

The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism Book Review

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DT 504 – Ecclesiology and Ecumenism  
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April 30, 2015

The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism

By Louis Bouyer

Published 1956, Reviewing special printing from Scepter Publishers

271 pages

I hereby attest that I have read this book in its entirety, have not skimmed, and have applied my best effort to understanding it.

## **I. Introduction**

In *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, Bouyer sets out to examine the original mindset of the protestant reformers and how that has been lived in the modern protestant communities. He looks at the necessarily failed initial presuppositions of Protestantism as well as the truths that the reformers preached, truths which, to the obvious pain of the Catholic Church of the day and to modern Catholics, must be acknowledged as holding the Church to the Christianity in which she was originally founded.

He pays some particular attention to the renewal in Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that sought to bring the protestant movement back to its roots and allow it to flourish in the world. Unfortunately, those same movements, notably, the theology of Karl Barth, stifled the potential movement back to reconciliation that would have begun as some of the untenable structures of Protestantism were identified. Bouyer notes that, at the precise time when these would have becoming increasingly visible and directed many Protestants to unification with the Catholic Church, Barth provided an escape that perhaps delayed that hope.

## **II. Bouyer as a Resource for Ecumenical Dialog**

If we are to understand a goal of the Christian Faith as a universal brotherhood in the faith, then we must also understand that it is a wound to the very nature of that brotherhood for significant divisions and animosity to remain. We must resist both indifferentism that treats all Christian communities as having the same access to and equal representation of the Church and the triumphalism that places the entire blame of the divisions in Christianity on the reformers of

the sixteenth century and the Protestants of today. Rather, we must realize that the reformers had, in many cases, valid concerns and points to make in criticizing the Church of the early modern period. It is notable in reflecting on the error of this triumphalism that, even as an arch-heretic as some contemporary Catholics would title him, Luther's own challenges as asserted in the 95 Theses were, in the estimation of the Council of Trent, found to be half right; only about half of them were identified as heretical propositions, and the other half were, presumably, valid if properly understood and applied to the life of the Church as she did herself in the counter-reformation.

Bouyer points out a frequent dissimilarity between the spirit of Protestantism and the forms it would take in the world. In its spirit, it sought to purify Christianity from what it saw as a dangerous intermingling of paganism and secular involvement. However, in the practical examples of its implementation, it could not escape. As Bouyer points out, Luther sought protection from the secular princes, and, Calvin, in violent reaction to that relationship, rejected secular control but imposed an absolute authority of his church that rivaled that of the Catholic Church of the day. Bouyer points out that this failure to properly relate to creation is a source of the failure of Protestantism in general; inadvertently, it held fast to aspects of medieval society it sought to eschew, sometimes the worst aspects like nominalism, secular humanism, and subordinationism. As such, its success, the revivication of Christianity as a whole, can be best actualized in "a fully conscious and deliberate return." (270)

With this in mind, we must ask the necessary question of how Catholics should best engage non-Catholic Christian communities in ecumenical dialog without resorting to an indifferentism that will so dilute right theology as to replace Truth or a triumphalism that will, far from developing an atmosphere in which Catholics can appreciate and assimilate the truths

which are proper to the Church that are, at times, better expressed to the contemporary world in protestant communities. Indeed, while Catholics must accept that the Church herself has the fullness of truth and needs no supplement to that truth, the persons who comprise the Church militant must always be prepared to be called by God to apprehend that Truth in ways that may better be expressed through protestant movements, the unfamiliarity of which is a clear reproach from God of our own sloth or hardness of heart.

### **III. A Significant Section**

In chapter 5, Bouyer examines the notion of justification, as it was understood by Luther, adapted, and perhaps better stated by Kierkegaard, and malformed in the modern forms of Protestantism. It is most notable, and should be highlighted since the joint declaration on justification between the Lutheran community and the Catholic Church, that, in many ways, Luther's understanding of justification that objected to the Christianity of the sixteenth century harmonizes with, rather than opposes, the idea as it was formed in the counter-reformation and, perhaps moreso, in the post-conciliar Church. Bouyer points out that it could be said that Luther's goal was not to reject any and all understanding of sacramentality, but rather to reject that expression of the sacraments that would render them little more than magic spells requiring no personal participation.

In Luther's view as well as that of the Catholic Church, the acts of faith and the sacramental economy through the Church do not and can not dispense grace as if by magic. While the Church has held firmly through the centuries that the Sacraments produce the grace they signify *ex opere operato*, that grace cannot be active in a person's life unless he maintains a more personal relationship to Christ and the faith that underlie those Sacraments. This is the *ex opere operantis* grace that the Church holds is available to the faithful when their own hearts are

properly disposed to receive that grace. Perhaps Luther did or would still oppose the first activity of Sacraments set forth, here, but it seems likely that his violent rejection was related, at some level, to a Church that had allowed her expressions of faith to devolve into pious superstition in the period and world in which he lived. Bouyer states this in a way that no paraphrase could do justice.

All this could be summed up by saying that, for Luther and his disciples, our religion is quite unreal as long as we ourselves are not personally committed; and by “ourselves” is not meant our superficial or assume character, but our most profound recesses of consciousness. However, they mean, too, the personality, not considered in isolation, but aware of itself in its awareness of being loved by God and so abandoning itself to that love. (126)

#### **IV. A New Idea**

Bouyer points out from several directions the ways in which modern Protestantism would not be a realization of the desires of the reformers but a malformation that, even if they could not force themselves to reject in favor of the Catholic Church, would not fulfill the desires and vision of the early reformers. This is especially true in the case of American Evangelical Protestantism, which, although it is not identified as such, is the most extreme incarnation of the personal in-a-vacuum notion of faith that he rejects as being a desired result of Luther’s movement.

He makes it clear that this is one of his premises in the earliest pages of the text, on the first page of his actual content, where he observes “authentic Protestantism is far more than a negative unbridled individualism.” (15) Clearly, such a statement is meant to suggest a contrast between the ideals set forth by the first reformers and the form their movements have taken in Bouyer’s world, a form that has degraded rather than improved in the years since he wrote this book, especially in the United States. Far from a rejection of what the Catholic Church is, properly understood, the aims of the reformers seem to mirror the aims of many of the counter

reform movements and even the spiritual revitalization and deepened interior life sought by Catholics from Ignatius of Loyola to the Council Fathers at the Second Vatican Council.

In fact, Bouyer points out, the soil for the Protestant movement was well fertilized by the churchmen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who saw the terrible results of a purely external ritualized religion, a religion that saw most Christians going through the motions of their faith, but failing to let that faith infiltrate their lives on Monday morning; indeed, many had so allowed their faith to devolve into rote ritual that they were blissfully ignorant of many, if not most, precepts of that faith. It seems, in Bouyer's mind, if Luther had lived in the contemporary period, or if, in his own day, he had been rather more politic than he was, he would have been hailed not as a great reformer by Protestants and an arch-heretic by Catholics, but as a reformer who rightly pointed out some of the shortcomings and temptations of the Church as it was seen. Rather than animosity from Catholics seeking to defend the Church from her enemies, he would likely be hailed as a true reformer with Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint Philip Neri. In this assessment, Bouyer seems correct of the early reformers, but that assessment does not necessarily reflect the state of Protestantism at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

## **V. A Great Quote**

In his final critique of Barth, Bouyer observes that he “offered the uneasy and nervous conscience of institutional Protestantism a momentary escape, which was bound to meet with resounding success...it simply puts an affirmative coloring on the negations from which Protestantism was dying, without giving them any positive content at all.” (266-267) In this, Bouyer identifies one of the most difficult tasks facing the contemporary Catholic seeking to effectively and genuinely engage in ecumenism in twenty-first century America. Many of the modern Protestant movements are trapped in an identification of Christianity that is not a

positive affirmation of belief, but rather a negative rejection of the Catholic Church. They no longer can identify the aspects of the Catholic Church against which they protest, but rather know only that the Catholic Church is wrong and so far intermingled with pagan practices and empty ritual that it cannot be the true expression of religion desired by Christ. This same mindset was expressed by the mother of a personal friend who once told her that she wasn't concerned with which Church my friend attended, "as long as it's not Catholic."

Granted, as Bouyer points out, part of this challenge is that the positive aspects of the spirit of Protestantism were never clearly stated by themselves. Rather, since the Protestant movement has always identified itself by what it was rejecting from the Catholic Church, its mother against whom it protested, it never effectively formulated a positive statement of the good it sought. Since, from its primitive forebears, this was a flaw in the Protestant approach, it is not surprising that it is still the deadly flaw from which Protestantism suffers. Again, this does not remove responsibility from Catholics to enter effective dialog with protestant communities in view of achieving the visible unity that was Christ's clear intention. Instead, it makes incumbent on those participating in such dialog to identify and embrace those truths that underlie the protest, even if, in so doing, Catholics are forced to admit that these truths are hidden in the heart of the Church instead of effectively expressed in her everyday life.

## **VI. Conclusion**

It would be a welcome conclusion to state from Bouyer's observations that unity of Christians is closer than ever. Unfortunately, however, such an assertion is both unwarranted and counterproductive. As we noted above, many Protestants reject the Church outright because of what they mistakenly believe her to be, in the words of Fulton Sheen. To combat that, we, as Catholics, must be willing to humbly approach the dialog in a way that respects the objections

that have grown from and since the sixteenth century, to acknowledge the culpability of the Church in the early days and her shared responsibility for the growing chasm, and to praise the truths that were identified by the reformers and the non-Catholic Christians in the intervening centuries. From this starting point, we can seek to overcome the errors that may have been introduced in the Protestant forms that were not consonant with the spirit of the first reformers and perhaps bring to the Church the unity desired by Christ.