

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren)

Introduction

by Leonard Verduin

The Reformers faced a dilemma between their loyalty to the New Testament Scriptures and their loyalty to the existing Church and its traditions, leading to the emergence of the Second Front and the conflict between the Reformers and the Stepchildren.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Romans 3:28, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 3:1, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8, James 2:24, 1 Peter 2:9, 1 John 2:4

Topics: "Reformation History", "Church Governance"

Description

Leonard Verduin discusses the emergence of deep-seated differences within the dissenters against the medieval order, leading to the Reformers facing opposition on a 'Second Front' from the Radicals. This Second Front significantly impacted the course of the Reformation, causing the Reformers to shift their focus and theology. The Radicals, also known as the Stepchildren of the Reformation, challenged Luther's emphasis on justification by faith alone and the role of good works in salvation, standing to the right of Luther on crucial theological points. The conflict at the Second Front centered around differing views of the Church of Christ, with the Stepchildren advocating for a Church based solely on personal faith, leading to their departure from the Reformers.

Transcript

BEFORE THE REFORMATION WAS TEN YEARS ALONG IT HAD become evident that not all who were rebelling against the medieval order were of one mind and heart. It had become apparent that within the camp of the dissenters there were deep-seated differences, tensions of such dimensions that a parting of the ways was in the making. It had become plain that the Reformers would as a result be obliged to deploy some of their forces to a second front; they would have to divide their energies between two opponents, Rome and the Radicals.

From the outset the Reformers realized that the opposition that was shaping up on the Second Front was going to be formidable -- at least as formidable as the opposition from the side of the Catholics. As early as May 28, 1525, Zwingli, in a letter to Vadian, expressed the opinion that the struggle with the Catholic party was "but child's play" when compared with the struggle that was erupting at the Second Front.

The opening of the Second Front affected the course of the Reformation very significantly. By way of reaction to it the Reformers backed into a corner where they would not otherwise have retreated. The opening of the Second Front caused the Reformers to go back on their own former selves; it made them swing to the right. This bending to the right, occasioned by the emergence of the Second Front, caused much that was latent in the earliest rustlings of the Reform to go underground, as it were, not to emerge again until much later times.

No suitable name has been found for the Second Front.

A name that has gained rather wide usage is "The Left-wing of the Reformation." This name, however, is less than wholly satisfactory. The term "Left-wing" is borrowed from the parliamentary scene and stands for the faction that wishes to go faster and farther than the center, and much faster and farther than the right. We would therefore expect a "Left-Wing of the Reformation" to out-Luther Luther. But an examination of the record shows that the men of the "Left-wing" did not do this; in fact, we find them going against Luther, and at very crucial points.

Let us take for example that very central doctrine of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith and its bearing on the place of good works in the scheme of salvation. In his haste to establish the doctrine of justification by faith rather than by works Luther down-graded good works; the only place he had left for good works was at the very end, as a sort of postscript or appendage, something that needed attention after salvation was an accomplished fact. We meet in Luther, to put it theologically, a very heavy emphasis on the forensic aspect of salvation and a correspondingly light emphasis on the moral aspect. Luther was primarily interested in pardon, rather than in renewal. His theology was a theology that addresses itself to the problem of guilt, rather than to the problem of pollution. There is an imbalance in this theology between what God does for man and what He does in man. It was this imbalance that caused Luther to collide with the Epistle of James.

The people of the Second Front showed from the very first a critical attitude toward Luther's disparagement of good works. They did not go along with his one-sidedly forensic theology. They complained that "Luther throws works without faith so far to one side that all he has left is a faith without works." They suggested that Luther's sola fide was heresy -- if taken, as it was taken by some, to mean faith unaccompanied. In this matter, which takes us to the very heart of the Lutheran vision, the men of the Second Front stood to the right of Luther, so much so that their enemies accused them of being "heaven-stormers" and "work-saints," people who think to ea -- salvation by their good works. Surely this is not left-wing; one could with greater propriety consider it, at this vital point, to be right-wing. These men stood closer to Rome than to Luther in this matter. We do well, therefore, to avoid the expression "Left-wing of the Reformation."

Another name that has come into quite common use is "The Radicals of the Reformation." This name is similarly inadequate, for it likewise implies that the people of the Second Front were quite similar to the Reformers, only more headlong.

But the difference between the Reformers and the men of the Second Front was not simply a quantitative one; the difference was qualitative. Although we shall be using the term "Radicals" occasionally, we do so with this reservation. They were radicals, it is true; but they differed from the Reformers in kind, not simply in degree.

The men of the Second Front have also been referred to as "The Stepchildren of the Reformation." This is a much better term, and we shall be using it freely. This name is appropriate for two reasons; first, because the men of the Second Front were indeed treated as stepchildren allegedly are wont to be treated; second, because they were the victims of a second marriage. Later we shall point out what this second marriage was. We shall also, likewise in its proper place, suggest still another name as a useful designation of these Stepchildren.

Contemporaries called the Stepchildren by all sorts of derogatory names, each of which calls special attention to an aspect of the disagreement that had developed. These names were not intended to convey information; they were intended to convey opprobrium. They were one and all hateful to the persons to whom they were affixed.

The Stepchildren wanted to be known as "evangelicals," as "brethren," or simply as "Christians" or "believers." On their part they called the Reformers "Scribes" or "the learned ones"; those who followed these were called "name-Christians" or "heathen."

Not one of the ugly names used by contemporaries to designate the Stepchildren was new; not one of them was coined in the sixteenth century. All were old terms of opprobrium, most of them were very old. Nor were the ideas that are characteristic of the Stepchildren's vision new; these too were old, very old. Not one of them was invented in Reformation times. When we examine the thinking of the Stepchildren in its several items, whether it be the rejection of "christening" or the refusal to swear an oath, or certain convictions in the matter of economics, or an apparent toning down of the sacrament, etc., we find that it was not in any sense new when the Second Front rallied to it. This explains why no new names were invented. Men have need of new names only if and when they encounter new commodities; there were no new commodities; hence there was no need for the coining of any new names.

It must also be pointed out in this connection that the record does not credit the vision that prevailed at the Second Front to any person alive in those times. Who it was that broached the idea, so central in the vision of the Stepchildren, that the Church of Christ must consist of believing people and of them exclusively, the sources say not a word. Nor do the sources say' who it may have been that first challenged the propriety of "christening." The same situation confronts us when we examine the rest of the vision of the Stepchildren. This is passing strange, if it is assumed, as has become the vogue, that the Stepchildren were simply the fruitage of the Reformation. Imagine the story of the rise of Communism without the mention of its Karl Marx!

How is all this to be explained? The answer can be quite Simple. We do not read of any new commodities or new names, or of any father of it all, for the simple reason that what erupted at the Second Front was a resurgence, a reiteration, a restatement, precipitated in a way by what began with the posting of the now famous Theses, but essentially older than 1517. What erupted at the Second Front was a resurgence of those tendencies and opinions that had for centuries already existed over against the medieval order; it was connected with ancient circles in which, in spite of the persecutions, a body of ancient opinions and convictions was still alive. It was not a thing arising without deeper root out of the events that began in 1517. To ignore this fact is to fall into error, an error the more serious since even the experts have strayed into it.^a

[a. To quote but one example: When Josef Beck set himself to edit a volume of original source materials, *Die Geschichts-BÄ¼cher der WiedertÄ¼ufer in Osterreich-Ungarn* (an in-group account of the rise of the

Anabaptists of Austria-Hungary) he deftly excised "a piece of Church History extending from the year 344 to 1519" for the reason that "it has nothing at all, or very little, to do with the matter in hand." Surely this is arbitrary procedure. The people who wrote this early account -- their own biography -- were of the conviction that one must pay considerable attention to the events that lie between 344 and 1519 if one is to understand the origin and history of the people described. Surely it is to beg the question to wave this testimony to one side, just because it does not fit into a preconceived historical construction!]

The dissent against the medieval order was in 1517 already a millenium old and extremely widespread. Because it had been obliged to carry on under cover, so that conference between the dissidents was quite out of the question, it had gone in all directions. The "medieval underground," as it has been called, was unable to have its "town meetings" to discuss and then come to consensus; hence the endless variety. The Church called all its foes by one and the same name, "heretics," who "like the foxes of Samson, have diverse faces but are all tied together at the tail." The Church had no desire to differentiate between group and group; they were all guilty of one and the same sin, that of challenging her monopoly; and she vented her spleen on them indiscriminately.

This will go far to explain why the "Left-wing of the Reformation" or the "Radical Reformation," or whatever one wishes to call the camp that developed the Second Front, shows such bewildering diversity.^b The Church had long had a sort of catch-all, a kind of wastebasket into which she thrust everything she didn't want; when the Reformation failed to satisfy there was again and at once the same multifariousness; Menno and M^untzer, Schwenkfeld and Servetus, and many more, all clubbed together under a single label.

[^b. Even a cursory examination of "The Radical Reformation," as discussed by George H. Williams in his recent and monumental book by that title, will show what a motley crowd is covered by that name. Elements are included that have literally nothing in common except the fact that they were neither Catholics nor followers of the Reformers.]

Fortunately for us, the record shows that there were great polarities right within the camp of the "heretics," in medieval times and also in the days of the Reformation. We find Menno Simons, for example, aiming his criticism quite as much at fellow "heretics" as at the Catholics and the Reformers. If we allow ourselves to be taught by these built-in polarities we can narrow down the area of our investigation; we can then perhaps arrive at some such thing as the "typical Anabaptist" or the typical "Stepchild of the Reformers." If we allow ourselves to be guided by the recorded antagonisms we will be able, it is hoped, to arrive at a kind of standard, the typical man of the Second Front.

Until comparatively recent times men were obliged to speak of the Stepchildren in the idioms of their foes. Men could do little but repeat the ancient vilifications that had been part of the psychological warfare raging at the Second Front.^c By and large the primary sources in the matter, consisting of court records, correspondence, confessions, testimonials, etc., were tucked away in ancient archives. There was not much historians could do but repeat the old legends.

[^c. Morikhofer, in his biography of Zwingli, asserts that "Zwingli presents in lurid colors as facts that which came to his ears as rumor." But one does not have to ascribe to outright falsification the many misrepresentations that the Reformers committed in their polemics against the Stepchildren. Much of it was due to failures in communication. The two groups proceeded from such radically different presuppositions that they were unable to do each other justice. In all events, as we shall have occasion to

point out often enough, there was plenty of reporting that must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.]

All this has changed. During the past thirty years a vast array of the primary sources has been made available in print, accessible to all who have an interest in the matter. Enough is on hand now, in fact, to warrant the assumption that further bringing to light will not alter appreciably the outlines now already wholly clear."d

[d. George H. Williams, in the first sentences of the Preface to *The Radical Reformation*, asserts that the bringing to light of the source materials concerning the Stepchildren has much the same significance for the interpretation of the whole of modern Church history that the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has for the study of the New Testament and Church history.]

One of the things that has become apparent is that near the heart of the conflict that raged at the Second Front lay two irreconcilable and mutually exclusive concepts of the delineation of the Church of Christ. Modern investigators have, one by one, singly and in combination, come to see that this was the heart of the matter, two diverse and disparate conceptions as to what the Church of Christ is and what its relation is to that which lies around it. All the several features of the struggle are so many implications of this master struggle. It is very nearly correct to say that there is consensus at this point.

The Stepchildren believed that the Church of Christ is by definition an element in society, not society as such. Their opponents, the Reformers as well as the Catholics, were unwilling to go along with this; they continued to look upon the Church as coextensive with society.

It has been said of late that Luther was faced with a dilemma, the dilemma of wanting both a confessional Church based on personal faith and a regional Church including all in a given locality. It was this dilemma that gave rise to the Second Front.

This dilemma was a cruel one. He who thinks of the Church as a community of experiential believers is bound to oppose him who thinks of it as a fellowship embracing all in a given territory; he who operates with the concept of the Church as a Society embracing all in a given geographic area must of necessity look askance at him who restricts the Church to the believing ones. The two views cannot be combined; one cancels out the other. In the one view the Church is *Corpus Christi*, the body of Christ, which consists of believing folk and of them solely; in the other view the Church is *Corpus Christianum*, the body of a "christened" society. As we shall see, attempts have been made to combine these two, but without success.

Upon the horns of this dilemma Luther was impaled. And not only Luther -- all the rest of the Reformers were torn between the same two alternatives. They one and all halted between two opinions. They one and all tried to avoid an outright choice. All tried to ride the fence.

It was this fence-riding that was the immediate occasion for the exodus of the people who thereupon came to be known as the Stepchildren and treated as such. When the Reformers gave evidence that they were not minded to let go of "Christendom," that is, of the Church embracing a whole society, then the exodus occurred. Those who departed were convinced that "Christendom" is a myth, seeing that the Church of Christ consists of the believing element of society and of it only. Their going only made the Reformers burn the midnight oil in an effort to provide an apology for the inclusive Church. And the Reformers grew progressively more hostile toward those who left. Here we are standing right in the middle of the battle at the Second Front.e

[e. With the exodus of the Stepchildren the vision of the Reformers became less ambiguous than it had been. Since the Stepchildren insisted that only a Church based on personal faith was acceptable to them and since they began to try for that kind of Church, the Reformers were left with the other alternative, a Church embracing all in a given locality. Of all the earlier Reformers it must be said therefore that they had an early phase and a later phase. This has been realized by many investigators. It has caused Alfred Farner, for instance, to say of Zwingli, in his *Die Lehre von Kirche und Staat bei Zwingli*, that "Seit dem Jahre 1526 beginnen bei Zwingli weltliches und geistliches Gebiet ineinanderzugehen." This was the logical outcome of Zwingli's drift toward the inclusive Church. At the end of his career he had come full circle, declaring "urbem Christianam nihil quam Ecclesiam Christianam esse." Another investigator, Hundeshagen, had discovered a century ago already that "Zwingli kenne das Prinzip der Gewissensfreiheit nur in den ersten Jahren seines reformatorischen Wirkens." A similar drift toward the right may be observed in the rest of the Reformers of the first decade.]

We have spoken of an exodus. That word is warranted. The people of the Second Front had indeed been at one time a part of the flock that had rallied to the cause of the Reform; in this sense the Stepchildren were the children of 1517. But they abandoned the Reformers because of an earlier conditioning; in this respect they were not the children of 1517. The Second Front resulted from an exodus of people who had come to the Reformation already conditioned, and this conditioning made it predictable that they would not feel at home there permanently and would, for that reason, depart again.

That this is what happened we have from the mouth of Luther himself. He wrote: "In our times the doctrine of the Gospel, reestablished and cleansed, has drawn to it and gained many who in earlier times had been suppressed by the tyranny of Antichrist, the Pope; however there have forthwith gone out from us Wiedertauffer, Sacramentschuxirmer und andere Rottengeister . . . for they were not of us even though for a while they walked with us."¹

In this word from the hand of Luther we read the following three things: (1) that people who in earlier times had been suppressed by papal tyranny had joined his movement (they were therefore already estranged from the medieval order); (2) that these did not stay with him, seeing that they were really not homogeneous with him and his ideas; (3) that they thereupon came to be known as Wiedertauffer, etc. The present volume is in a large way an exegesis of this terse statement made by Luther. The uncomplimentary names he used are nothing but synonyms for "Stepchildren of the Reformation."

Now that we have stated the nature of the Reformers' dilemma, we may well ask how they came to be in such an uncomfortable position. How did they happen to be torn between these two alternatives, these two irreducible views concerning the delineation of the Church? Why was it so painfully difficult to choose between these two possibilities? Whence came this problem that drained away a sizable part of the Reformers' following?

The dilemma resulted from the fact that the Reformers were torn between two loyalties. On the one hand was a loyalty to the New Testament Scriptures, which know no Church other than the believers' Church, a Church based on personal faith. On the other hand was a loyalty to what the Dutch call "het historisch gewordene" (that which has come about with the passing of time), in which the Church was construed so as to include all in a given locality. Only by repudiating history, twelve whole centuries of it, could one escape from the dilemma -- unless he were prepared to repudiate the New Testament. This latter escape neither the Reformers nor the Stepchildren were willing to use. So there was the other escape, the repudiation of *het historisch gewordene*. To reject it was a radical step, too radical except for radicals, who

took this way out and so came to stand alone, as Stepchildren.

As we have already said, in the dealings with the Stepchildren a great many terms of reproach were bandied about. Although these names were used in spite, they do, each in its turn, put in focus a phase of the master struggle, the struggle regarding the delineation of the Church. Each of these smear-words points up an aspect of the battle that raged at the Second Front. We shall in this study pick up some of the most commonly-used terms of reproach, examine them somewhat carefully, one in each chapter. Together these studies will sketch, so it is hoped, the essential outlines of the battle of the Second Front.

Before we delve into our subject we wish to point out that this neither was nor is a mere academic matter. The Stepchildren were not speculative theologians, eager to win an argument; they were deeply religious men, and the matter had a definitely existential dimension for them. We shall discover that for us also the matter is far from a mere monk's quarrel.

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

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net