

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Donatisten! - Part 1

by Leonard Verduin

The New Testament vision of societal compositism conceives of human society as a composite thing, composed of factions with different loyalties for Church and State.

Scripture: Matthew 22:21, John 18:36, Acts 4:18, Romans 13:1, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 6:17, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 5:25, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

Description

Leonard Verduin preaches about the historical context of the Donatist Rebellion in the fourth century and its relevance to the Reformation era. He highlights the concept of 'Christian sacralism' introduced by the Constantinian change, which led to the fusion of Church and State, causing a 'fall' of the Church. Verduin discusses the resistance of the Stepchildren, or neo-Donatists, against this fusion, emphasizing their belief in a Church based on personal faith and their rejection of a Church embracing all in a given locality. The sermon explores the parallels between the Donatist Rebellion and the Reformers' drift towards neo-Constantinianism, leading to the emergence of the Second Front and the Stepchildren's call for the restitution of the Church to its New Testament format.

Transcript

My kingdom is not of this world John 18:36

ONE OF THE TERMS OF REPROACH USED BY THE REFORMERS as an incriminating label of the Second Front was "Donatists"; the form "neo-Donatists" also occurs in the sources. This reproachful name was used very freely and frequently.

This name leads straight to the heart of the matter; that is one reason for taking it up first.

To understand why the Stepchildren were called "Donatists" or "neo-Donatists" one must go back to the fourth century, the age in which the original Donatists lived. The original Donatism is usually referred to as the Donatist Rebellion. To understand a rebellion one has to know the thing against which the rebellion was directed. Donatism was a reaction. To understand this reaction one will have to know the thing against which the reaction was aimed.

To get all this before us will take a little time and effort; but it will be time well-spent, for the stage on which the sixteenth century conflict was enacted was set in the fourth, as informed observers in Reformation times saw very clearly. We shall have to go, very rapidly, over the history of the first four centuries of the Christian era, to understand what the original Donatism was and why the Stepchildren were called neo-Donatists.

We must begin by pointing out that with the launching of the New Testament vision a new idea was being broached; the world was being treated to a new and very revolutionary concept of society, namely, that men can get along peacefully in the market place even though they do not worship at the same shrine. The New Testament conceives of human society as a composite thing -- that is, composed of factions. It expects that some men will glory in the very same Cross over which other men stumble. It anticipates that some men will make their boast of the very same thing of which other men are ashamed. And it assumes that such diversity on the plane of religion does not imply cacophony on the square. It thinks that even though men differ basically and radically at the shrine they need not clash in the market place.

This is one of the New Testament's boldest innovations, the sweep of which will not escape the thoughtful. In this novel view it is plainly implied that there are resources in the as yet not regenerated human heart, due to the remnants of the original righteousness left after the Fall, resources that are adequate for the affairs of state, loyalties that are adequate for the political level, over and above the loyalties that result of the New Testament's "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's."

In the New Testament vision, that which we today call the State and that which we now call the Church are agencies that cater to differentiable loyalties. The State demands a loyalty that all men can give, irrespective of their religious orientation; the Church demands a loyalty which only he can give who believes in the Christ. The State has a sword with which it constrains men, coerces them if need be; the Church has a sword also, but it is the sword of the Word of God, a sword that goes no farther than moral suasion.

The New Testament envisions no trouble in the outworking of this division of labor -- as long as both sides play in the register intended for them; it envisions trouble only if and when either of the two goes outside its province, as for instance when, as in Acts 4:18, men in the uniform of the State tell people whether they are to preach and what. The New Testament vision implies that as long as Church and State weed each in its own garden there will be a tolerable *modus vivendi*.

It must not escape the reader that this was a novel insight, so novel as to be revolutionary. The world had never seen the like of it before. For all pre-Christian society is sacral. By the word "sacral," which we shall be using frequently and which we request the reader to impress on his mind, we mean "bound together by a common religious loyalty." By sacral society we mean society held together by a religion to which all the members of that society are committed.

The society of ancient Babylon, for example, was a sacral society; all Babylonians were expected to bow to one and the same Object (cf. Daniel 3); their society was pre-Christian. The society of Ephesus was sacral; all Ephesians were expected to join in the chant "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!", Ephesian society was pre-Christian. In our own day the society of the Navajo in our Southwest is sacral; all members of that society are expected to take part in the ritual; theirs too is pre-Christian society.

According to this construction of things, the Old Testament too was pre-Christian -- as indeed it was in the chronological sense. Every member of Old Testament society was considered to be in the same religious category as was every other member of it. This makes Old Testament society sacral and pre-Christian. It was a monolithic society rather than a composite one. It had no room for diversity, for for and against.

If we are permitted to look ahead a bit here, there would in all probability never have been a Second Front if the Reformers had been aware of the pre-Christian quality of the Old Testament in this matter. It was the Reformers' refusal to admit that there is this perspective in the relationship that obtains between the two Testaments, it was their refusal to grant that the one had outmoded the other at this point, that caused the exodus of the Stepchildren. But we shall return to this point later.

It was because the Jews of Jesus' day were pre-Christian, and therefore sacralists in their conception of things, that the problem "whether it is lawful to pay tribute to Caesar" seemed to them to be an insoluble problem. How could a man, they asked, be loyal to the political community by paying his taxes, without thereby being disloyal to the religious community, the Church. They, sacralists that they were, knew no answer to this question. It vexed them every time they tangled with it. And for that reason they confronted the Master with it, so that He too might be embarrassed by it and be hopelessly pinned in a corner. How great must have been their surprise at the ease with which Jesus, acting on the new insight He had come to convey, sailed through the dilemma with "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." In His way of thinking there wasn't even any problem.

As the thoughtful reader will have perceived, much is implied in this New Testament innovation. In it is implied that the State is a secular institution, secular in the etymological sense, namely, "pertaining to this age or era." The State is intended, by God himself, to regulate as best it can, with the insights available to it and with the resources at its command, the things of this age. It is implied in the New Testament vision that the State, being itself a creature of God's common grace, works with the resources which that non-redemptive grace makes available.^f

[^f. The State, which St. Paul does not hesitate to call "God's servant" (Romans 13) and for which he enjoins his followers not only to pray but to pray "first of all" (I Timothy 2), derives not from the redemptive enterprise of God but from God's desire to conserve. Emil Brunner, who has discussed this matter very helpfully in his *Die Christusbotschaft und der Staat* puts it this way: "Wir haben es hier zweifellos nicht mit einer Ordnung der Erlösung, sondern der Erhaltung, nicht der erlosenden, sondern der erhaltenden, der allgemeinen Gnade zu tun -- die darum allgemein heisst, weil sie gerade wie Regen und Sonnenschein allen Menschen, auch denen, die nichts von Jesus Christus oder der besonderen Gnade wissen, zukommt."]

It is implied in the New Testament vision that Christianity is not a culture-creating thing but rather a culture-influencing one. Wherever the Gospel is preached human society becomes composite; hence, since culture is the name given to the total spiritual heritage of an entire people, there can never be such a thing as a Christian culture; there can only be cultures in which the influence of Christianity is more or less apparent. The New Testament vision does not pit a "Christian culture" against a non-Christian culture; rather does it introduce a leaven into any existing culture into which it insinuates itself, a leaven whereby that already existing culture is then affected. New Testament ideology does not seek to make the not-yet believer culturally sterile, nor even the outright unbeliever, the disbeliever; it is satisfied to add the Christians' voice to the cultural ensemble.

Again, if we are permitted to run ahead of ourselves a bit, we may at this point call attention to the fact that the house of freedom and of democracy has been reared in those areas -- and we dare say in them alone -- where men have made serious work of the New Testament vision as to societal compositism. It, more than any other single factor, has given us human society with option built into it. For pre-Christian society is optionless society -- just as post-Christian society will again be optionless society. The New Testament's idea of societal compositism is the only real alternative to the stultifying ideologies that have given rise to the modern optionless and option-forbidding totalitarian States.g1

[g1. One of John Dewey's smallest books, but one of his most important ones, has the very un-American title: "A Common Faith." In its argument Dewey asserts (very rightly) that historic Christianity is committed to the distinction of sheep and goats; he also asserts (very wrongly) that this differentiation must somehow be overcome if the American democratic ideal is to be realized. The exact opposite, however, is true; the democratic ideal of which Dewey speaks requires diversity, not sameness. It may be argued, and quite correctly, that the very American ideal of democracy of which the man speaks is the direct fruitage of the insight of historic Christianity to which he refers, the insight which he wishes to see discarded. It is this insight that has given the world the idea of a society with-option. What Dewey is proposing is that we kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. If ever the time comes that Americans have "a common faith" America as we know it will be no more. In its place will have come an optionless monolithic society -- of the kind known in our day as totalitarianism.]

It was the outworking of the sacralist thought habits of Roman society that occasioned the persecutions to which the early Christians were exposed. The Roman State had its officially designated Object of worship, and to it every Roman was expected to give homage. It is significant that the early Christians did not launch a crusade to have this Object ousted and a new and better Object, the God of the Scriptures, put in its place. The primitive Church did not propose to remove the Object that had hitherto stood in the square and put its own Object in its place. It was content to worship the Christian God in an off-the-street place and to ignore the Object that stood in a place where none belongs, being careful that no one would have reason to complain that by so worshipping at an esoteric shrine the Christians were drawing themselves away from the affairs of Roman life.

It must be said here, and with considerable emphasis, that the New Testament vision of societal compositism did not lead to any attitude of aloofness from the workaday things. We point this out here because the notion is abroad that they who take the New Testament seriously at this point must of necessity become nonchalant concerning the affairs of public life. The aloofness which was characteristic of the medieval and modern "sects," an aloofness about which men have often complained, and not without cause, was not a feature of the early Christians. Aloof Christianity comes later and then by way of reaction. No, early Christianity was not aloof; it was deeply involved in the affairs of society, The testimony of The Epistle to Diognetus is enough, it seems, to bear this out. This literary product, which according to modern scholarship dates from near the end of the second century, draws a parallel between the soul and the body on the one hand and the Christians and society on the other hand, "The soul dwells in the body but is not of the body and the Christians dwell in the world without being of the world"; it then goes on to say:

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."¹

Early Christianity, it may be said, took seriously Jesus' idea about "in the world but not of the world." It knew that it was the Master's will that they be "the salt of the earth," a formula that speaks of deep difference going hand in hand with close integration. The early Christians knew that they were partakers of an anointing, a transaction whereby they were on the one hand set in contrast with the world about them and on the other hand set in context with it. They knew that one must "follow peace" (of which the basic meaning is togetherness) "and holiness" (of which the essential meaning is separation) if one is to "see-God."

All told, early Christianity acted on the insight that Jesus had come to create "a people within a people"; it realized that it is by the act of faith that men become the Sons of God, with a sonship that is not simply continuous with the sonship that is by nature. Primitive Christianity knew that although God is the Savior of "all men" He is the Savior "in a special way" of them that believe. Early Christianity's world was peopled with folk who witness and folk who were witnessed to. It therefore conceived of a composite society, not a monolithic one.

One of the sayings of Jesus that has caused later generations trouble, if not embarrassment, gave the early Christians no trouble at all -- namely His dictum: "Think not that I came to send peace upon the earth I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against the mother ... , a man's foes shall be those of his own household." To the early Church this was but a statement, somewhat hyperbolic perhaps, to the effect that Jesus came to usher in a new concept of society; in it He was setting forth His concept of the composite society, by carrying it even into the family circle. If societal compositism can and does occur even on this level what will it be in the great out-of-doors?

This concept was startlingly new. Roman society was sacral and non-composite. And its sacralism came to expression everywhere. In the institution known as the *idolothya*, for instance, the placing of the meat supply before the Object. This ancient custom had grown to such dimensions that virtually all meat available at the butcher's was placed meat, and bore the stamp of the Object which Romans worshipped. It is a curious fact, one certainly not without its Significance, that as far as we know, the early Christians did not so much as contemplate the possibility of having the public meat supply stamped with another stamp, the stamp of the Christians' Object; they seem not to have stirred a finger to have some Christian symbol, say the outline of a fish, put in place of the customary stamp. They seem to have proceeded upon the assumption that a religious mark upon a common meat supply is an anomaly anyway, one which a Christian does well simply to ignore. They walked nonchalantly over the matter, with an "Eat anything and everything that they sell in the shambles, and never mind the questions." The only moral problem posed by the *idolothya* was the question whether it was in keeping with the Christian attitude to walk roughshod over the sensitivities of a weaker brother, the man who still heard religious overtones in the butcher shop.

The Roman society, prompted by its sacralist view of things, oppressed the Christians, especially when Rome was beset with political worries. They ascribed their political troubles to the fact that the religious pattern of uniformity was being shaken. The religion of Rome was a religion of *do ut des* (I give in order that you may give), and every adversity was interpreted to be a frown of the Object for his loss of patronage, caused by the Christians. If the Tiber went out of its banks or the Nile failed to do so, the

Christians were blamed for this manifest gesture of divine displeasure. And then the cry rang out, "To the lions with them!" So also if the earth moved or the sky stood still.

Meanwhile the Christian cause went forward by leaps and bounds. In an incredibly short time Christianity had insinuated itself into every level of Roman society, all through the empire, and beyond it. It had marched triumphantly to the ends of the earth. So much has this remarkable growth been attributed to the effect of the martyrdoms, so often has it been said that "the blood of martyrs was the seed of the Church" that the fact has been eclipsed that this phenomenal growth was basically due to the techniques employed, the techniques prescribed by the New Testament concept of cultural compositism. In a way that students of social dynamics will understand at once, the Church grew and grew. After all, men change their opinion primarily in contacts known as "bull-sessions"; and Christians were forever engaged in bull-sessions with their not-yet-believing associates. By the middle of the second century it was being said, by Justinus in his running encounter with Tryphon Judaeus, that "There is not a race of men on the earth among whom converts to the Christian faith cannot be found." By the end of that century Tertullian could say, without fear of contradiction, that "We came on the scene only yesterday and already we fill all your institutions, your towns, walled cities, your fortresses . . . , your senate and your forum." The New Testament vision was paying off richly.

Meanwhile the empire had ceased to thrive. This, as we have already said, was interpreted to be due to divine displeasure at the sight of an eroding sacralism. The Christians posed a new and strange problem. Rome had learned to live, somehow and somewhat, with the Jews -- even though they were a standing exception to the sacralist pattern. True, once in a while Rome persecuted these dissenters from the sacralist pattern, as when Claudias ordered all Jews to quit Rome (Acts 18:2); but this action was probably economic rather than religious in origin. But the Jews never had been a part of the Roman sacral society. In this respect the Christians were different. They were apostates; and that was a different matter. We may say in passing, and return to this point later, that sacral systems have a reason for dealing with apostates in an especially severe way.

In one of the frantic moments, in a desperate attempt to recover the erstwhile religious consensus (which, it was held, had given Rome the golden days that were now past) the emperor Decius invented the following scheme. Every householder was instructed to procure an affidavit attesting to loyalty to, and recent participation in, the ancient religious behavior vis-a-vis the Object; it read: "I, N.N., have always sacrificed to the gods and now in your presence I have, in keeping with the directive, sacrificed and have caused a libation to be poured out, have tasted of the sacrificial victim; and I request that you, a public notary, certify the same."² Then when a house-to-house check-up was conducted the offenders were spotted. If a man was unable to clear himself the failure to produce the required billet was prima facie evidence of infidelity to the Object, infidelity that was punishable with death. In this way Decius not only hoped to inject a little life into the dying religiosity of the empire by bringing the rank and file into the temples once again, but he also welcomed the spotting of the Christians. His concern was not so much a religious concern as one which we would today call a political concern. It is well to keep this remark in mind, for we shall come face to face with this situation often in this study.

Since there is always the danger that the Christian innovations are again lost, since there is always the danger of a kind of atavism of the spirit, a reversal whereby things are allowed to slip back into a supposedly superseded plane, it was but natural that men should begin to toy with the possibility of moving out the ancestral Object and moving in the Object of the Christians, to make the religion of Jesus a substitute for the binder that was eroding away. In a word, to carve out a "Christian sacralism" (we print

this expression in quotation marks, to indicate that for us the combination of this noun with this adjective is an anomaly) to take the place of the older sacralism that was petering out. It seems that one of the first, if not the very first, to toy with the possibility of having some day a "Christian sacralism" was Meliton, bishop of Sardis, who in the year 175 declared in the ear of the emperor that a do ut des arrangement with the God of the Christians might be a good thing, seeing that "Only when Christianity is protected ... does the Empire continue to preserve its size and splendor." As early as the year 250 Origen was already hinting, broadly enough, that "If now the entire Roman empire should unite in the adoration of the true God, then the Lord would fight for her, she being still [the reference is to Exodus 14:14]; then she would slay more enemies than Moses did in his day.?" This is a broad hint in the direction of "Christian sacralism," the suggestion that it would be desirable to re-define the Church of Christ, to make it a society embracing all in a given locality, rather than, as it had been hitherto, a fellowship of believers.

On the other hand, there were men, like Tertullian for example, who early braced themselves against this eventuality. The remark sometimes ascribed to him "Quid est imp era tori cum ecclesia?" (What does the emperor have to do with the Church?) is the cry of a man who, mindful that in the authentic Christian vision Church and State lie on different planes, is ill at ease at the prospect of letting the one become confused with the other.

What Tertullian feared came to pass in the "Age of Constantine," which was ushered in by the "conversion" of the emperor. Much has been written about this event and much remains to be written. One thing seems very evident; it is that, as in the case of Decius before him, the problem to which Constantine sought a solution was political rather than religious. The facts are that Constantine was a worried statesman, as well he might have been. The empire he had inherited was coming apart at the seams. He had his sleepless nights about this fact. How could he conquer this problem? How bind the sprawling domains together again? How regain the ancient stability and inner cohesion? Then came the much celebrated "vision," a cross in the clouds, and the words "in hoc signo vinces" (in this sign conquer). There he had it! Make the religion of Jesus the religion of the empire and then look to it to achieve the consensus that he, sacralist that he was, and remained, felt he had to have.

We wish to say in passing (for we shall return to this matter later in this study) that this was to read a new and totally strange meaning into the "Cross." Is the Cross of Christ then a thing whereby emperors' ambitions are realized? A device that sees the political aspirations of a power-hungry ruler through to Victory? Surely Constantine had grasped little or nothing of the ideas set forth in the Cross of Christ! One need not go to the length of the writer who speaks of Constantine as "the murderous egoist who possessed the great merit of having conceived of Christianity as a world power and of having acted on this novel insight, We can easily imagine the joy of the Christians in having finally obtained a firm guarantee against the persecutions, but we are not obliged to share that elation"; but one cannot stomach any longer the hundreds of pages of extravagant praise heaped on Constantinus Magnus by his biographer, Eusebius of Caesarea! For it is and remains a fact that "Christianity grows alien to its essence when it is made into law for those who have been merely born instead of reborn." Yet that is what the Constantinian change effected.

It speaks volumes, it would seem, that the monogram which Constantine is said to have invented, and which has found its way into almost every Christian Church, the monogram that looks like the letter p with an X worked into its stem (the X representing the first letter of the Greek word Christos and the r being the second letter of it) was introduced on the shields of Constantine's soldiers; the "converted" emperor seems not to have had any interest in making it available as a badge for men not in uniform.

In the Constantinian change a tendency that had been developing for some time, was unleashed. A radical change of roles occurred. The Christian religion would now enjoy the benefits, if benefits they be, which the ethnic faith had enjoyed hitherto. And the hardships which had in earlier times fallen upon the Christians would now become the lot of those who lingered at the ancient shrines; and for the same reason -- that they posed a threat to the sacral order. By the end of the fourth century the simplest votive offerings set before the erstwhile Object, even in household shrines, made the bringers thereof subject to grievous penalty. Gatherings in the signature of the now outlawed faith were strictly proscribed. Indoctrination in the tenets of the ancient faith was strictly forbidden. Not yet baptized persons were required to attend catechism classes in preparation for baptism; all who after attending such classes refused to present themselves for baptism, or having received it then relapsed into the old ways, were subject to the ultimate sentence."

It was at this point that Donatism appeared. Donatism was essentially a protest against the new sacralism. It was basically a rebellion against the Constantinian change. The tensions that had developed between the Donatists in North Africa and the Catholics were, as Professor Frend has put it, "not those of doctrine and philosophy; it was the question of the nature of the church as a society and its relationship to the world, rather than any distinctive beliefs, that formed the heart of the controversy between the Catholics and the Donatists."

The Donatist pastors were wont to tell their flocks that nothing had changed, essentially, now that the empire had embraced Christianity; the only difference, they said, was that whereas in previous times the devil had used force, he was now working in and with allies on the inside. For the true believer the result was the same, namely, persecution for the true follower of Christ. The Donatist bishop Petilian refused to entertain any difference between the persecutions once staged by a pagan government and the persecutions which his flock was now experiencing at the hands of the now supposedly Christian regime. The number of believers had not changed; only the tares had become more numerous. The Donatist pastors said that "the acre of the Lord continues in Africa alone." They looked upon the clerics who were promoting the change as "evil priests working hand in glove with the kings of the earth, men who by their conduct show that they have no king but Caesar." The Donatists continued to think of the Church of Christ as a "small body of the saved surrounded by the unregenerate mass." They insisted that the independence of the Church in regard to the emperor and his officials had to be "upheld at all costs." When troops were sent to quell the Donatist rebellion the followers of Donatus were not the least bit surprised; the new regime was only acting in character.

This then was the original Donatism -- a rebellion against the encroachments of "Christian sacralism," or -- as we shall henceforth style it at times -- against Constantinianism.² This then was Donatism -- an attempt to conserve the concept of the Church "based on personal faith" and to obstruct the drift toward a Church "including all in a given locality."^h These were the very same options before which the Reformers stood; small wonder that the name "neo-Donatists" came to the lips of men!

Donatism as a movement in the fourth century was successfully suppressed; but the ideas of Donatism lived on. They recurred in wave upon wave of dissent against the medieval sacralist order. There is probably a sound historical core of truth in the sentence written by Dostoevsky regarding the Constantinian change: "A compromise arose; the Empire accepted Christianity and the Church accepted Roman law and the Roman State. A small part of the Church retired into the desert and there began to continue its former work." It is with this continuing rebellion against the Constantinian change that we are engaged in this study.

[g2. Some modern writers prefer the name Theodosianism, the reason being that much of the legislation in support of the new order originated with this emperor. (A good example of this preference for the name Theodosianism may be found in Emil Brunner's *Die Christusbotschaft und der Staat*.) Since the ideas of the new regime came to expression quite extensively in the days of Constantine already, we prefer to follow the school of thought that speaks of the Constantinian change.]

[h. No one knew better than did Augustine just what was at issue in the conflict that had flared up between the Catholics and the Donatists. Said he, "The issue between us and the Donatists is about the question where this body is to be located, that is, what and where is the Church?" (*Inter nos autem et Donatistas quaestio est, ubi sit hoc corpus, id est, ubi sit Ecclesia?* See *Ad Catholicos Epistula II, 2*.)]

With Donatism begins a new variety of heresy, a heresy that is theologically correct; we shall therefore refer to it as "heresy" in the rest of this book.ⁱ To the theological correctness of this "heresy" the sources bear eloquent testimony. Even the inquisitors witnessed to it. These "heretics," they said, "have the appearance of piety and this because before men they live justly, believing correctly all things concerning God as well as all the articles contained in the creed." It may be pointed out however that there was one word in the Apostles' Creed at which the "heretics" balked, the word "catholic" in the article dealing with the Church. This word they could not and did not utter. This is not surprising. The word "catholic" is derived from the Greek *kata* (meaning "according to") and *halos* (meaning "the entirety"); the combination means then "according to the entirety" and fits into the language of "Christian sacralism." It is therefore not surprising that the "heretics" avoided it. For them the Church was not "according to the entirety" but consisted of the believing element only. Moreover, this word had a history. The proponents of "Christian sacralism" had long ago seen the propaganda value which this word could have in their scheme. Theodosius had given orders that "all peoples over whom our rule extends shall live in that religion which was revealed to St. Peter We give orders that all these are to adopt the name 'Catholic Christians'; the rest we shall let pass for fools and they will have to bear the reproach of being called heretics. They must come first under the wrath of God and then also under ours."⁶

[i. We do not wish to leave the impression that there were no dissenting groups that entertained unorthodox theological ideas. There were, just as there were such in the days of the Stepchildren. The fact is that there were "heretics" and heretics, with the former disowning the latter in very clear terms.]

It is therefore not at all strange that the "heretics" avoided the word. The rejection of it must have been quite persistent; for it became one of the tell-tale marks of the "heretic." It is highly instructive that the Stepchildren of the Reformation, who continued in the tradition of the "heretic," also "recited the Apostles' Creed correctly, save for 'the word.'" The Clerk of Courts who has recorded this fact for us has added, in parenthesis, "i.e., the word *allgemein*"; he volunteered further that this was "*ut solent schismatici*" (as is the custom with the schismatic -- which is a synonym for the "heretic"). ⁷

The one thing the prevailing Church had against the "heretics" was their refusal to go along with "Christian sacralism." This was their sin, their one and only sin. And it was this sin, and this sin only, that set the wheels of the Church's discipline going. (We shall return to this matter later.)

This "Donatism" was never absent from the medieval scene. In the words of Adolf von Harnack: "In the twelve centuries that went before the Reformation it has never lacked for attempts to get away from the State-Church Priests' Church and to reinstitute the apostolic congregational structurization."⁸ What is this but to say that throughout medieval times there never was a moment in which Constantinianism stood

unchallenged. In the company of the "heretics" the New Testament was honored (we shall return to this matter also); and wherever the New Testament is held in honor there its concept of the Church of Christ will continue to challenge. There a Church based on personal faith will challenge the concept of a Church embracing all.

The battle between these two concepts of the Church had been raging for twelve centuries when Luther put the trumpet of reform to his lips. The noise of this battle had by no means decreased. Contemporaries who were in position to know have gone on record to the effect that there were then more men committed to the views of the "heretic" than there had ever been before. In many areas the populace was so much on the side of the "heretic" that executions had to be carried out at night or early in the morning for fear of tumult. Sometimes the age-old provision that death sentences had to be announced with the tolling of the bell was conveniently ignored. At times jails in which "heretics" had been incarcerated were stormed and their prisoners set free. The frantic efforts used by the Church to keep in power are in themselves proof enough that "revisionism" was an ever-present threat. As a recent investigator has put it: "The Protestant Left was the heir of the medieval underworld. It had categories of thought and a vocabulary emerging from late medieval heresies . . . , a vocabulary which pre-existed the Reformation and had its own power and momentum quite apart from Luther."⁹

There is every reason to believe that the Reformers were quite aware of the ancient battle. How could it be otherwise? It may safely be said that a person could not spend the span of a human life anywhere in Europe without coming in contact personally with the "heretic." There were inquisitors everywhere. Some of these had a record of consigning men to the flames at the rate of almost one a day. How could an informed person remain unaffected by the tradition of the "heretic"?

Moreover, there is every reason to believe that the Reformers were at the first sympathetic toward much of the old heritage of the "heretic." They said things that cheered the hearts of people who had been conditioned by it. Sometimes they said things that were definitely in the idiom of the old protest. For a while it seemed, at least to onlookers who wanted to see it that way, that the Reformers were going to be the answer to the prayers of the "heretics."

When the Reformers presently gave evidence -- as give it they did -- that they were not intent on sweeping the Constantinian heritage away, there was an arching of the eyebrows among some who were walking with them. When the Reformers accepted the proffered arm of the civil rulers -- as accept it they did -- then there were frowns, frowns which soon changed into audible groans of disillusionment. And then there was the exodus. And with that the Stepchildren were on the scene. And, the Second Front.

What caused the exodus was the Reformers' drift toward neo-Constantinianism. As the Stepchildren saw things, history was repeating itself. A new "Christian sacralism" was taking shape, on a smaller scale to be sure and with some version of a reformed faith in the saddle. It was this new "Christian sacralism" that precipitated the neo-Donatists, Small wonder they were called by that name.

The parallel between the things that had happened in and with the coming of the Constantinian change and that which was happening now was indeed close, so close as to be uncanny. Just as his rounds with the original Donatists had made of Augustine the unrestrained sacralist that he became, so did the Reformers, in their rounds with the neo-Donatists, become the uninhibited supporters of neo-Constantinianism that the record shows them to have been. The parallel can be drawn closer still; just as the original Donatism had its lunatic fringe, in the so-called Circumcelliones, so did the later Donatism

have its lunatic fringe, in the men of Munster. Just as Augustine's experience with the Donatists led him to make certain Retractiones, in which he controverted his own earlier affirmations, so did their dealings with the neo-Donatists cause the Reformers to repudiate some of the things they had stood for earlier, so writing their own Retractions, as it were. (In its proper place we shall return to this about-face of the Reformers, a matter to which the Stepchildren were not slow to call attention.)

Just as the erstwhile Donatists had insisted that "the independence of the Church with respect to the emperor must be upheld" so did the later Donatists insist that "a true Church cannot exist where the secular rule and the Christian Church are blended together." It runs like a refrain through the testimony of the Stepchildren that, as they saw it, the Reformation had gone sour when the Reformers had made a league with the civil powers. It has therefore been very well said that the crystallization of the Reformation in territorial churches or in parishes led by city political authorities gave the impulse for the development of the Second Front. A good start had been made, so said the Stepchildren, but the enlistment of the magistrates had spoiled it all. One of the manifestoes that issued from the Second Front says, after relating a great deal of older history of the "heretic":

In 1519 Martin Luther began to write against the frightful abominations of the Babylonian Harlot and to disclose all her wickedness . . . , yes, as with thunderclaps to bring it all down But as soon as he joined himself to the secular rule, seeking protection there against the cross . . . then it went with him as with a man who in mending an old kettle only makes the hole bigger, and he raised up a people altogether callous in sin.¹⁰

The charge, lodged with many variations, was that the Reformers had begun well but had spoiled their beginning when they reverted back to the medieval pattern of things. The Reformers, said the Stepchildren, had "fallen back to the beast, that is, the Romish school, which now they defend; the kingdom of God which had previously come to them they have again cast away."¹¹ Now there were two papal systems, an old one and a new, both of them opposed to the Stepchildren and for the same reason, namely, the latter's rejection of "Christian sacralism."^j

[j. An incarcerated soldier of the Second Front spoke of his opponents, whether from the papal camp or the Protestant camp, as "bepstler, si seien vom alten oder neuen bapst."¹²]

It was the coalition of the Reformers with "the arm of flesh" that grieved those who came to be treated as Stepchildren. One by one modern investigators have come to see this. "They would have nothing to do with a State Church and this was the main point in their separation from the Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Calvinists; this was the one conception on which all parties among them were in absolute accord"; "The real issue ... was on the question of the type of Church which should take the place of the old Church"; "The real issue was . . . a bitter and irreconcilable battle between two mutually exclusive concepts of the Church"; "Luther stopped short of a full reformation, content to walk hand in hand with the State . . . , bogged down halfway between Catholicism and the New Testament Church organization." So runs the consensus.

While the radicals were defecting from Luther the Swiss Reformer Zwingli was having very similar troubles. At the outset Zwingli had been intimate with the people who later opened the Second Front. He had, in fact, to quite an extent shared their views, a fact to which the Stepchildren were not slow to point. He had, for example, said that infant baptism "nit sin solle," ought not to be. Then came the moment in which the City Council let it be known that all contemplated reforms in the religious area had to be officially

approved by them first. To this Zwingli submitted; and it was at this moment, very precisely, that the Radicals began to peel off. One of the first mutterings of the storm that was brewing was the remark made by one who would soon function as a leader among the Stepchildren: "You have no business giving these decisions into the hands of the civil power." This marked not only the beginning of the tension; it also pinpointed the conceptual area in which it occurred, namely, that of the nature of the Church and the relationship in which it stands to society as such. Again, it was the question that had been in the minds of the Donatists, the same insistence that "the independence of the Church in regard to the magistrate must be preserved at all costs." Just as in the eyes of the Donatists the Church had disgraced itself when it accepted the flirtations of the emperor, so did the neo-Donatists frown upon the Reformers for letting themselves be seduced by the same siren voice, the same flirtations.

The flirtations to which we refer ended in a marriage.^k It was this marriage that put in the status of stepchildren those who had hitherto walked with the Reformers but who had resisted stubbornly the coalescence of Church and State. Whether the marriage was one of convenience we shall not attempt to say; that it was diplomatically wise is of course evident. It made it possible for the Reform, which would otherwise in all likelihood have been choked in its own blood and dispatched as the Hussite reform had been dispatched, to have a future. By it the ancient sacralist system, armed to the teeth with military might available to it on a moment's notice, was challenged by a rival sacralist system, likewise backed up by a sword of steel. But from a principia I point of view the marriage was a catastrophe; for it made inevitable the perpetuation of all the evils that had been spawned by the Constantinian change. As one of the first to attempt an objective study of the Second Front, C. A. Cornelius, has put it:

As correct as this step taken by Zwingli was from the point of view of the State, and however much it was calculated to give his ecclesiastical endeavors greater dignity and status, it was a bad step from an evangelical point of view, one that was certain to lead to contention and schism in the party.¹³

[k. Alfred Farner, in his *Die Lehre von Kirche und Staat bei Zwingli* traces Zwingli's gradual change from an ambiguous position to an outright espousal of "Christian sacralism." He sees Zwingli going past dead center, in his letter to Blarer in which, Farner says, it becomes clear "dasz fur Zwingli Kirchgemeinde und burgerliche Gemeinde eine Einheit geworden sind."]

Of the momentous development, the marriage of which we have spoken, a present-day student of Reformation history has said, so very correctly:

The product of the development from October 1523 to January 1525 was ... the rejection of *Corpus Christianum*. Following the revolutionary change in the relations of the Church and the world which we associate with the names of Constantine, Theodosius, Augustine, medieval Christendom had no room for the Biblical concept of the "world." The consequences for ethics, for a doctrine of the Church, for evangelism, and for eschatology, were revolutionary and yet hardly noticed. So conscious and so all-pervading was the acceptance of the identity of Church and society that the Reformers, each working closely with the local magistracy and seeking to reform medieval Catholicism with as little commotion as possible, were not even aware of a problem and were able to pass off as political revolutionaries those who raised the question.¹⁴

In the eyes of the Donatists, whether early Donatists or late, the Church had "fallen" in the days of Constantine, with a "fall" as calamitous and as fraught with evil consequences as the "fall" in Eden. This "fall" had made a fallen creature of the Church, one "dead in trespasses and sins." And just as the

catastrophe in Eden had made a re-birth necessary, so did the "fall" of the fourth century require a new creation. So said the "heretics." They felt called therefore to reconstitute the Church, to start all over. The medieval "heretics" may therefore be called Restitutionists, and their views, Restitutionism. Because the Stepchildren fell heir to this assessment of the Constantinian change they may likewise be called Restitutionists. We shall do so (and so fulfill a promise made in the Introduction of this volume). They were doubly entitled to this term; for, as they saw things, they were confronted with a twice-fallen Church, once in the days of Constantine and now again in the days of the Reform.

Restitutionists sought to recover the Church of the New Testament; their ambition, early and late, was to return the Church of Christ to its New Testament format. This ambition comes to expression constantly in the literature which the Stepchildren have left behind. We read, for instance, in an account drawn up by a man who fought at the Second Front:

At the outset it must be confessed and granted that the first Church of Christ and the Apostles has in foregoing times been destroyed and laid waste by Antichrist, so that we do not need to waste many words or call in many witnesses, seeing that we to a man do know, as do all who call themselves Evangelicals, that the entire papacy has become a Sodom. . . .15

He then goes on to describe the steps which the Restitutionists took in an effort to recover the erstwhile Church. Since the Reformers, as the Restitutionists saw things, were now just as "fallen" as the papists, their reformatory program held forth no promise.

Let us not pass lightly over the implications of the Constantinian change. A "fall" is a serious thing. The change that took place in the days of Constantine shook the ship from stem to stem; nothing in the Church's theology, its organization, its place in the world, escaped the effects of the virus that had entered its bloodstream. Medication would have to be strong and in large doses.

Moreover, let it be remembered that the Church which the men of the sixteenth-century had inherited had borne the image of the Constantinian synthesis for well over a millenium when the Reformation began to happen. Hence let no one underestimate the headlong daring of the Radicals of Reformation times; they were out to turn the world upside down, the world as it had stood for so long a time that men could hardly imagine it had ever stood otherwise. Had it not been for the fact that the blue-prints of the authentic Church were still accessible, in the New Testament, there would never have been any clamor for the restitution of it.

We shall spend the rest of our space in this chapter, and all our space in the chapters that follow, setting forth somewhat the effects of the "fall" of the Church. This will simultaneously get us acquainted with the Stepchildren and their ambitions. We shall travel from one sector of the Second Front to the other, to see what goes on. As we do so we will probably have the same experience which a modern historian, Walter Hobbouse, had when he travelled this same path:

Long ago I came to believe that the great change in the relations between the Church and the world which began with the conversion of Constantine is not only a decisive turning point in Church history but is also the key to many of the practical difficulties of the present day and that the Church of the future is destined more and more to return to the condition of things somewhat like that which prevailed in the Ante-Nicene Church; that is to say, that instead of pretending to be coextensive with the world it will confess itself the Church of a minority, will accept a position involving a more conscious antagonism with the World, and will, in return, gain in some measure its former coherence.16

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/leonard-verduin/reformers-and-their-stepchildren-donatisten-part-1/>

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