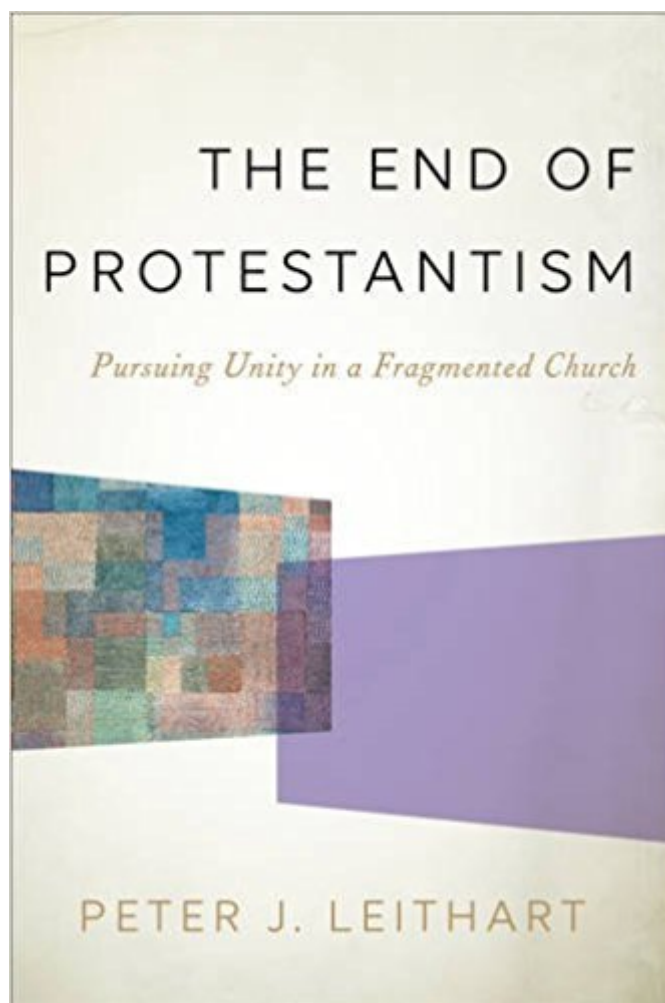


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# The End Of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity In A Fragmented Church



## Synopsis

The Failure of Denominationalism and the Future of Christian Unity One of the unforeseen results of the Reformation was the shattering fragmentation of the church. Protestant tribalism was and continues to be a major hindrance to any solution to Christian division and its cultural effects. In this book, influential thinker Peter Leithart critiques American denominationalism in the context of global and historic Christianity, calls for an end to Protestant tribalism, and presents a vision for the future church that transcends post-Reformation divisions. Leithart offers pastors and churches a practical agenda, backed by theological arguments, for pursuing local unity now. Unity in the church will not be a matter of drawing all churches into a single, existing denomination, says Leithart. Returning to Catholicism or Orthodoxy is not the solution. But it is possible to move toward church unity without giving up our convictions about truth. This critique and defense of Protestantism urges readers to preserve and celebrate the central truths recovered in the Reformation while working to heal the wounds of the body of Christ.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

One of the unforeseen results of the Reformation was the shattering fragmentation of the church. The End of Protestantism critiques American denominationalism in the context of global and historic Christianity, calls for an end to Protestant tribalism, and presents a vision for the future church that transcends post-Reformation divisions. "This uncommonly courageous book goes where too few of us who love Christ's church dare to go. Leithart provides a nuanced, historically textured, and

clear-eyed perspective (his 'short game') on our myriad Protestant divisions. He rightly believes that our constant divisions are a major factor in the present dissolution of the church in the West. In short, he believes that we have created walls where we should have built bridges. But his 'long game' is what gives me incredible hope. His insights have transformed my life as a teacher and practitioner of deep Christian unity. If we honestly desire to address the really big questions about Protestantism's tragic divisions, and then prayerfully consider how to respond in faith, hope, and love, we can find no better resource than *The End of Protestantism*. Be prepared to rethink everything you've known if you are a thoughtful Protestant."--John H. Armstrong, president and founder, ACT3 Network, Carol Stream, Illinois

"This is a book to read in community--whether in a book group, a Sunday school class, or a course in ecclesiology. Best of all would be to read it with an ecumenical gathering of Christian friends and colleagues. The conversation will surely be lively. Every reader is certain to find things that challenge and exasperate, as well as things that enlighten and delight. And when the discussion is over, maybe--just maybe--your community will be equipped to take a step or two toward more genuine catholicity."--Laura Smit, Calvin College

"This is one book on church unity that could actually make a difference""Leithart simply cannot write a dull book. He cannot because he has the courage and intellect to go to the heart of the matter. In this book he explores the coming unity we pray God intends for the church. He does so with his usual scholarship and wise judgments. One can only hope for this vision for the future of the church to be realized."--Stanley Hauerwas, Duke Divinity School

"I had given up trying to find--short of the Lord's return--an alternative to the tribalism of divisive denominationalism and the 'unity' efforts of mainstream ecumenism. Peter Leithart has convinced me that I gave up too easily. This groundbreaking book combines exciting ecclesiological explorations with some practical steps for moving forward prior to the eschaton."--Richard J. Mouw, Fuller Theological Seminary

"Peter Leithart is my kind of ecumenist. He is deeply disturbed by the church's disunity and deeply committed to seeing our many fractures healed, and--this is the key--he is committed to doing so in a way that is both theological and practical. This is one book on church unity that could actually make a difference."--Mark Galli, editor of *Christianity Today*

"Leithart's provocative call for the death of Protestantism is likely to cause discomfort among those eager to hold on to their denominational particularities. But make no mistake: Leithart not only takes on his fellow Protestants; his postdenominational Christianity also chastises the sectarianism of Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The urgent and fearless ecumenical proposal of *The End of Protestantism* holds out for the end of all tribal badges within the visible unity of a reformed Catholic church."--Hans Boersma,

Regent College" The bold title of this book presages an equally daring theological argument: faithfulness to Christ and the gospel demands the visible unity of all Christians. The author sketches his capacious and informed vision of the demise of denominationalism and the birth of 'Reformational Catholicism.' One of the most creative theologians writing today, Leithart here offers an incisive and compelling volume urging the churches to become what Christ commands: the one body of the Lord. Highly recommended."--Thomas G. Guarino, Seton Hall University; cochairman, Evangelicals and Catholics Together

What a fantastic book on church history and denominations with wonderful vision for unity. I also appreciate his calling out of the church settling for 'invisible' unity where we are not in fellowship. It suffers for the chapter predicting what the future church could/should look like, and that would have been best left at the end as an addendum rather than disrupting the flow of information and commentary by putting it so close to the front - I almost set it down because it read so much like fantastical blue prints for Leithart's ideal church splicing; like an 'Esperanto' of liturgy. However, everything after that point redeems the book to the perspective that only God knows how to get us to the point of unity and what that will look like. I'm very glad I continued reading it.

Leithart dreams of unity in Christianity. He wants Protestants to pursue internal reforms that would bring churches more in line with Scripture and Christian tradition. He calls this new ecclesiology Reformational Catholicism. He has arranged his book in four parts. In the first section he lays out his vision. Next he looks at denominational Christianity in the U.S. and identifies the faults. Next he shows how God is remapping the global church. His final section includes guidelines to theologians, pastors, and lay Christians who want to work on this idea. Here is a little of what he says the future church will look like. "Everyone will accept the whole of the tradition, East and West and beyond, past and present, as a treasure entrusted by the Spirit to the church." (443/4456) Creeds and catechisms of the Reformation and the Catholic church will be used but with the understanding that they may be distorted. "They will leave every creed and confession open to correction by the Word of God." (460/4456) Mary will be honored and the saints will be celebrated. "Protestant churches will have to become more catholic, and Catholic and Orthodox churches will have to become more biblical." (615/4456) Leithart writes that in disputed doctrinal areas, "Protestants should operate on one overriding principle: Scripture is the final source for and judge of theological controversy." (2911/4456) Correctly framed, he says, that principle can be agreeable to Catholics. My question is who will determine what Scripture

says? I think every denomination would say they now consider Scripture their final source. He also suggests a renewed appreciation for pre-Reformation modes of reading and interpreting Scripture. (2954/4456) He suggests reviving the medieval Quadriga method, something that led to wild speculations about the meaning of Bible passages. This dream and the means to arrive at it seems very unworkable to me. To accept all traditions fails to realize that some traditions might just be ungodly and non-Biblical. But then, who would make that evaluation? Leithart does say there would be controversies and struggles in the future. I found Leithart's writing style difficult to follow. I felt he was asking Protestants to give up much more than Catholics. I also felt that the importance of salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ was somewhat ignored. Unity in Christianity is an admirable dream, but at what cost to those who need to know the truth of salvation? There is some good information toward the end of the book, helping pastors and lay people get a vision for unity in their own community. Rather than ironing out doctrinal differences, this unity is more on the level of working together in the community. I received a complimentary galley of this book from the publisher. My comments are an independent and honest review.

Peter Leithart is, simultaneously, provocative and substantive. This may seem like an odd thing to say, but it is a rare quality for any theological writer to possess; he can both grab and hold the reader's attention through gifted prose, and present substantial theological arguments with relative ease. A good friend of mine once quipped, "Leithart is such a theological maverick". He's right, and this book is no different. For anyone familiar with Leithart's writings for a while, or a consistent reader of his blog over at First Things, this book will come as no surprise. The unity of the church catholic (universal) has been a passion/theme in Leithart's writing for some time. Indeed, this book has been brewing for some time now, and found its impetus, in a particularly thought-provoking post by the same title on First things in 2013. It started a small blog storm, and eventually led to a conference panel titled "The Future of Protestantism". Now, a few years later, Leithart has expounded upon that post, and many others, in book form. He has also answered many of his critics' responses in the process. So, what is "The End of Protestantism" as Leithart sees it. It's important to note that this isn't just a doomsday tale - an easy shot across the bow at denominationalism - though, Leithart doesn't let denominationalism off of the hook. This is also not some utopian vision of what the church could look like - in fact, Leithart goes to great lengths to dispell this idea. Instead, this is a substantial proposal of what the church *should* look like - a clarion call for the "end" of Protestantism in two ways: the actual "end" finality of American (this is his focus) denominationalism as it has severed/divided Christ's Body (the church) into, literal, pieces; but, it's

also a call for Protestantism to seek its "end" (telos/goal) which is the unity of the Body, that Christ prays for in John 17, in the "not yet" kingdom of God. He calls this proposal, "Reformational Catholicism". Leithart grounds his proposal in Christ's prayer in John 17:21, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me". This is both the jumping off point for the proposal and its substance - we have not taken Christ's prayer and call for the unity of the church seriously enough, and our American denominational spirit is a testament to this, "Denominationalism is not union. It is the institutionalization 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" (4). He pulls no punches when it comes to denominations, and rightfully so. He connects our denominationalism with our Americanism in the U.S. church suggesting it has hurt our prophetic witness, "It (American church) cannot overcome Babel because the denominational church is a Christianized Babel" (89). This is one of Leithart's strongest points, because he goes on to point out that not only is the American church divided along denominational lines, but, as a result, racial/ethnic lines - to its shame: over 90% of U.S. churches are racially homogenized (91). So, there are many problems with American Protestantism: denominational divisions, racial divisions, and not taking the call for unity of Christ's Body seriously. Is this merely Leithart brow beating the Protestant church? Is this merely a negative book that offers no hope? No. Leithart devotes just as much time/ink to hope for the future. Indeed, part of his argument is that we should be the future church in the present, or "Be \*now\* what you \*will be\*". We are called to practice this unity now. One of things I most appreciated is that Leithart devotes an entire chapter to some of the benefits American denominationalism has brought to the church, and even goes so far as to claim it is/was God's intent for a time (a great chapter of biblical theology and Leithartian typology is devoted to this). So, the news isn't all bad. One of my favorite proposals comes from, likely, the most "utopian" chapter in the book, and from an end note (Leithart has a whole book worth of end notes). He is making a strong case for Reformational Catholicism (chapter 3), and dreaming of what this church might/could look like, and then he dreams further in an endnote: "I can dream in more detail: Churches in the future will use bread, not specially prepared wafers, stressing the continuity between the church's feast and the meals of daily life. They will use wine, not grape juice, not only because Jesus drank wine but because wine symbolizes the maturation of the goods of the earth and because wine induces Sabbathical restfulness. Churches will stress the Supper is a meal by sitting to eat, as the crowds did in the Gospels" (Endnote #18 p.196-7). And this is just a taste of his vision for the future church. Finally, he ends the book with some more practical, daily examples of how pastors, and

laymen can pursue this vision - bringing this grand vision back to earth. I thought these were extremely helpful. Indeed, I think this could make a great follow-up/companion reading to James Davison Hunter's "To Change the World" as Leithart expounds on some of Hunter's observations, all the while I believe, giving "feet" to part of Hunter's "faithful presence" proposal. However, while reading, I couldn't help but catch the vision, while still feeling that it was "far off" - that it was too "not yet" to be realized in any practical sense. And, that may still be my main grudge at the end of this: How then shall we live? The examples felt, maybe, a bit too limited in scope for such a grand proposal, and in that way, fell prey to the "utopian" critique. I'm still unclear how Leithart sees the "give and take" of denominations in regards to doctrine. He mentions that it will be painful, but isn't always clear what doctrine should remain settled, and what can be held loosely. In this way, it's hard for me to see this sort of ecumenism leaving the confines of local "pastor's groups" or "cross-denomination missions efforts". These are good things, but fall short of actually practicing church together. Though, I will always take a strong proposal for unity, no matter how "utopian," because we need to catch the vision as the Body. Additionally, a minor note of personal critique: I am ardent fan of footnotes, but I can't stand end notes. This is something I have wished for in other Leithart books as well (particularly Between Babel and Beast). [Disclaimer: I received this book from the publisher as part of the Launch Team]

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