

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren)

Rottengeister! - Part 2

by Leonard Verduin

Leonard Verduin explores the tension between the Anabaptists and Reformers regarding the significance of suffering and the true essence of Christian witness.

Topics: "Non Resistance", "The Cross"

Description

Leonard Verduin preaches about the Anabaptists' strong conviction in experiencing the Cross of Christ, leading them to reject the fusion of the Cross with the sword by the Reformers. The Stepchildren believed that true Christians must bear the Cross of suffering and persecution, not resorting to violence. They emphasized the importance of witnessing Christ through suffering and non-resistance, contrasting with the prevailing Christian sacralism that endorsed warfare. The Stepchildren's missionary zeal and refusal to participate in war reflected their commitment to following the peaceful example of Jesus, challenging the Constantinian distortion of Christianity.

Transcript

What the Stepchildren had against the Reformers was that they had "welded the Cross to the sword," an operation whereby in the Stepchildren's eyes they lost the right to the name of Christian. As Leonard Schiemer put it, in words written from the prison where he was incarcerated for being an Anabaptist: "If the Cross is not experienced then we have the proof that we are false Christians, not yet adopted into the sonship of God." Schiemer was burned for writing that way, on January 14, 1528.

A simple peasant woman who had joined the Anabaptist movement said, "We want to attend preaching services where Christ is preached; your Christ brings you no suffering." Another plain person put it this way, "Wherever you hear about the Cross, there the true Church is in evidence."

Baptism was not only the prelude to suffering in the Anabaptist system of thought; it was also part of the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. Christ had drained a bitter cup, to the dregs, and they who follow Him will have a similar experience. As Hans Cluber, an Anabaptist on trial in Hesse in 1535, put it, "What men take to themselves in the sacrament is neither blood nor flesh, but trouble and anguish; He who would drink the sweet cup in the hereafter must empty the sour one here."²⁰

The readiness with which the Stepchildren shouldered this Cross and the singular constancy with which they bore it, had tremendous propaganda value. In a way that reminded of the medieval "heretics" and of the early Christians, the ashes of the martyrs became the seed of the Church. For every Anabaptist that was burned, a whole handful rose up to take his place. Menno Simons himself was sent on the way toward Anabaptism by the spectacle of Sicke Snijder being put to death. So effective was this Cross-bearing that it became the custom to tie a piece of wood crosswise in the mouth of a person about to be executed, so that he would be unable to testify and so draw men and women after himself.

The neo-Constantinians were at their wits' end to neutralize the effectiveness of the Stepchildren's Cross-bearing. Luther spoke with some disdain of "people who fashion for themselves a willingness to suffer and leave all behind; and then they boast of being martyrs, so seeking their own honor." He saw an exact parallel with that which had happened in the days of the Donatists; for he said, "We see many die with a smile on their lips, facing death without blanching, just as people possessed have no fear of death. This sort of thing we had occasion to see previously in the Donatists, and we see it in our own times in the Anabaptists."²¹

At another time Luther wrote:

St. Augustine in earlier times had much to do with the Donatists; they were the same kind of customers and seducers in that they too begged men to put them to death, asking executioners to slay them, in their passion for martyrdom. And then when no one complied by taking them in hand they hurled themselves from bridges or tumbled from housetops, or broke their necks, the while quoting the saying about "whoso loves his own life more than me," etc.²²

The enemies of the Stepchildren exploited Augustine's saying, coined in that man's rounds with the Donatists, "Martyrem fecit causa, non poena" (it is the cause that makes the martyr, not the punishment). They also informed the Anabaptists that Christ did not say "Blessed are they that suffer" but "Blessed are they that suffer for righteousness' sake" -- which was, of course, to beg the question.

Luther's hint that it was demon-possession that inspired the Stepchildren's fortitude in the face of death was enlarged upon by Adam Krafft, who had this to say:

That they are possessed and blinded by the devil becomes apparent . . . when they go willingly into death, into fire and into water. The devil is wont to do such things. In the Gospel we read of him casting a young man into the fire (Matthew 17) ... as also he drove Judas into the noose. It is apparent that in our times he continues to drive people so that they end themselves, just as in earlier times the Donatists went of themselves into the water and into the fire. The devil tried also to get the Christ to make a martyr of himself when he suggested that the Christ should leap from the temple tower.²³

For a long time this explanation of the Stepchildren's willingness to bear the Cross continued in vogue. We find it still employed at the Disputation held at Emden in 1578, where the spokesman for the Reformed position cautioned his Anabaptist opponents that "a man may fool himself with the Cross and with persecution The Donatists sought Similarly to prove by their Cross-bearing that they were the Church of God "

One thing that Augustine left unexplained was left unexplained by the Reformers also. It is this. If one withholds from the people whom they called "Donatists" the passages in the New Testament that speak of Cross-bearing as the mark of the believer, to whom then are they applicable? Least of all can they

appropriate them who sit snug and smug behind the arm of flesh, the sword of the civil ruler, in a situation of "Christian sacralism," in a situation in which there was nothing even remotely resembling the Cross-experience of the early Christians.

Another term of reproach employed to stigmatize the Stepchildren was the word *Leufer*, a word meaning "one who walks, or, runs." As such it calls attention to the practice of traveling about in missionary fashion.

The original Christian Church was a missionary society. Its members were constantly drawing into its fellowship those who were "outside." The method was that of Witnessing. At life's more intimate junctures the early Christians witnessed concerning the Faith that was in them. What was true of the apostolic Church was true for the pre-Constantinian Church generally: "The Lord added to her daily such as should be saved.

[i. The New Testament plainly teaches that the true follower of the Christ will experience something of the Cross. Whether the very preaching of the Cross will be able to humanize men to such an extent that this Cross becomes less heavy is of course a question by itself. Menno Simons had his ideas about this question, alleging that to the end of time the faithful would have to bear the Cross. He wrote, in his most influential tract, his *Fundamentboek*: "Do not comfort one another with senseless comfort and unfounded hope, as do those who think that the Word will yet be taught and practiced without the cross . . ." Tear from your heart the harmful thought of hoping for different times, lest you be deceived in your false hope. I have known some who waited for a day of freedom; but they did not live long enough to see their hope realized."]

In the account given in the Book of Acts the witness to the Resurrected One did not elicit much ill will, if any, at the hands of the people confronted. (The only significant exception in Acts is the case of Ephesus, recorded in Chapter 19; and here the motive is economic rather than religious.) Such ill-will as came to expression issued from the apostate Jews rather than from the gentiles. This less than hostile reception of the messengers of Christ and their message, characterized the entire post-apostolic period.

This was a period of almost incredible expansion. Men from every walk of life came into the Church in large numbers, from one end of the empire to the other, and from the regions beyond. Christians insinuated themselves into every activity of the society of the day. They were in the army, in politics, in the courts and palaces. It is hard to visualize what might have been if this method had been continued.]

[j. In far less than a century the Christian Faith had found adherents in virtually every place. As early as the year 112, Pliny the Younger, in a letter to the emperor Trajan said of the Christianity of his day: "The disease of this superstition has spread itself over the cities not only but also across villages and towns." So great was the number of adherents of the new faith that this pagan Roman expressed the fear that the resulting reduction in the volume of sacrifice would incur the wrath of the gods and so bring calamity upon the State. For, as an emperor put it early in the 4th century, "All the calamities have come to pass because of the destructive notions of the folly of these reckless men, since this folly has seized them and has placed virtually the whole world under their ridiculous behavior."]

But the Constantinian change put an end to this epoch. In the climate of "Christian sacralism," missions in the erstwhile sense are unthinkable. To whom can an individual witness if all men already "belong"? Such expansion programs as there were became just an aspect of military annexation, the kind we witness for example in the late medieval times when the New World was discovered and a conquistador and a padre stepped ashore simultaneously, the former to plant a Hag and the latter a cross. Then the conquerors

moved on to further "conquests for Christ." Sometimes a token baptism of some key men in the area passed for the "christening" of the whole tribe. Needless to say, men so "converted" were changed not at all. Commonly the only effect was the laying of a painfully thin veneer upon the existing heathenism. One can see the outworkings of this kind of "missions" in many a land today; the same old superstitions, the same poverty and squalor that existed before, with nothing but a shrine and a steeple and a crucifix to tell us that this is a region that has been "evangelized."

Missions in the New Testament sense the medieval world did not know. The prevailing view was that the Great Commission, the command to preach the Gospel to all nations, had been executed, finished, in and with the "larger fulfillment" of which Augustine had spoken so oracularly. As a consequence, the eschatological hope that had lived so fervently in the early Church came to a halt; that far-off event to which the New Testament Church had cast its eyes had been realized; all promises had been fulfilled. So thought and lived the medieval Church. The "Maranatha!" of the erstwhile Church died on her lips. Save for a stray voice, such as that of Joachim of Fiore (who was himself a "heretic," albeit within the "fallen" Church), now and then, the recovery of the eschatological hope had to wait until Constantinianism had eroded away.

A sense of mission and a practice of mission did continue to manifest itself -- in the camp of the "heretics." Here we find men going on missionary journeys, usually two by two, so emulating the pattern of Luke 10. A striking thing about these missionaries was that they were oblivious to borders, the kind surveyors establish. They traveled across such "borders" with the nonchalance that marks the meadow-lark that flies singingly from Montana into Alberta. The mobility of these medieval missionaries is apparent from the fact that, although Waldensianism was originally based in the Piedmont, there were converts to it in every area of the empire, and beyond it, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean.

Naturally, it was frightfully dangerous to engage in such activity. It was therefore done as secretly as possible. Its dimensions must have been infinitely more extensive than the recorded facts would indicate; for when things went as planned there was no record made; written accounts were occasioned only if and when things did not go as planned. Then, since the liquidation procedures were recorded, we do have a record. It is safe to say that this missionary activity was like an iceberg -- by far the largest part of it was invisible. We get only glimpses.

One such glimpse reveals something of the courage and the conviction, the sense of mission, of these "heretical" missionaries. We read of one of them swimming across the Ibs River, full of floating ice at the time, in the deep of night, in order to reach a person on the other side who had given evidence of being receptive to the gospel.²⁴

The Church was frantic over these activities. It invented several damning words, in its fight against this threat. We read of Schwärmer (a word that is distantly related to our English word "swarm"); of Schleicher (a word meaning one who crawls in); of Truands (a word related to our "truant," one who is not in the expected place); of gyrovagi (i.e., wanderers in circles); of Gartenbrüder (a word meaning wandering ones; it is related to the expression gardende Knechte, i.e., mobile soldiers); also of Leufer.

Strong testimony to the Church's concern (and therefore to the effectiveness of the missions of the "heretics") may be seen in the steps it took to stop the Leufer; it bound every cleric to a parish, so that men might know in all situations who were the authorized clerics and who the not-authorized. By this device the "heretic," unattached as he was, was at a severe disadvantage. The "fallen" Church seems not to have

given a thought, and, if she did, then she did not care a fig, for the fact that the New Testament knows nothing about such parishes and such delimitations, whereby a man is told where he may witness and where not.

Strongest testimony of all to the effectiveness of this missionary activity of the "heretics" is the fact that the Church copied it. The Order of the Dominicans was actually created as a response to the "heretic." This Order was to fight fire with fire, simulate the "heretics" in all respects -- save one. The Dominicans also were to go out two by two; they too were to go in austere attire; they too were to roam about at will; they too were to preach outside hallowed precincts. The one point of difference was that while the "heretics" spoke evil of the "fallen" Church the Dominicans were to speak well of her. Save for this point of difference, the two varieties of itinerant preacher looked very much alike -- up to such details as the wearing of a beard.^k

[^k. it was a common feature of the medieval "heretic" to wear a full beard, so much so that "heretics" were commonly called *Bartmännner*, men with beards. This throws an interesting, and probably significant, light upon the fact that among the more conservative descendants of the Anabaptists there still is a religious sensitivity that prescribes a beard for the adult male.]

Needless to say, the creation of this Order (notorious from the outset for its *ketterjacht*, its inquisitorial tactics in connection with "heretics") made the lot of the "heretic" much more difficult. Henceforth it would be hard to know friend from foe.

It seems that in some instances these measures against the "heretics" boomeranged. So well had the Church instructed her obedient children to shun the roving missionary, run him out of town, stone him, that when the new variety put in its appearance in outlying districts, where the news of the creation of the new Order had not yet penetrated so it seems, they were received gruffly with "Are you heretics and did you come to infect Germany as you have Lombardy?" Not being too well at home in the language, they answered in the affirmative. Upon this they were stoned and only with some difficulty got out of town unhurt.^l

[^l. It seems that a similarly ludicrous occurrence took place in Cologne as well as in Paris (related by Mens in his *Oorsprong en Beteekenis van de Nederlandsche Begijnen en Begarden Beweging*, p. 31ff.). One can hardly believe that the news of the newly-created Order had not yet reached these important centres when the events occurred. We must therefore seek for an other explanation for the hostilities there. In view of fact that in a great many instances the populace was on the side of the "heretics," as were in many instances even the local governors, the less than friendly reception of the Dominicans may find its explanation in popular disapproval of the increased inquisitorial activity provided by the creation of the new Order of heresy-hunters.]

Since missions cannot thrive in the climate of sacralism and since the Reformers turned to a new version of "Christian sacralism," it is not at all surprising that the Reformation did not develop a theology of missions nor a practice of missions.^m

[^m. To this day it is customary among the Reformed people of the Netherlands to reserve the word *Zending* (missions) to the foreign scene. Missions within the homeland are usually referred to as *Evangelisatie*. Back of this usage there lies, of course, the assumption that people who are part of Christendom can hardly be objects of missionary activity, that the "heathen" who lives, let us say, in a suburb of Amsterdam is less a "heathen," or at least a significantly different kind of "heathen," than is the

native of Borneo.

The swing toward the right prevented that. It has been said that:

The prevailing view with regard to foreign missions at the beginning of the Protestant era was that the command to preach the Gospel to all nations was given only to the original apostles and expired with them. This view was to persist within Protestantism for three centuries and more.²⁵

The people of Reformation times looked upon all those whom they met in daily contact as in some genuine sense Christian; and this precludes a missionary outreach. The recovery of the missionary insight dates from the moment when the sacralism of Reformation times had eroded away sufficiently. Not until the concept of the Church as "including all in a given locality" was overcome was it possible for missions in the New Testament sense to be resumed.ⁿ And then it was discovered that there was a big dike of resentment to be overcome -- men in areas that had had bad experiences with "Christendom" looked upon the missionary with understandable distrust. As Emil Brunner has put it:

The main obstacle in our day to Christian advance is obviously the guilt of the past centuries, namely the Christian mission having been a part of western imperialism, or to put it more mildly, the Christian mission letting itself be protected by the western powers. It will take a long time until the memory of this fact is extinguished.²⁶

[n. Little by little European Churchmen are beginning to recover the New Testament dimension of mission, and this recovery is contingent upon the awareness that the Constantinian experiment is a thing of the past. Recently, so it is reported, a young Swiss pastor accepted his office only on condition that it be clearly understood that the role and mission of the Church in Switzerland is "precisely the same as in pretotalitarian China." (Cf. Franklin H. Littell, *The Free Church*, p. 4.)]

One of the first things that had to be done in the drive to recover the mission of the New Testament was to convince men that the Great Commission was still in force. William Carey, perhaps the pioneer in this recovery, was obliged to argue at great length "whether the commission given by our Lord to His disciples be not still binding on us." His book entitled *An Inquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, written in 1792, marks the beginning of a new era, the Era of Missions -- three centuries after 1517!

These three centuries would not have been lost if the Stepchildren had had their way. For with them, missions in the New Testament sense were in vogue from the outset. In fact, this lay evangelism, this witness of man to man, not only played a large part in the rapid spread of Anabaptism but appeared to the Reformers to be one of its most objectionable and dangerous features. To obstruct it, they revived the ancient Catholic weapon against the Leufer, insisting again that every man who presumes to handle the Word of God must be "called" by the magistrate and then restricted to a parish. To this the Stepchildren, as early as 1525, said, with Zwingli and Leo *jā*¼d in mind: "If you were as evangelical as you think you are, you would obey the Gospel and go out as emissaries of God, to preach the Word of God and return the erring to the right way."

The Stepchildren had re-discovered that there is such a thing as the "world" and that it lies right at every man's doorstep. It was by this rediscovery that, as a modern student has put it:

"Evangelism, which for the Constantinian reformers was by definition inconceivable, became a real possibility; alone of the churches of the Reformation, the Anabaptists considered evangelism as belonging to the essential being of the church."²⁷

Among the Stepchildren the distinction of pastor and missionary was unknown; every pastor was a missionary, and every missionary was a pastor. For the Stepchildren the world was populated with two kinds of people, those who witness and those who are witnessed to. There was for them no third category.

Nor does the distinction, so proper enough in the framework of "Christian sacralism" of Home Missions and Foreign Missions, make sense in the thought-world of the Stepchildren. It makes sense only to men who operate with the concept of "Christendom." It is an interesting and significant fact, but not a surprising one, that the Reformed Churches in the New World are embarrassed by this ancient terminology.^o It rests upon the mistaken notion that the world is populated with three kinds of people, Christians, christians, and non-Christians; wherever men return to the New Testament teaching that the world is populated with but two kinds of people, believers and not-yet believers, the distinction of Home Missions and Foreign Missions is certain to lose its meaning. Whether a man lives in the jungles of the Amazon or in the jungles of Omaha makes no essential difference; both are objects of the missionary outreach, and in the same way. For, as Lesslie Newbigin has said, so very correctly:

The precise differentiation which entitles an activity to be called "missionary" . . . does not lie in the crossing of a geographical frontier It lies in the crossing of the frontier between faith in Christ . . . and unbelief.

Newbigin spoke from a situation in which there is no Constantinian heritage, and it is this fact that led him to say what we have just quoted. In so speaking, he was but appropriating an idiom of the Stepchildren, who four centuries earlier knew that "Christendom" is and always was a myth, only a myth, and who said so, come what may, and who for saying this were belabored with the spiteful name of Rottengeister.

[^o The Christian Reformed Church, for example, is presently toying with the possibility of bringing its total missionary activity under one head. This Church, which began as a transplant from European soil, had inherited the concept of *inwendige zending* (which it rendered "Home Missions") and *heiden zending* (which it rendered "Foreign Missions"). From the original names of these two it is apparent that the distinction intended was not that of mission-within and mission-without (as men conveniently try to believe). The terms stand for mission to people who are a part of "Christendom" and mission to people who are not. Home Missions hope to make Christians out of christians, whereas Foreign Missions hope to make Christians out of non-Christians. It is significant that this Church, early in its career on this continent, when it discovered that there were Indian tribes in the great Southwest which were in no sense a part of "Christendom," began mission work among them, placing this work under the heading of "Heathen Missions," even though the terrain was within the boundaries of the United States, so setting up a Foreign Mission that was not foreign. Needless to say, now that the Constantinian past is a thing of the past, this terminology is no longer tolerable.]

The Stepchildren of the Reformers were frequently known as "weerloze Christenen," that is, defenseless Christians, people who believed in non-resistance. To this day the typical descendant of these Stepchildren will be classified as a "C.O.," a conscientious objector. The conviction that to bear arms is incongruous for a Christian has perhaps been the greatest single factor contributing to the frequent and distressingly difficult migrations in which the descendants of the Stepchildren have been involved.

Throughout their history, right up to modern times, have they preferred to leave all behind, pull up stakes, and migrate to a far-away place, rather than participate in the business of war. It may be said that this refusal for reasons of conscience to don a soldier's uniform is the one feature of these people with which the man in the street is familiar.

In this feature of the Anabaptists' vision they were not indebted to the Reformers, were not even of a piece with them. They were also in this aspect not "Left-wing." For the Reformers one and all made their peace with the institution of war. (Zwingli himself died on the battlefield.) No, in this matter, as in so many others, the Stepchildren were a resurgence of an ancient insight, heirs to an ancient legacy, the legacy of the "heretic."

In a sacral society, warfare is not only in honor but is blessed. The god of ethnic religion is a god of battle, and the priest gives blessing to the expedition of war. In fact, in a sacral society religion has as much, if not more, to do with war as with any other thing that involves society.

Original Christianity struck a new note in regard to all this. The Christ came "meek and lowly" and the role of the conqueror was utterly foreign to Him. "My kingdom," said He, "is not of this world; if it were then would my servants fight ... , but now is my kingdom not from hence." And when one of His disciples sliced the air with a well-aimed sword, so cutting off the ear of a man in uniform, Jesus said majestically, "Enough of that, put it back; all that take the sword will perish at its edge." And, stooping down, He forthwith repaired the damage -- lest His cause be misconstrued from the beginning.

The early Church remembered. It had an army and an arsenal -- but its weapons, though "mighty . . . to the pulling down of strongholds" were strictly "not carnal," nor, it may be added, carnage-creating.

It is true, the New Testament Church still had the Old Testament; and in it warfare had the status that it regularly has in a sacral society. But so sure was the primitive Church that it was heir to a new and better covenant, so sure was it that the Old had been superseded by the New, that it looked upon the Old Testament's attitude toward war as little more than a curious relic of the past. It would, if there had been no other alternative, have repudiated the Old Testament rather than lose the novelty of Christ's attitude toward war: "Better [as Adolf von Harnack has it] to let go of the Old Testament than to let the image of the Father of Jesus Christ be clouded by a warlike shadow." The rise of Marcionism proves the point we are making. Marcion saw no chance of harmonizing the regime of Jesus Christ with the dispensation of the --Old Testament; and in desperation He abandoned the Old Testament, relegating it to some lesser deity.p

[p. Of Marcion and his followers Harnack has said, "Marcion hat ungezweifelt den christlichen Gottesbegriff wesentlich richtig erfasst Es wird stets ein Ruhm der marcionitische Kirche . . . bleiben, dass sie lieber das Alte Testament verwerfen, als das Bild des Vaters Jesu Christi durch Einmischung von Ziigen eines kriegesischen Gottes truben wollte" (Militia Christi, p. 25). The adherents of "Christian sacralism," who had no trouble in the matter, poured out vials of vitriol on the Marcionists, more than they deserved.]

The Constantinian change put an end to all of this. When it had come full circle "the meek and peaceful Jesus had become the God of battle, and the cross, the holy sign of Christian redemption, a banner of bloody strife."28 "The God of the Christians had changed into a God of war and of conquest." And "the sign of the cross, to which Jesus had been led by his refusal to sanction or to lead a patriotic war and on which he had died for the salvation of men, was now an imperial military emblem, one bringing good fortune and victory." Be it remembered that Constantine introduced the monogram in which the first two

letters of the name of Christ are combined, on the shields of his soldiers! And bits of iron, which the emperor's mother persuaded herself were relics of the nails of the Cross of Christ and which she had sent to her son, were by him made into parts of a bridlebit of his champion war steed, and a helmet, which he used in his military expedition." Pagan that he was at heart, and remained, he thought that he had found a new God of battle, one mightier than the Mars of old had ever been!q

[q. In our own times, during the second World War, the world witnessed a very similar role assigned to religion. What Shintoism was to the Japanese war-lords, that the religion of the Christians was to Constantines, a thing with which to bind together a total people in a concerted war effort. With Constantine begins a martialization of the Christian religion that changed its nature very radically, so radically that it became quite unrecognizable. Is this to say too much? Who can recognize anything of the Man of Galilee in the brutal boasting of pope Innocent III, who after the fearful carnage wreaked upon the Albigensians, gloated: "God has mercifully purged His people's lands; and the pest of heretical wickedness which had grown like a cancer and had infected the whole of Provence is being deadened and driven away. His mighty hand has taken many towns and cities wherein the devil dwelt in the persons of those whom he possessed; and a holy habitation is being prepared for the Holy Ghost in the persons of those whom He hath filled, to take the place of the expelled heretics. Wherefore we give praise to Almighty God because in one and the same cause of His mercy He has deigned to work two works of justice, by bringing these faithless folk their merited destruction, in such fashion that as many as possible of the faithful should gain their well-earned reward by the extermination of these folk He hath deigned by their destruction to grant a means of wealth, nay more, of salvation, by the armies ... that have lately triumphed over them]

And ever since Constantine, when the Church at last got to the place where it could win wars and gain political advantages from them, it has supported war in the name of the Prince of Peace. War became a Christian enterprise, perhaps the noblest of them all. By the year 416 the tables had been so completely turned that non-Christians were no longer wanted in the army.³⁰

Small wonder that there was rebellion against this deformation. There were those who kept in contact with the New Testament and who were therefore in position to know from what heights the Church had fallen. It became a feature of medieval dissent to frown on war and the tumult thereof.

At times this dissent took the form of rejecting not only warfare but also capital punishment. It was a feature of Waldensianism to acknowledge that the sword of the magistrate is "of God," to obviate social chaos, but must not go the full length, must stop short of taking human life.³¹

Although it can be argued that the Reformers, notably Zwingli, at the first held a position approaching that of pacifism,³² it is beyond cavil that in their final edition they were ready to give their blessing to warfare -- even to warfare waged for the faith. Their espousal of neo-Constantinianism left them no choice but to return to the medieval theology, in which "the Son of God goes forth to war, a kingdom to subdue." The many and frightful "religious wars" were the direct outcome of the Reformers' return to that mongrel version of the Christian faith that began in the days of Constantine. If kings must support the "true religion" with the weapons of war, then there will be no end of bloodshed and carnage, seeing that men, and nations, will not agree as to what the "true religion" is.^r

[r. It was one of the bitter ironies of history that Huldreich Zwingli, the man who had served as midwife at the birth of Protestantism, had had a hand in welding the sword once more to the Cross of Christ, himself

died on the battlefield, caught in the traffic between two "Christian magistrates," each doing his duty in regard to religion.]

Upon the heels of the Reformers' re-espousal of war as a Christian undertaking, especially upon the heels of their drift toward war as a proper instrument for the propagation and preservation of the faith, came the Stepchildren's assault upon war, as a device for the promotion of the cause of Christ at the outset; but soon against war as such. With them "Christian warfare" was a warfare waged not with clanging engines of destruction but with weapons "mighty to the pulling down of the strongholds of sin." "True Christians," said one of them, "are sheep in the midst of wolves, sheep for the slaughter, to be baptized in anguish and distress, trouble and persecution, suffering and death, tried in the fire; they attain to the fatherland of everlasting peace not by killing foes of flesh, but foes of spirit."³³

In their haste to come clear of the Constantinian distortion, a distortion whereby the very Christ took on the features of the Mars of ancient ethnicism, they presently found themselves in a quandary as to whether a man can be both a Christian and a magistrate, seeing that a magistrate must be prepared to pick up the sword, and, if need be slay men with it. This was the same hard question over which Tertullian had mulled long ago, "aut si Christiani potuissent esse Caesares," whether Christians can also be emperors. They came to no unanimity touching this question. The prevailing opinion was that it is better for the Christian to stay away from an assignment that may take him to the place of bloodshed. Better to leave that assignment to once-born men, with whom "an eye for an eye" is the standard of dealing with infractions. They would then themselves be free to practice the stipulations laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. Since no policeman can live by the command to "turn the other cheek," the job of the policeman was not for them. We may smile at the naivete of this philosophy; we may frown at this solution; but he who has been with the New Testament will have even greater trouble with the person who has no problem here, no problem because he has allowed the unique message of Jesus Christ to be cast into the mold of pre-Christian systems. Only that man is "fit for the kingdom" who encounters a real problem here. And that man will find himself drawn to the sensitivity, if not to the practical solutions, that marked the vision of the Rottengeister.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/leonard-verduin/reformers-and-their-stepchildren-rottegeister-part-2/>

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