

The Dissent and Nonconformity Series

Number 14



The Reformers and Their Stepchildren

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The Reformers
and Their Stepchildren
(A Summary)

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©April 2014 Edition

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Introduction

Luther and all the Reformers were faced with a dilemma between a confessional church of personal faith and a regional church of all in a given area. The two are mutually exclusive. They wavered between them and kept trying to meld them together and compromise, causing the Stepchildren to withdraw. But the Reformers became increasingly hostile to them; Luther described the Stepchildren in derogatory terms, and wrongly applied 1 John 2:19 to them because they once were part of his movement.

This still goes on today. Regardless of the particulars, the powers and rulers in the “regional church” have no tolerance for those who leave it, thinking nothing of ruining the reputations of victims while protecting the reputations of perpetrators. The powers may squabble amongst themselves for preeminence, but they are united in their quest to control and subjugate the masses, not at all unlike the political forces that would fight amongst themselves to see who will dominate the world. Domination is never in doubt; the argument is over the name and creed of the overlords. Individuals and people of conscience and principle are not endured lightly, and if the overlords had all the state power they crave, such individuals would be jailed or executed and Bibles would be burned. Persecution is never worse than when religion has the power of the state.

The book is arranged according to the various derogatory names used against these “stepchildren”. The material here is my own (Paula Fether) assessment and summary. Please visit BooksChristian.com or Amazon.com to purchase the book. Very highly recommended.

1. Donatisten

(the neo-Donatists, or “new followers of Donatus”)

This derogatory term has its roots in the fourth century. In all of history, both before and after the advent of Christianity, the “regional church” has been the overwhelming norm; one’s nationality and religion were not to be separated. We see this today in the difficulty Muslims have of separating America from Christianity. So the New Testament concept of a faith held without regard for one’s society was, and still is, a radical idea and a difficult concept to grasp.

But its success depends upon the two entities keeping out of each other’s spheres, and it is this separation which Paul exhorted believers to help ensure by praying for secular leaders, that they would stay in their own bounds so Christians could practice their faith unhindered. While the society and faith of the Israelites were designed by God to be one, this does not carry over to the Body of Christ, as Jesus Himself explained with the illustration of the wineskins. Failure to recognize this sharp division was what would eventually lead to the exodus of the Stepchildren from the Reformation.

Just as salt is not a food in itself but something that enhances the food it is mixed with, so also the Christian faith is not a society of its own but an influence, such that the resulting “flavor” may differ depending on the society. We were never meant to withdraw from society, as for example various monasteries or groups such as the Amish have done, but to infiltrate it and change its character from within. And the resulting “flavor” is personal choice or individual freedom of conscience. It has been demonstrated in America that this influence can work; widely divergent groups have worked together toward common goals for generations. This is the evidence for Christian influence in our government and society, and as this influence is removed, we are seeing increasing micromanagement and homogenization of society as well as in “Christendom”. That the “regional church” is now flexing its muscles bodes ill for authentic Christianity.

In contrast to modern trends, we read this account of the Christian faith in practice from The Epistle to Diognetus near the end of the second century:

“Christians are not distinct from the rest of men in country or language or customs. For neither do they dwell anywhere in special cities of their own nor do they use a different language, nor practice a conspicuous manner of life. . . . But dwelling as they do in Hellenic and in barbaric cities, as each man’s lot is, and following the customs of the country in dress and food and the rest of life, the manner of conduct which they display is wonderful and confessedly beyond belief. They inhabit their own fatherland, but as sojourners; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is to them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign country. . . . They live on the earth but their citizenship is in heaven.”

Christianity is truly a paradox between peace (togetherness) and holiness (separateness), and all its excesses and downfalls through history can be explained by the failure of scholars and leaders to grasp this fact, even as common believers recognized it and lived it. This principle holds as well in the larger sphere of the work of Jesus on the cross: he is the savior of all, but in a unique way of those who believe.¹ This verse could very well refer to the way our “salt” lifts up whatever society in which we find ourselves. Yet at the same time, it holds in the smaller sphere of the family, dividing even between parents and children,² the “double-edged sword”.³

So ironically, and quite the opposite of what has been taught, the mark of the “salty” Christian is not to try and impose a “Christian culture” from the top down, or to make Christianity any kind of official or all-encompassing law, but just the opposite; the mark of the Christian is this paradox of peace through holiness, togetherness through separation. This is why movements such as Dominionism are doomed to failure as far as the gospel is concerned, because they can only achieve unity through homogenization by means of the abandonment of doctrinal essentials; they want peace without holiness. Conversely, groups such as the Amish fail to “salt” the earth because they want holiness without peace.

Donatism, then, appeared when Constantine made Christianity the

¹1 Tim. 4:10

²Mt. 10:35–37, Luke 12:53

³Heb. 4:12

“regional church”, rendering all who rejected it not merely unbelievers but criminals. The Donatists rebelled against this unnatural and fatal homogenization, recognizing it as far more dangerous than any other state religion, since it would eat away at the faith from the inside.⁴ That the Reformers would later use this term as an epithet against any who opposed them is a testament to their wholesale ignorance (which is very hard to accept) or denial of the very substance of the faith. They were, after all, only “reforming” the state/church, not rejecting it, and only had the support of the neo-Donatists by virtue of the terminology they used at first. But this is not to say that the Reformers undoubtedly intended such homogenization at the outset; rather, they renounced their original convictions as an over-reaction to dissent, in an ironic repeat of Augustine’s own Retractions.

In the accounts of the Roman Catholic church, their rationale for using the arm of the state to execute heretics was that they were innocent of bloodshed since they themselves did not wield the sword, even though that sword was only used at their “request”. But this same “doublethink” is also at the heart of what is called “reformed theology”, which maintains that God is innocent of sin even though he makes people sinners or reprobates “for his good pleasure”. This is “separation” gone rancid, a madness of convenience.

But the primary point of the chapter is that the Reformers literally could not imagine any separation between church and state; to them these were two sides of the same coin. So anyone who advocated separation was presumed to really be advocating social chaos, the absence of civil government. Then can we absolve the Reformers of culpability under the “product of their time” defense? Hardly, since the very existence of the neo-Donatists proved that others of “their time” were not under this delusion. These people without influence or prestige had no trouble seeing what scripture so clearly taught, while the learned and influential were blinded by political ambition, having no excuse since they had better access to historical record and education. The chapter goes on to cite Luther with making an elementary logical blunder in this matter, a shortcoming that does not fill one with confidence regarding his status as a theologian.

The next Reformer to be examined is of course John Calvin, and

⁴Reminiscent of Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares in Mt. 13:24—30

though the Foundation bearing his name funded the research for this book, he is nonetheless shown to be even more in the state/church camp as Luther had been. In spite of his admirers' attempts to whitewash his motives, the author notes that Calvin clearly orchestrated the execution of his detractor Servetus, then whined about being mistreated when the inevitable backlash for his deed arrived. One such letter, though somewhat restrained out of the weakness of the position, typified the reliance on the Old Testament for justification. But as with Luther's poor logic, Calvin's supporters used even poorer hermeneutics to try and extract some kind of New Testament proof-text.⁵ Again, such things do not fill the Christian with confidence in these theologians, whether logically, scripturally, or spiritually.

Others following in the footsteps of the Reformers have not renounced this view of the "regional church", and in fact have continued to uphold it, even praising Constantine for ushering in a golden age. One might give some sympathy to the idea as a misguided zeal for the promised time when Jesus will rule the world "with a rod of iron"⁶ and there will no longer be a need for separation. But this is not that time, and we are to be separate from the state.⁷

⁵p. 54

⁶Ps. 2:9, Rev. 2:27, 12:5, 19:15

⁷1 Cor. 5:9–13

2. Stabler

(staff-carriers (as opposed to sword-carriers))

Every false interpretation of scripture needs a few good proof-texts, and these were supplied early on by Augustine; e.g. Luke 14:23 was turned from compelling or urging to forcing people to convert. He anticipated the rebuttal and tried to deflate it, but only by arguing that Jesus only allowed people to turn away from him because the “church” had not yet come into full existence. This effectively nullified the example of Jesus for his own followers, such that the marriage between the church and the state was a “fall upward”. Augustine then issued a thinly-veiled threat against the Donatists, since he held that the state/church had both the right and the power to hunt them down as those who cause division. Here again we see in the word “division” the misuse of scripture and ignorance of the scope and intent of “separateness”. Those who came after Augustine became zealous “missionaries” of coercion, not far from the tendency of missionaries in recent times to try and turn every culture into a western “Christian” one, or to expand the membership of their own particular denomination.

But it should be noted that when anyone is quoted in defense of a given charge, the timing of the quote must be considered. Luther, for example, spoke against coercion at the beginning, but when the pressures of Rome were brought upon him, he chose to abandon that earlier view in favor of a weapon to match Rome: conversion by force. He wanted to save the Reformation more than anything, and if that meant becoming the very thing he originally rebelled against, so be it. We should all take warning from his example, for we are no less prone to take the way that seems right to us, and to rationalize what had once been unthinkable. Yet at the same time, the responses of the “heretics” at every turn are ample proof that the concept of separation was not unknown or unrevealed.

Today’s “regional church” is doing exactly the same thing as the Reformers: make “churches” places where the majority are unsaved; the only difference is that they have learned to use a lure instead of the sword. People are enticed with “communitarianism”, involvement, social justice, great entertainment, no need to be holy, and activities to keep the kids off the streets. They are encouraged to “plug in”, which is essentially the

same as calling them cogs that need to find a wheel. It is a giant “bait and switch” where the true unity and family life of the Body of Christ is replaced with the “unity” of homogenization and loss of individuality, where instead of being the “eye or the hand or the foot”, each person is an appliance that needs to be hooked up.

We also see in the writings of some of the reformers a very familiar appeal to culture and history: that because the norm was for a nation to adopt a religion, it must be God’s will. This is the same argument used to uphold patriarchy, which like the state/church is drawn from the Old Testament and not the New. But as historical record shows, it would be the secular authorities in areas where Protestantism had been established that came to allow freedom, not the Reformed ones, refuting the appeal to what governments always do as being God’s will. The “heretics” had truly been “salt” that changed the “flavor” of secular government, without spilling a drop of anyone’s blood but their own. But in the Reformed approach we see that the flesh is impatient and tries to fulfill God’s promises its own way, as did Sarah in getting Abraham to have children by her handmaid.

It is, then, a great tragedy that the Reformers have been credited with the freedom of conscience characterizing the western world, for they were its bitterest enemies. The “heretics” were the true “reformers” of government and society, a fact also seen in the abolishing of slavery in the United States. But as the saying goes, “History is written by the victors”, and the Reformers, having the means to propagate their views, were in a position to rewrite church history to cover over their error. They have achieved great success in painting themselves the champions of freedom and taking credit for the work done by their enemies, in spite of the fact that this indicts them for their opposition to such freedom. Like the Pharisees they say, “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets”,⁸ but as Jesus retorted, “So you testify against yourselves that you are [their] descendants”.

⁸Mt. 23:30

3. Catharer

(“the cleansed”)

Since the proponents of the state/church needed the Old Testament to justify their view, it should come as no surprise that the Reformers would develop Covenant Theology, which sees no “old” and “new” Testament division as such. This allows the interpreter to choose any part of the laws of Israel for the church, since they are held to be one and the same.⁹ Thus the “type and shadow” was made equal to “the reality”.¹⁰

But in spite of the outward piety of the laws of Israel, the “regional church” paradigm resulted in an averaging of morality to the lowest common denominator, which again is being seen today in the “seeker-sensitive” movement that invites the unsaved and unchanged to fill the churches. And in both scenarios, those who left/leave on grounds of either teaching or behavior were/are accused of seeking (or claiming for themselves) perfection, as in the popular clich’e, “If you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it, or it won’t be perfect anymore”. The Christian who stands on the principle of holiness is thereby painted as elitist and conceited.

This leads to the vital distinction between the believer who occasionally falls into sin, and the one who wallows in sin. If no such distinction is recognized, then no believer is able to “bring an accusation” against another, especially a leader.¹¹ This is exactly what the “regional church” view needs to keep its leaders from scrutiny, especially by the “laity”, and it renders holiness impossible to define. But salvation by faith alone is not mutually exclusive with a life of holiness; in fact, both are needed together. Yet the purpose of holiness is not to acquire salvation (as if a gift can be earned) but is simply the natural result of it, such that any who claim salvation yet live in sin bring such a claim into serious doubt.

It is most ironic that the way to tell a reformer from a “heretic” was by conduct; practically all it took to be convicted of “heresy” was to live a clean life. The Reformers could not deny the holiness and piety of the “heretics”, so they began to accuse them of merely putting on a show

⁹What is Covenant Theology?, second to last paragraph

¹⁰Col. 2:17

¹¹1 Tim. 5:17–21

in order to lure people into evil. Further, they smeared the “heretics” as guilty of more vile behavior than themselves, so as to appear holy in comparison. Truly, the reformers exemplified the incredulous question of Paul in Rom. 6:1, “What shall we say then, that we should go on sinning so that grace may increase?”, and the warning of Isaiah 5:20, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

It is against this backdrop that the Reformed teaching, that God does tell us to do that which is impossible for us to do,¹² takes on a much different light. The Reformers rightly noted that God demands holiness and clean behavior, but asserted that we are incapable of performing it. Yet, incredibly, they take this as God approving of such failure, since it shows how powerless we are! (Had they not read Rom. 6:1?) If everything happens only because God acts, then whatever happens must be what God wants, including the vile behavior of the Reformers. Yet it seemed to escape them that this means the “heretics” were also doing the will of God.

On the other extreme, the Reformers took the holiness of the “heretics” as proof that they were one and the same with the Manicheans who practiced extreme deprivation and harsh treatment of the body,¹³ yet Paul’s point in that reference hardly argues for indulgence, as if any attempt to restrain oneself amounted to “an appearance of wisdom”. These are the absurd lengths to which the Reformers were willing to go in order to both preserve coercion and excuse sin.

The congregation of the “heretics” was completely different. In it, any unfruitful branch was to be reluctantly cut off and thrown outside, since fallible humans cannot see into the heart as God does. We are not talking about judging anyone’s eternal destination but only their right to fellowship in this life. The example of Paul with the Corinthians regarding the man living in sin¹⁴ should put to rest any excuse against performing this pruning, seeing that the people were having plenty of sin and maturity issues of their own yet were charged to carry it out. The fact that such actions were rare in the early church should be proof enough that not everyone in a given area was to be coerced into the

¹²See this article on Luther’s [Bondage of the Will](#) which, though intending to praise Luther, has quotes that show his logic to be ridiculous

¹³Col. 2:23

¹⁴1 Cor. 5

Body of Christ.

But the “regional church” has no place to expel anyone in this life, hence the need to put people to death should the “church” decide to be rid of them. This renders Paul’s instruction impossible to practice, as the dead person could never be taught a lesson or given the chance to repent. This explains, at least in part, the absence of church discipline in all of its history, thus also explaining its rampant apostasy, especially in modern times. In addition, it explains the penchant of church leadership to never concern itself with sin except that of questioning its authority or methods; this is abundantly true today. Most believers wish to excuse even the most vile behavior while viciously condemning the whistleblower. Sadly, even those who call out leaders for abuse will excuse “believers” for perversion as long as it “doesn’t hurt anyone”, in apparent disregard for the fact that it grieves the Holy Spirit. Regardless of the “standard”, it is division or disagreement which cannot be tolerated.

4. Sacramentschwärmer

(“Sacramentarians”)

Another necessary outworking of the state/church is that outward action must trump the teaching of scripture; ritual and performance must be equated with the religion itself, and individual familiarity with the scriptures must be minimized. The Roman church had used direct assault since Constantine, but substitution is always more effective in the long run since it is less liable to elicit radical opposition. Thus the Reformers decided to tell people that God only accepted their worship in approved buildings, led by approved clerics. Of course this is exactly what Rome had been doing for centuries, but the Reformers had no problem with the nature of its institution. Control was the primary objective, and it left no room for individualism.

There are two activities associated with Christian life in the New Testament: the “love feast” or meal of remembrance, and baptism. To subvert the former required only a few subtle twists: from meal to sacrifice, from table to altar, and a change of emphasis from the partaker to the dispenser. Thus the one handing out the bread and cup became the “priest” who alone could offer the “sacrifice”. Those things whose purpose had been to unite people in a common faith were now pressed into the service of religious activity, which was the needed control mechanism. The pagans of Constantine’s time would have no qualms about such things, since they were familiar elements of their former religions. Yet these seemingly small adjustments had terrible ramifications for the Body of Christ. And one must wonder why any Protestant church has an altar.

It should be noted that not many— in fact almost none— of the Reformers were trained in the handling of scripture, but only in the handling of sacraments and activities. Neither the priest nor the supplicant mattered, but only the activity, which in the Reformed mind disarmed the “heretical” objection that a priest of unsavory character was unqualified to serve as such. It also ensured that only those loyal to the system would ever be given the position of a priest, and it erected a barrier between the laity and the clergy— which, ironically, became the “real” Church as a separate class from the larger community. So much for the objection

to separation.

Another ingredient in this replacement religion was the “mystery” of transubstantiation, whereby the priest would magically transform ordinary bread and wine into an actual sacrifice by saying Latin words which the people did not understand, giving rise to the phrase “hocus-pocus” (the people’s phonetic version of the priest’s words) for any act of magic. With this it was clear that Christianity could not be practiced without priests, due to their having received this mysterious power which, they were told, had been passed down from the original apostles. And naturally, the Bible was not to be distributed in the common tongue, so anyone who supplied or received one drew the ire of the state/church.

Along with the earlier question as to why any Protestant church would have an altar, we should also ask why only “pastors” are permitted to “serve communion” or perform baptisms. Is this not a capitulation to the priestly class of the state/church, especially since such “offices” are recognized by the secular government and approved to perform weddings and funerals? And does something mystical happen to offerings of money placed upon an altar, both of which use the terminology of pagan sacrifice? Why are Protestants who have not been baptized frowned upon as “rebellious” and their salvation questioned regardless of evidence of a changed heart, and why are such people forbidden to participate in “communion”? Are they not members of the Body of Christ unless they perform a ritual? How is this not exactly the same as the sacramental system?

5. Winckler

(“those who meet in the corners”)

This chapter focuses on the need of the “regional church” for sacred buildings. It was not enough to have taken away the right of every believer to read the Bible or to eat the Lord’s Supper without official sanction or oversight; a building that towered above all others in the city was required. Naturally, the “heretics” wanted no part of these “temples” and continued to meet in homes. But because they were outlaws they met in secret— which in turn got them labeled as having something to hide, and it must be evil! And this evil thing of course was the preaching of the Word without the sanction of the state/church, by people who were not endowed with the mystical ability to understand scripture. Yet the allegedly-enlightened clergy feared any debate of scripture with such ignorant “heretics”. Again, the great crime of the “heretics” was not false doctrine but separation.

The Protestant tradition has held on to the concept of approved clergy with its term “calling”. We hear this word today and presume it has to do with the calling of God, but in practice it means exactly what the Romans and the Reformers meant: properly and officially “ordained” or trained by approved institutions or seminaries. Though, as the book observes, the “heretical” model has proved by its success here in America that it is the right one, it still suffers from an inability to completely renounce the regional church model. As already mentioned, this includes sacred buildings, a clergy class of the “called”, altars, offerings, and seminaries. But brazen efforts are mounting to return to the “golden age” of Constantine by means of the blending of church, state, and industry, known as “the three-legged stool”. The mechanism of this transformation as they call it is Hegel’s *dialectic*, in which two opposing ideas are made to give up essential elements of their doctrines in order to arrive at a third, blended belief. Compromise is the order of the day, and— surprise surprise— the greatest sin is separation.

6. Wiedertaufer

(“Anabaptists”)

While much was made of the matter of the Lord’s Supper in the previous chapter, this one turns to the other practice that could be made to serve the state/church: baptism. By forcing infants to be baptized they could be claimed by the institutional church as its property, making any future baptism of conscience a crime against the state. It also gave them the legal right to call everyone a “Christian” by virtue of this infant baptism. As the reader will have already figured out, the crime once again is not theological but separatist; the order of society and the state must be preserved.

The issue at first was not any theological objection to baptizing infants, but only to calling it *christening* or “Christianizing”. Before this point neither side was terribly concerned with the practice either way, but afterwards both sides saw the need to make a clean break from the other, the Reformers insisting upon it and the “heretics” stopping it completely. Zwingli, firmly in the Reformed camp but clearly expressing his belief that infant baptism should not be done, nonetheless practiced it because he did not want to lose his financial support. This may seem crass in hindsight, but it goes on today, from pastors who will not offend certain members in their sermons, to missionaries who will sign documents of loyalty to a creed to keep their funding. This is but one exhibit in the case against providing salaries to “clergy”. Zwingli’s other rationalization was all too familiar in the churches today: he did not wish to offend; “the world was not ready” to take it.

But while Zwingli tried to claim his earlier rejection of infant baptism was simply a mistaken belief, Luther loudly proclaimed that the very idea of believer’s baptism was a grievous falsehood, a teaching of the devil. He divorced baptism from faith, defending the absurdity that the two were unrelated; that is, he taught *unbeliever’s* baptism! Not only this, but in order to justify it he had to abandon his own catch-phrase, *sola scriptura*, in favor of the weight of tradition.¹⁵ And he is still hailed today as a great theologian.

¹⁵p. 204

Another reformer cited on that same page used a defense we hear often in the war against the sufficiency of scripture: that “the anointing” would be unnecessary if just anyone could understand it, and if all that God decreed had been written down. This is indistinguishable from the Roman creed, “scripture plus tradition”, along with the need for “clergy” to properly define God’s unwritten commands, as well as the wish to include extra-Biblical writings as authoritative. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants today turn against any who claim that every believer can read the scriptures without “oversight” and be led directly by the Holy Spirit, citing the many different interpretations. But this hardly helps their case, since even they cannot agree! Then the question is only concerned with choosing the right infallible interpreter (or to use a modern term, “covering”). And once again, the all-important principle is that the people are ruled and controlled by their betters.

Clearly, if there is no other reason to break with this sacramental mindset, it is the iron grip it keeps on its victims. It caused many to become cowards and traitors to the true church, inventing more and more twisted theological systems to keep it running at all costs. It so blinds the eyes of those who accept it that they will resort to teachings so patently false that they have nothing to say to the heathen on any point. It was true throughout church history, and it is gaining ground today. It explains how the modern effort to “relate” to society is driven not by care for the lost but the need to control everyone and call them all “Christians”. When faced with the awful choice between faithfulness to scripture and unity, they choose unity every time, no matter what. If perversion would cause some to be excluded from the church, then we must accept it; if preaching the bold truths of scripture keeps some away, then we must stop such preaching; but if women preaching would upset the established order, we must forbid it. As Jesus said, “wisdom is proved right by her children”.¹⁶

Another facet of the issue of baptism is that the Anabaptists did not consider it the New Testament equivalent of circumcision. To do so would be to put the Old Testament on an equal plane in the church, which in turn would legitimize the forcing of all in a society to one religious authority and practice. We see this continued in the the penchant for preachers to liken the church building and its altar as the “Christian

¹⁶Luke 7:31–35

temple", to which offerings and sacrifices (conveniently in the form of cash) must be brought, at least partly to support the "priesthood". No modern Protestant preacher can justify a blistering diatribe on people's lack of "tithing" without appeal to Malachi's impassioned indictment of the lack of tithing in his day. Yet again we see the sacramentalist grip on those who think themselves against it, so strong is the delusion.

In the face of this distinction on the part of the Anabaptists, the Reformers charged them with dividing Father from Son! Today, ridicule is heaped upon those who put the New over the Old, as if they throw out half the Bible. But this issue, like infant baptism, was polarized as a result and led the Reformers to elevate the Old even more. One can easily deduce that from here arises the continued insistence by many that all believers obey the old law; it *must* be so because the alternative is to remove the basis for the sacramental church. On the other extreme, some decide to "cut the whole thing off" and dispense with any and every rule of conduct, making it impossible to call anything sin, and leading us right back to the Reformer's disregard of a changed life. In fact, both the legalist and the libertine drink from the same ecumenical cup, the difference only being which set of behaviors is labeled sin.

7. Kommunisten

(“the community of goods”)

As noted previously, one side’s error led to the other side’s extreme, and this is also true in the matter of materialism. Since the popes and Reformers alike lived high above ordinary people, the “heretics” took to more obvious and extreme poverty. This of course would lead to the idea among subsequent generations of “heretics” that poverty is “Christian”, yet the original motivation was not that this is what scripture taught, but to contrast more strongly with the greed and callousness of the Reformers. It should be noted that the first believers “had all things in common”, but this was hardly “communism” since the sharing was completely and individually voluntary. Evidence for this is in the tragic case of Ananias and Saphira, who were free, as Peter stated, to give or not give as they chose. The whole point is lack of hoarding or indifference to the poor. As Paul said, the goal is that all in the community of believers would have equality through voluntary giving.¹⁷

Regarding the concept of “usury”, in scripture it did not mean simply to charge interest on a loan, but to capitalize on someone’s misery. That is, it was wrong to profit from someone who only borrowed due to an emergency.¹⁸ So the person who borrows to purchase something that is not absolutely necessary to keep them alive is not the victim of “usury” if they are charged interest. This is why scripture tells us to give without thought of repayment; the giving is to the very needy, the suffering. To withhold help since the victim could not repay was clearly a callous and unloving act.¹⁹ But of course this means that the borrower who is not suffering or who intends to either make a profit or buy “toys” should be expected to repay, even with interest. In fact, one could surmise that such interest might discourage borrowing for any other reason than necessity. In time the institutional church would counter the charge of greed by setting up orders of clerics who took vows of poverty. Curiously enough, the popes were never of such orders. Begging was hailed as goodly, so some reasoned that the poor should not be helped!

¹⁷2 Cor. 8:12–13

¹⁸p. 226

¹⁹Luke 6:34

As the “heretics” were forced in most cases to meet in the dark, another charge leveled against them (from Constantinian times) was that money and goods weren’t all they shared. They were thus accused of sharing spouses as well, since “everything” was to be held in common. And this was exacerbated by the fact that they did not see the need for “clergy” to perform weddings, which at the very least labeled them as advocating cohabitation. Calvin also perpetuated this lie, though he and his followers were at one time accused of the same thing. That the Reformers could thus accuse the “heretics” of vile practices while admitting they lived exemplary lives is an obvious self-contradiction. But they turned this into support for their claim that the “heretics” only lived such exemplary lives as a hook and lure to a life of concealed evil. This habit of burning straw men was employed with regularity. But this charge more than any other was what began to turn the tide of popular opinion away from the “heretics” and into the arms of the sacramentalist church. It does not take much imagination, then, to see where the custom of a marriage license began.

Another belief of the “heretics” was that this stewardship extended to the earth itself, such that the real Christian was one who made efficient use of its resources and did not pollute or ruin it, as the earth was the rightful inheritance of future generations. So rather than being the villain of the modern world, whether economically or ecologically, true Christianity is its benefactor, while the sacramentalist mindset of both the Roman Catholics and the Reformers turned it into unbridled disregard for both the poor and the earth. We must know this distinction when discussing such issues in our modern world, where the charges that Christianity ruins the earth and foments materialism are frequently made.

To be fair, some pockets of “heretics” were driven to extremes, such as one might expect from battle fatigue. Relentless imprisonment, torture, and execution takes its toll, especially in a confined area. But in its typical fashion, the Reformers took such eccentricities as the norm and used them to blight the whole movement. It was used to prove their earlier allegations of evil intent. This was the side of the story they told, leading the careless follower to accept every word as the whole truth, and it is perpetuated to this day among the Reformed.

The chapter concludes by noting that had the “heretics” not been so treated and maligned, their economic views would have left little or no soil for the economic theories of Karl Marx to grow in. That is,

the consequences of the victory of the Reformers were far-reaching and disastrous, shaping the western world for generations to come.

8. Rottengeister

(“people who agitate within a society to form a party”)

As with the issue raised in the previous chapter concerning a marriage certificate, another related issue was with oath-taking, the very definition of the “proper” state/church marriage. To the “heretics”, the oath was the swearing of allegiance to the state, and thus to whatever god or creed it sanctioned. It was instituted, at least in part, to force the early Christians to identify themselves. And as with the other points of contention, the “heretics” refused to have anything to do with such oaths, more so than if the sacralist church had not made an issue of it. And of course the Reformers were all the more insistent on it, since it represented order and was the most obvious means of preserving it. Any who would not swear allegiance to the church were also not swearing it to the state, so such people were looked upon as traitors or unpatriotic, in more modern terminology. But to add insult to injury, anyone who relented under torture was then labeled as someone who didn’t follow their own ordinances!

History has shown that the greatest fear of the sacramentalists—a society in chaos— was unfounded. In fact, it is when the state and church lock arms that the people revolt and there is upheaval. But even in today’s churches it is feared that without the “oversight” of ordained men, there will be spiritual chaos; without the central planning of synods and committees and boards of directors, the church will not accomplish its mission; without the mystical line to God of the elite, the people are defenseless against the wiles of the devil. This is all sacramentalist thinking and fear-mongering.

Yet another anomaly among the “heretics” was docetism, or the belief that Jesus’ incarnation was only apparent and not real. One might wonder how such an idea came to be accepted at all, until it is known that others were teaching, as was the case in the first century, that Jesus was not only human but also sinful; that is, to be in human flesh was to be a sinner. And as always, such aberrant teachings pushed some to the other extreme. One might then ask how any who taught that all human flesh is sinful would explain the incarnation of Jesus as sinless, and the response is to make more than is warranted of Jesus’ lack of a human

father. This gave birth (pun intended) to the idea that sin is a genetic quality passed by and through males, such that either Mary or her “seed” would have to be mystically cleansed by God prior to Jesus’ incarnation. Yet far from solving the problem, this only moved the line in the sand and raised the question of how Mary or her “seed” came to be sinless. Further, if this was an act of God, then of what purpose was the virgin birth in the first place?

Such squabbles over that which scripture does not give the demanded details led one “heretic” to liken them to the contest at the foot of the Cross to see which soldier would get Jesus’ clothes. Or as I like to put it, many of the arguments of the ensuing centuries have amounted to deciding how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It is an ironic display of deliberate division from those who claim to hate such a thing. But the larger point is that if excuses are to be made for the Reformers as “products of their time” who were driven by external forces to their error, then the same must be granted to the “heretics”. In other words, if Calvin is to be absolved of evil for executing Servetus (for the crime of returning after banishment, a common principle of the time), then Servetus is to be absolved of evil for holding to views Calvin deemed heretical.

The defining mark of the “heretic” was, above all, a willingness—even to the point of eagerness—to suffer and die for the true gospel, which they understood to be the real meaning of carrying one’s cross. But rather than spark regret or shame in the hearts of the Reformers, such a mark only drew their derision; even Luther mocked them.²⁰ They had convinced themselves that the “heretics” were dying for the wrong cause, and thus not Christian martyrs at all. The very eagerness of the “heretics” to plunge willingly into the flames was spun to be proof that they were of the devil, whose abode was the flames of hell. So they were painted not as martyrs but suicidal and possessed maniacs the world would do better without. At the end of it all, one must ask: exactly how, then, should the Christian be identified?

Another casualty of the state/church is missionary zeal. It is literally impossible to evangelize if everyone is already “christened”. And if everyone is part of the church, then all the prophecies must therefore be fulfilled. And if all the prophecies are fulfilled, then there is no hope of a

²⁰p. 262

future wherein Jesus will literally come to earth and set up the Kingdom, for that Kingdom is already here. And this, in our time, is leading to the belief that only those who still hold out for that literal fulfillment are insidious obstacles to that Kingdom, and will be treated as viciously as the “heretics” of old— all while “thinking they do God a service”.²¹ At present, though, they are content to merely accuse such people of ignorance or of inventing an escapist myth. But in keeping with the trend we’ve already noted, the state/church decided to create an order of missionaries too (the Dominicans), to combat the teachings of the “heretics”. They were to copy them in all respects but the teachings: travel two by two, dress modestly, etc.

The last question faced in this long struggle was that which still rages: whether the Christian should have any involvement in the state, especially since this of necessity involves law enforcement, possible capital punishment, and even war. But the point is not whether we choose yes or no, but whether we struggle at all. That is, the true Christian will agonize over this issue, while the statist will have no qualms at all, as the state is the rightful arm of the church.

²¹John 16:2

Postscript

This book studied little-known church history to come to a very basic question: how to keep the church “in the world but not of the world” without going to extremes. On one hand Christianity becomes so “involved” that it loses its identity, and on the other hand it becomes so separate that it loses its relevance. The state/church is on one end and the Amish, for example, are on the other. But by studying the sequence of events we can understand why various views developed and how we have misunderstood both the views and their proponents. And then we are better equipped to see more such extremes to come. The state/church has never really gone away but has been largely dormant in the west, and it is no coincidence that it is the west where prosperity has been enjoyed by the most people for the longest time.

But now it is beginning to rise again with great deception. “Unity” or “peace at any price” is the chant being heard from all quarters, religious and secular. In an evil twist on the “heretics” separation between the Old and New Testaments, doctrine is seen as a regrettable byproduct of a barbaric age and is to be discarded in favor of a false, outward unity. The American Constitution has come under attack as not permitting all religions, but forbidding all religions. At the same time, and on a global scale, only certain approved philosophies (such as evolution) are given the light of day, and woe to any who deviate. But as it was in the days of the Reformation, these are opposite reactions to other extremes, not the least of which has been the longstanding attempt to install “Christianity” as the state religion once again.

In light of that, it is most curious to observe the relative passivity coming from Christendom over the onslaught of Islam, the ultimate state/religion. Could it be that even the most vile false religion is to be preferred over the true gospel, just because it melds with the state? Have we been betrayed once again by our leadership, who in a desperate bid to keep their place has made a pact with the devil? Will we stand and bleat like sheep as “Christian” celebrities destroy doctrinal essentials while demanding everyone unify over a vague concept of “love”?

Are we to take what we’ve learned in all this— that “church membership”, altars, clergy, sanctioned weddings and baptisms, etc. are all part

and parcel of the fake, institutional church— and hide it “because the world (or the church) is not ready” to hear it? How many Christians can stomach leaving all this? They, like the Reformers, call us names, accuse us of impure or selfish motives, and consider themselves the upholders of all that is truly Christian and spiritual. They ruin lives in many cases, and gladly team up with secular authority when it suits them. The cost is high enough, but of course not as high as that paid by the “heretics”. Will we pay it, or shrink back?