloved John Paul II the Great, to some of the far less admirable, to say the least, Renaissance popes who have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of Protestantism. These issues will all have to remain in the background, because the question posed is “Why does the pope matter to *Protestants*?”

Rather, I would like to submit the thesis that the pope matters to Protestants because it is the Petrine ministry which forces them to recognize what *kind* of Protestants they are. Something analogous obtains, by the way, also for Catholics. What do I mean? Let me adduce an ad-hoc distinction—for purely heuristic reasons—between *essential* Protestantism and *accidental* Protestantism.

¹ This text represents the opening lecture for a colloquy with the whole student body at Duke University Divinity School on the given topic “Why does the pope matter to Protestants?” The original event took place on October 19, 2005.

Essential Protestantism requires for its identity Catholicism as the “other,” over against which it constitutes and identifies itself: anti-Catholicism and the pope as Anti-Christ are identity-markers of essential Protestantism. Much of essential Protestantism assumes that at the time of the Reformation the true Gospel—lost or at least significantly distorted shortly after the apostle Paul²—was rediscovered and the Church in the true sense reconstituted. Virtually everything in-between, the few exceptions only affirming the rule, pertains to the aberration of Roman Catholicism. Essential Protestantism, therefore, in a large measure needs Roman Catholicism and especially the papacy to know itself, to have a hold of its identity as Protestantism.

Accidental Protestantism, on the other hand, sees itself as the result of a particular, specific protestation. For Martin Luther it was the gospel of justification by faith alone. Hence, in 1531, Luther could say “I could kiss the pope’s feet, if he would permit the gospel.” The full quote from his *Large Commentary on Galatians* reads:

All we aim for is that the glory of God be preserved and that the righteousness of faith remain pure and sound. Once this has been established, namely that God alone justifies us solely by His grace through Christ, we are willing not only to bear the pope aloft on our hands but to kiss his feet.³

And pretty much exactly five hundred years later, in August 1932, Karl Barth could state in the preface to the first volume of his rightly renowned *Church Dogmatics*: “I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.”⁴

² I am referring here to the a quasi-historical, but de facto ideological construal of notorious longevity among Protestants, originally fathered by the nineteenth-century Protestant historian of dogma F.C. Baur, of early Christianity’s “fall” from the pure heights of Paulinism into the murky depths of *Frühkatholizismus*, a fall that, alas, occurred even before the Christian canon of Scripture was established.

³ Martin Luther, *In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas Commentarius* in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883), vol. 40/1, 181. (The translation is Jaroslav Pelikan’s from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians* 1535, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis: Concordia, 1963], 99.)

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 2nd ed. (1936; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), xiii. Barth understood the analogy of being (*analogia entis*) to be an analogy within being, with God being conceptually reached within the concept of being such that it would be

For accidental Protestants there tends to be one fundamental difference—and it can be the Petrine office itself—that prevents them from being Catholic. This difference cannot be just any, but must be one without which the truth of the Gospel is decisively distorted or even abandoned. Being Protestant in this vein amounts to an emergency position necessary for the sake of the Gospel's truth and the Church's faithfulness; in short, accidental Protestantism does not understand itself as ecclesial normalcy. So, if the pope were indeed to permit the gospel—a point indeed very hard to deny after the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*⁵—Luther presumably would, or better, should be ready to kiss his feet, that is, more prosaically, to acknowledge the supreme teaching authority with which the Petrine ministry is endowed. And if Karl Barth were to discover that in the mistaken sense he thought about it, the *analogia entis* was never officially entertained as a Catholic doctrinal position nor ever subscribed to by eminent Catholic theologians, he would presumably have to rethink his position—"all other reasons . . . being . . . short-sighted and trivial."

This rather ad-hoc distinction between essential and accidental Protestantism becomes immediately concrete when we turn to the function that a decisive marker of Protestantism, namely *private judgment*, tends to play in either kind of Protestantism. What do I mean here by "private judgment"? Let me explain by way of a quote from John Henry Newman:

We [Protestants] uphold the pure unmutated Scripture; the Bible, and the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants; the Bible and our own sense of the Bible. We claim a sort of parliamentary privilege to interpret laws in our own way, and not to suffer an appeal to any court beyond ourselves. We know, and we view it with consternation, that all Antiquity runs counter to our interpretation, and therefore, alas, the Church was corrupt from very early times indeed. But mind, we hold all this in a truly Catholic spirit, not in bigotry. We allow in others the right of private judgment, and confess that we, as others, are fallible men. We confess facts are against us; we do but claim the liberty of theorizing in spite of them. Far be it from us to say that we are certainly right; we only say that the whole early Church was certainly wrong. We do not impose our belief on any one; we only say that those who take the contrary side are Papists, firebrands, persecutors, madmen, zealots, bigots, and an insult to the nineteenth century.⁶

possible to lay claim to a comprehensive conceptual knowledge of God outside Revelation.

⁵ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁶ John Henry Newman, "Primitive Christianity," in idem, *Historical Sketches*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 420–21.

Now, as attentive readers, you ask yourselves immediately how I could have ended up where I did that is, in full communion with the Catholic Church, without private judgment on my own—and that I hence contradict myself most blatantly. I completely agree, but let me add another short line from John Henry Newman: to the objection that converts must use their own “private judgment,” Newman responds that

they use it in order ultimately to supersede it; as a man out of doors uses a lamp in a dark night, and puts it out when he gets home. What would be thought of his bringing it into his drawing room? . . . if he came in with a great-coat on his back, a hat on his head, an umbrella under his arm, and a large stable-lantern in his hand?⁷

In this latter case, private judgment is a last resort, either to hold on to the truth of the Gospel in a particular situation of crisis or precisely to leave private judgment behind. Now, different from accidental Protestantism, which has seen itself to a large degree as a reform movement in the Church catholic, essential Protestantism internally divides over the matter of private judgment: where private judgment continues to rule as the foundational principle, we encounter liberal Protestantism in its manifold appearances; and where private judgment is seen as the one necessary act of protest over against Roman Catholicism, we encounter confessional Protestantism with its entailed assumption that a certain set of judgments, made by the Reformers and enshrined in various doctrinal documents, are practically and functionally infallible.

So why does the Petrine ministry matter to Protestants? To find out what kind of Protestants they are. Are they essential Protestants in that they need the Petrine ministry and its occupants as the negated “other” that helps constitute the Protestant identity in that it is first of all not Roman Catholicism, and that it entails the constant exercise of private judgment or that it regards a set of judgments as functionally infallible? Are they accidental Protestants who might want to regard the Petrine ministry as an invitation to question the dead end of private judgment, as an invitation to ask which ministries in their respective ecclesial bodies personally represent and guard over the Church’s unity, the orthodoxy of its teaching, and its living connectedness to the communion of churches synchronically and diachronically? Are there valid, authoritative, effective, and broadly acknowledged alternatives to the Petrine ministry? What,

⁷ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), 203.

finally, does it tell accidental Protestants if they come to realize that most Protestant ecclesial communions are much more interested in reconciled indifference of denominational schisms than in that kind of visible unity of the Catholic Church to which belongs inherently the visible office of a universal minister?

It is in order to provoke these kinds of questions by its ongoing existence, function, and efficacy, I would like to submit, that the Petrine office matters to Protestants. The Petrine office functions as a concrete thorn in the flesh of the ongoing practice of private judgment in matters of doctrine and morals among Protestants, and for that matter, also among Catholics. The very existence of the Petrine ministry and the authority it carries in matters of doctrine regarding faith and morals as well as in matters of jurisdiction painfully remind us all that the first human sin was the result of private judgment and that letting private judgment become the principle of Christian existence and reign in matters of Christian faith and morals means letting the flesh reign.

Now, what I just stated, is the *more* provocative way to put the matter why the pope matters to Protestants. A *less* provocative way to put the matter might be to ask in which way Protestants could acknowledge aspects of the Petrine ministry as integral, if not to the being of their communions themselves (which would indeed bring them into communion with the See of Peter and thus the Catholic Church), so at least to the well being of their communions *ad intra* as well as *ad extra*, and hence contribute to the growing communal bonds between these communions and the Catholic Church:

1. *Ad intra*: The Petrine ministry could be seen increasingly as that ministry that is most and irreversibly dedicated to visible Christian unity—without a facile capitulation to the truth, as most clearly formulated in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* by the late Pope John Paul II. Could there be a personal universal ministry to ecumenism and church unity? In other words, could there be a way forward for accidental Protestants—after the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*—in the direction of Philip Melanchthon's famous reserve from the *Smalkald Articles* (Melanchthon being the most important and influential voice of the Lutheran Reformation, second only to Luther):

“I, PHILIP MELANCHTHON, regard the above articles as right and Christian. However, concerning the pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, we, too, may concede to him that superiority over the bishops which he possesses by human right, making this concession for the sake of peace and general

unity among the Christians who are now under him and who may be in the future.⁸

2. *Ad extra*: The Petrine ministry could function as the most effective office of a spokesperson for all Christians (including indeed essential Protestants) in matters that concern all Christians to various governments on a global scale and before the UN. Could there be a personal universal office of a Christian spokesperson to the UN and to all governments, defending persecuted Christians, Christian minority rights, and the freedom to practice the Christian faith?

Could, in short, the pope matter to Protestants, essential as well as accidental, because the Petrine ministry might develop in ways that could be of genuine service also to Protestant Christians? N.V

⁸ Philip Melanchthon, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 316f. "Ego Philippus Melanthon suprapositos articulos approbo ut pios et christianos. De pontifice autem statuo, si evangelium admitteret, posse ei propter pacem et communem tranquillitatem christianorum, qui jam sub ipso sunt et in posterum sub ipso erunt, superioritatem in episcopos, quam alioqui habet jure humano, etiam a nobis permitti." *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsbургischen Konfession 1930, 8th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 464f.