



Interpreting the Reformation is complicated business. But like many complicated things, it can be simplified sufficiently well that even non-experts can get the gist of it.

Here's what seems a fairly accurate but simplified summary of the issue: The break between Catholics and Protestants was either a tragic necessity (to use Jaroslav Pelikan's expression) or it was tragic because unnecessary.

Many Protestants see the Catholic/Protestant split as a tragic necessity, although the staunchly anti-Catholic kind of Protestant often sees nothing tragic about it. Or if he does, the tragedy is that there ever was such a thing as the Roman Catholic Church that the Reformers had to separate from. His motto is "Come out from among them" and five centuries of Christian disunity has done nothing to cool his anti-Roman fervor.

Yet for most Protestants, even for most conservative Protestants, this is not so. They believe God "raised up" Luther and the other Reformers to restore the Gospel in its purity. They regret that this required a break with Roman Catholics (hence the tragedy) but fidelity to Christ, on their view, demanded it (hence the necessity).

Catholics agree with their more agreeable Protestant brethren that the sixteenth century division among Christians was tragic. But most Catholics who think about it also see it as unnecessary. At least unnecessary in the sense that what Catholics might regard as genuine issues raised by the Reformers could, on the Catholic view, have been addressed without the tragedy of dividing Christendom.

Yet we can go further than decrying the Reformation as unnecessary. In his ground-breaking work, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, Louis Bouyer argued that the Catholic Church herself is *necessary* for the full flowering of the *Reformation* principles. In other words, you need Catholicism to make Protestantism work—for Protestantism's principles fully to develop. Thus, the Reformation was not only unnecessary; it was impossible. What the Reformers sought, argues Bouyer, could not be achieved without the Catholic Church.

From Bouyer's conclusion we can infer at least two things. First, Protestantism can't be all wrong, otherwise how could the Catholic Church bring about the "full flowering of the principles of the Reformation"? Second, left to itself, Protestantism will go astray and be untrue to some of its central principles. It's these two points, as Bouyer articulates them, I would like to consider here.

One thing should be said up-front: although a convert from French Protestantism, Bouyer is no anti-Protestant polemicist. His *Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* was written a half-century ago, a decade before Vatican II's decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, yet it avoids the bitter anti-Protestantism that sometimes afflicted pre-conciliar Catholic works on Protestantism. That's one reason the book remains useful, even after decades of post-conciliar ecumenism.

In that regard, Bouyer's brief introduction is worth quoting in full:

"This book is a personal witness, a plain account of the way in which a Protestant came to feel himself obliged in conscience to give his adherence to the Catholic Church. No sentiment of revulsion turned him from the religion fostered in him by a Protestant upbringing followed by several years in the ministry. The fact is, he has never rejected it. It was his desire to explore its depths, its full scope, that led him, step by step, to a genuinely spiritual movement stemming from the teachings of the Gospel, and Protestantism as an

institution, or rather complexus of institutions, hostile to one another as well as to the Catholic Church. The study of this conflict brought him to detect the fatal error which drove the spiritual movement of Protestantism out of the one Church. He saw the necessity of returning to that Church, not in order to reject any of the positive Christian elements of his religious life, but to enable them, at last, to develop without hindrance.

"The writer, who carved out his way step by step, or rather, saw it opening before his eyes, hopes now to help along those who are still where he started. In addition, he would like to show those he has rejoined how a little more understanding of the others, above all a greater fidelity to their own gift, could help their 'separated brethren' to receive it in their turn. In this hope he offers his book to all who wish to be faithful to the truth, first, to the Word of God, but also to the truth of men as they are, not as our prejudices and habits impel us to see them."

Bouyer, then, addresses both Protestants and Catholics. To the Protestants, he says, in effect, "It is fidelity to our Protestant principles, properly understood, that has led me into the Catholic Church." To the Catholics, he says, "Protestantism isn't as antithetical to the Catholic Faith as you suppose. It has positive principles, as well as negative ones. Its positive principles, properly understood, belong to the Catholic Tradition, which we Catholics can see if we approach Protestantism with a bit of understanding and openness."

The Reformation was Right

Bouyer's argument is that the Reformation's main principle was essentially Catholic: "Luther's basic intuition, on which Protestantism continuously draws for its abiding vitality, so far from being hard to reconcile with Catholic tradition, or inconsistent with the teaching of the Apostles, was a return to the clearest elements of their teaching, and in the most direct line of that tradition."

1. *Sola Gratia.* What was the Reformation's main principle? Not, as many Catholics and even some Protestants think, "private judgment" in religion. According to Bouyer, "the true fundamental principle of Protestantism is the gratuitousness of salvation"—*sola gratia*. He writes, "In the view of Luther, as well as of all those faithful to his essential teaching, man without grace can, strictly speaking, do nothing of the slightest value for salvation. He can neither dispose himself for it, nor work for it in any independent fashion. Even his acceptance of grace is the work of grace. To Luther and his authentic followers, justifying faith . . . is quite certainly, the first and most fundamental grace."

Bouyer then shows how, contrary to what many Protestants and some Catholics think, salvation *sola gratia* is also Catholic teaching. He underscores the point to any Catholics who might think otherwise:

"If, then, any Catholic—and there would seem to be many such these days—whose first impulse is to reject the idea that man, without grace, can do nothing towards his salvation, that he cannot even accept the grace offered except by a previous grace, that the very faith which acknowledges the need of grace is a purely gratuitous gift, he would do well to attend closely to the texts we are about to quote."

In other words, "Listen up, Catholics!"

Bouyer quotes, at length, from the Second Council of Orange (529), the teaching of which was confirmed by Pope Boniface II as *de fide* or part of the Church's faith. The Council asserted that salvation is the work of God's grace and that even the beginning of faith or the consent to saving grace is itself the result of grace. By our natural powers, we can neither think as we ought nor choose any good pertaining to salvation. We can only do so by the illumination and impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Nor is it merely that man is limited in doing good. The Council affirmed that, as a result of the Fall, man is inclined to will evil. His freedom is gravely impaired and can only be repaired by God's grace. Following a number of biblical quotations, the Council states, "[W]e are obliged, in the mercy of God, to preach and

believe that, through sin of the first man, the free will is so weakened and warped, that no one thereafter can either love God as he ought, or believe in God, or do good for the sake of God, unless moved, previously, by the grace of the divine mercy Our salvation requires that we assert and believe that, in every good work we do, it is not we who have the initiative, aided, subsequently, by the mercy of God, but that he begins by inspiring faith and love towards him, without any prior merit of ours."

The Council of Trent, writes Bouyer, repeated that teaching, ruling out "a parallel action on the part of God and man, a sort of 'synergism', where man contributes, in the work of salvation, something, however slight, independent of grace." Even where Trent insists that man is not saved passively, notes Bouyer, it doesn't assert some independent, human contribution to salvation. Man freely cooperates in salvation, but his free cooperation is itself the result of grace. Precisely how this is so is mysterious, and the Church has not settled on a particular theological explanation. But *that* it is so, insist Bouyer, is Catholic teaching. Thus, concludes Bouyer, "the Catholic not only may, but must in virtue of his own faith, give a full and unreserved adherence to the *sola gratia*, understood in the positive sense we have seen upheld by Protestants."

2. *Sola Fide*: So much for *sola gratia*. But what about the other half of the Reformation principle regarding salvation, the claim that justification by grace comes through faith *alone* (*sola fide*)?

According to Bouyer, the main thrust of the doctrine of *sola fide* was to affirm that justification was wholly the work of God and to deny any positive human contribution apart from grace. Faith was understood as man's grace-enabled, grace-inspired, grace-completed response to God's saving initiative in Jesus Christ. What the Reformation initially sought to affirm, says Bouyer, was that such a response is purely God's gift to man, with man contributing nothing of his own to receive salvation.

In other words, it isn't as if God does his part and man cooperates by doing his part, even if that part is minuscule. The Reformation insisted that God does his part, which includes enabling and moving man to receive salvation in Christ. Man's "part" is to believe, properly understood, but faith too is the work of God, so man contributes nothing positively of his own. As Bouyer points out, this central concern of the Reformation also happened to be defined Catholic teaching, reaffirmed by the Council of Trent.



In a sense, the Reformation debate was over the nature of saving faith, not over whether faith saves. St. Thomas Aquinas, following St. Augustine and the patristic understanding of faith and salvation, said that saving faith was faith "formed by charity." In other words, saving faith involves at least the beginnings of the love of God. In this way, Catholics could speak of "justification by grace alone, through faith alone," if the "alone" was meant to distinguish the gift of God (faith) from any purely human contribution apart from grace; but not if "alone" was meant to offset faith from grace-enabled, grace-inspired, grace-accomplished love of God or charity.

For Catholic theologians of the time, the term "faith" was generally used in the highly refined sense of the gracious work of God in us by which we assent to God's Word on the authority of God who reveals. In this sense, faith is distinct from entrusting oneself to God in hope and love, though obviously faith is, in a way, naturally ordered to doing so: God gives man faith so that man can entrust himself to God in hope and love. But faith, understood as mere assent (albeit graced assent), is only the beginning of salvation. It needs to be "informed" or completed by charity, also the work of grace.

Luther and his followers, though, rejected the Catholic view that "saving faith" was "faith formed by charity" and therefore not "faith alone", where "faith" is understood as mere assent to God's Word, apart from trust and love. In large part, this was due to a misunderstanding by Luther. "We must not be misled on this point," writes Bouyer, "by Luther's later assertions opposed to the *fides caritate formata* [faith informed by charity]."

His object in disowning this formula was to reject the idea that faith justified man only if there were added to it a love proceeding from a natural disposition, not coming as a gift of God, the whole being the gift of God." Yet Luther's view of faith, contents Bouyer, seems to imply an element of love, at least in the sense of a total self-commitment to God. And, of course, this love must be both the response to God's loving initiative and the effect of that initiative by which man is enabled and moved to respond. But once again, this is Catholic doctrine, for the charity that "informs" faith so that it becomes saving faith is not a natural disposition, but is as much the work of God as the assent of faith.

Thus, Bouyer's point is that the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) was initially seen by the Reformers as a way of upholding justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*), which is also a fundamental Catholic truth. Only later, as a result of controversy, did the Reformers insist on identifying justification by faith alone with a negative principle that denied any form of cooperation, even grace-enabled cooperation.

Part Two

3. *Sola Scriptura*: Melancthon, the colleague of Luther, called justification *sola gratia, sola fide* the "Material Principle" of the Reformation. But there was also the Formal Principle, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* or what Bouyer calls the sovereign authority of Scripture. What of that?

Here, too, says Bouyer, the Reformation's core positive principle is correct. The Word of God, rather than a human word, must govern the life of the Christian and of the Church. And the Word of God is found in a unique and supreme form in the Bible, the inspired Word of God. The inspiration of the Bible means that God is the primary author of Scripture. Since we can say that about no other writing or formal expression of the Church's Faith, not even conciliar or papal definitions of faith, the Bible alone is the Word of God in this sense and therefore it possesses a unique authority.

Yet the supremacy of the Bible does not imply an opposition between it and the authority of the Church or Tradition, as certain negative principles adopted by the Reformers implied. Furthermore, the biblical spirituality of Protestantism, properly understood, is in keeping with the best traditions of Catholic spirituality, especially those of the Fathers and the great medieval theologians. Through Scripture, God speaks to us today, offering a living Word to guide our lives in Christ.

Thus, writes Bouyer, "the supreme authority of Scripture, taken in its positive sense, as gradually drawn out and systematized by Protestants themselves, far from setting the Church and Protestantism in opposition, should be the best possible warrant for their return to understanding and unity."

The Reformation was Wrong

Where does this leave us? If the Reformation was right about *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura*, its two key principles, how was it wrong? Bouyer holds that only the positive elements of these Reformation principles are correct.

Unfortunately, these principles were unnecessarily linked by the Reformers to certain negative elements, which the Catholic Church had to reject. Here we consider two of those elements: 1) the doctrine of extrinsic justification and the nature of justifying faith and 2) the authority of the Bible.

1. Extrinsic Justification. Regarding justification by grace alone, it was the doctrine of extrinsic justification and the rejection of the Catholic view of faith formed by charity as "saving faith." Bouyer writes, "The further Luther advanced in his conflict with other theologians, then with Rome, then with the whole of contemporary Catholicism and finally with the Catholicism of every age, the more closely we see him identifying affirmation about *sola gratia* with a particular theory, known as extrinsic justification."

Extrinsic justification is the idea that justification occurs outside of man, rather than within him. Catholicism, as we have seen, holds that justification is by grace alone. In that sense, it originates outside of man, with God's grace. But, according to Catholic teaching, God justifies man by effecting a change within him, by making him just or righteous, not merely by saying he is just or righteous or treating him as if he were. Justification *imparts* the righteousness of Christ to man, transforming him by grace into a child of God

The Reformation view was different. The Reformers, like the Catholic Church, insisted that justification is by grace and therefore originates outside of man, with God. But they also insisted that when God justifies man, man is not changed but merely declared just or righteous. God treats man as *if he were* just or righteous, *imputing* to man the righteousness of Christ, rather than *imparting* it to him.

The Reformers held this view for two reasons. First, because they came to think it necessary in order to uphold the gratuitousness of justification. Second, because they thought the Bible taught it. On both points, argues Bouyer, the Reformers were mistaken. There is neither a logical nor a biblical reason why God cannot effect a change in man without undercutting justification by grace alone. Whatever righteousness comes to be in man as a result of justification is a gift, as much any other gift God bestows on man. Nor does the Bible's treatment of "imputed" righteousness imply that justification is not *imparted*. On these points, the Reformers were simply wrong:

"Without the least doubt, grace, for St. Paul, however freely given, involves what he calls 'the new creation', the appearance in us of a 'new man', created in justice and holiness. So far from suppressing the efforts of man, or making them a matter of indifference, or at least irrelevant to salvation, he himself tells us to 'work out your salvation with fear and trembling', at the very moment when he affirms that '. . . knowing that it is God who works in you both to will and to accomplish.' These two expressions say better than any other that all is grace in our salvation, but at the same time grace is not opposed to human acts and endeavor in order to attain salvation, but arouses them and exacts their performance."

Calvin, notes Bouyer, tried to circumvent the biblical problems of the extrinsic justification theory by positing a systematic distinction between justification, which puts us in right relation to God but which, on the Protestant view, doesn't involve a change in man; and sanctification, which transforms us. Yet, argues Bouyer, this systematic distinction isn't biblical. In the Bible, justification and sanctification—as many modern Protestant exegetes admit—are two different terms for the same process. Both occur by grace through faith and both involve a faith "informed by charity" or completed by love. As Bouyer contends, faith in the Pauline sense, "supposes the total abandonment of man to the gift of God"—which amounts to love of God. He argues that it is absurd to think that the man justified by faith, who calls God "Abba, Father," doesn't love God or doesn't have to love him in order to be justified.

2. *Sola Scriptura* vs. Church and Tradition. Bouyer also sees a negative principle that the Reformation unnecessarily associated with *sola Scriptura* or the sovereignty of the Bible. Yes, the Bible alone is the Word of God in the sense that only the Bible is divinely inspired. And yes the Bible's authority is supreme in the sense that neither the Church nor the Church's Tradition "trumps" Scripture. But that doesn't mean that the Word of God in an authoritative form is found only in the Bible, for the Word of God can be communicated in a non-inspired, yet authoritative form as well. Nor does it mean that there can be no authoritative interpreter of the Bible (the Magisterium) or authoritative interpretation of biblical doctrine (Tradition). Repudiation of the Church's authority and Tradition simply doesn't follow from the premise of Scripture's supremacy as the inspired Word of God. Furthermore, the Tradition and authority of the Church are required to determine the canon of the Bible.

Luther and Calvin did not follow the Radical Reformation in rejecting any role for Church authority or Tradition altogether. But they radically truncated such a role. Furthermore, they provided no means by which the Church, as a community of believers, could determine when the Bible was being authentically interpreted or who within the community had the right to make such a determination for the community. In this way, they ultimately undercut the supremacy of the Bible, for they provided no means by which the supreme

authority of the Bible could, in fact, be exercised in the Church as a whole. The Bible's authority extended only so far as the individual believer's interpretation of it allowed.

The Catholic Church and Reformation Principles

As we have seen, Bouyer argues for the Reformation's "positive principles" and against its "negative principles." But how did what was right from one point of view in the Reformation go so wrong from another point of view? Bouyer argues that under the influence of decadent scholasticism, mainly Nominalism, the Reformers unnecessarily inserted the negative elements into their ideas along with the positive principles. "Brought up on these lines of thought, identified with them so closely they could not see beyond them," he writes, "the Reformers could only systematize their very valuable insights in a vitiated framework."

The irony is profound. The Reformation sought to recover "genuine Christianity" by hacking through what it regarded as the vast overgrowth of medieval theology. Yet to do so, the Reformers wielded swords forged in the fires of the worst of medieval theology—the decadent scholasticism of Nominalism.

The negative principles of the Reformation necessarily led the Catholic Church to reject the movement—though not, in fact, its fundamental positive principles, which were essentially Catholic. Eventually, argues Bouyer, through a complex historical process, these negative elements ate away at the positive principles as well. The result was liberal Protestantism, which wound up affirming the very things Protestantism set out to deny (man's ability to save himself) and denying things Protestantism began by affirming (*sola gratia*).

Bouyer contends that the only way to safeguard the positive principles of the Reformation is through the Catholic Church. For only in the Catholic Church are the positive principles the Reformation affirmed found without the negative elements the Reformers mistakenly affixed to them. But how to bring this about?

Bouyer says that both Protestants and Catholics have responsibilities here. Protestants must investigate their roots and consider whether the negative elements of the Reformation, such as extrinsic justification and the rejection of a definitive Church teaching authority and Tradition, are necessary to uphold the positive principles of *sola gratia* and the supremacy of Scripture. If not, then how is continued separation from the Catholic Church justified? Furthermore, if, as Bouyer contends, the negative elements of the Reformation were drawn from a decadent theology and philosophy of the Middle Ages and not Christian antiquity, then it is the Catholic Church that has upheld the true faith and has maintained a balance regarding the positive principles of the Reformation that Protestantism lacks. In this way, the Catholic Church is needed for Protestantism to live up to its own positive principles.

Catholics have responsibilities as well. One major responsibility is to be sure they have fully embraced their own Church's teaching on the gratuitousness of salvation and the supremacy of the Bible. As Bouyer writes, "Catholics are in fact too prone to forget that, if the Church bears within herself, and cannot ever lose, the fullness of Gospel truth, its members, at any given time and place, are always in need of a renewed effort to apprehend this truth really and not just, as Newman would say, 'notionally'." "To Catholics, lukewarm and unaware of their responsibilities," he adds, the Reformation, properly understood, "recalls the existence of many of their own treasures which they overlook."

Only if Catholics are fully Catholic—which includes fully embracing the positive principles of the Reformation that Bouyer insists are essentially Catholic—can they "legitimately aspire to show and prepare their separated brethren the way to a return which would be for them not a denial but a fulfillment."

Today, as in the sixteenth century, the burden rests with us Catholics. We must live, by God's abundant grace, up to our high calling in Christ Jesus. And in this way, show our Protestant brethren that their own positive principles are properly expressed only in the Catholic Church.



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