

(Reformers and Their Stepchildren) Rottengeister! - Part 1

by Leonard Verduin

The sermon explores the concept of Rottengeister and its connection to the oath, highlighting the tension between the medieval Church and the early Christians, and the later swing to neo-sacralism by the Reformers.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, Matthew 11:28, Mark 10:38, Luke 12:50, John 14:6, Acts 5:41, Galatians 6:12, Hebrews 8:13

Topics: "Anabaptist History", "Christian Sacralism"

Description

Leonard Verduin preaches about the historical context of the term 'Rottengeister' used to describe agitators within society, highlighting the Anabaptists' role as faction-makers challenging the monolithic society of medieval times. The sermon delves into the Anabaptists' refusal to swear oaths, tracing the evolution of oath-taking from pre-Christian times to the medieval Church's sacralism. Verduin discusses the Anabaptists' stance on the oath, emphasizing their commitment to a Church of followers by choice rather than happenstance, contrasting with the Reformers' view. The sermon also explores the Anabaptists' deviation into docetic Christology and their emphasis on Cross-bearing as essential to discipleship, reflecting their rejection of 'Christian sacralism' and martyrdom as a hallmark of genuine faith.

Transcript

Fear not, little flock ...Luke 12:32

IN HIS DAY LUTHER SAID THAT THERE HAD GONE FORTH FROM his camp Wiedertäufer, Sacramentschwärmer, und andere Rottengeister. In earlier chapters we have busied ourselves with the first two of these terms of reproach applied to the Stepchildren; in this chapter we take up the last.

The term Rottengeister was a sort of catch-all, an and-so-forth, to cover the rest of an allegedly evil crew. We shall therefore take up in this final chapter several of the remaining features of the vision of the Stepchildren.

In a way, the name Rottengeister leads more directly to the heart of the Second Front than most of the rest of the smearwords used. A Rott is a clique, a faction, an element; and Rottengeister are clique-organizers, faction-makers, element-creators. In more sophisticated language, Rottengeister are people who agitate within a society to form a party. In our present terminology, we may say that Rottengeister are agitators whose activity leads to a composite situation. This makes them identical with "heretics," for, as we saw,

the word "heretic" points to choice-making, In medieval times, as in any sacral situation, Rottengeister were held to be the epitome of evil because they were a threat to the monolithic society. In language borrowed from the scene of the Crucifixion they were said to be guilty of "rending the robe of Christ." The term Rottengeister was very useful in the psychological warfare that raged at the Second Front -- for what the "heretic" had been in the eyes of medieval sacralism, that the Anabaptists were in the eyes of the neo-sacralists of Reformation times.

Not one of the Reformers seems to have been aware of the fact that Christians are, and in the nature of things must be, Rottengeister. Christians are out to create a following, an element, a faction. The Church of the New Testament is by definition a sect, a following (the word sect is, as we have said, from the Latin sequor, a word of which follow is the essential idea). The very thing that sacralists want to avoid at all costs is in the Christian vision the sine qua non, namely to "choose this day whom you will serve." It may be said that if the Reformers had been willing to be guided by the New Testament, there would never have been a Second Front; for then the Stepchildren's ambition to organize a Church that consisted of followers would not have seemed objectionable.

The Donatists realized in their day that to eliminate out of the lives of men the "for or against" of Christianity was to make an end to Christianity. The medieval "heretic" realized it too. As did the men of the Second Front. All of these were committed to the creation of a Church composed of Christians-by-choice, to take the place of a Church consisting of christians-by-happenstance. The Restitutionist vision. looks to the creation of islands in the sea of humanity, continents if that can be. It constructs a relief map, with parts below and parts above sea-level; it has a native fear of a landscape such as is said to have existed prior to Genesis 1:9. One must not be surprised to hear people with such a vision called Rottengeister.

It was part of the Restitutionist heritage to refuse the oath. We shall study this feature at this time; and we shall discover that this refusal to swear an oath was the consequence of the basic conviction of the "heretic."

In contemporary Western society the oath is primarily a device intended to secure veracity; it is a device whereby men think to get "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." But this is a narrowing down. Formerly the oath was quite as much a device intended to secure loyalty, particularly the loyalty of subjects to those who stood over them. This was an oath of fealty.

Although the oath is referred to in the Christian Scriptures, in the Old as well as in the New Testament, it is not an institution broached in these Scriptures. The oath is pre-Christian. It was in common use, for example, in the ethnic society of pre-Constantinian Rome. In this society the oath of fealty was in common use.' In ancient Rome the oath served especially to procure fealty to the emperor. In this capacity the oath had a decidedly religious flavor. As such it was part and parcel of a sacral situation. Back of it lay the assumption that ruler and subjects recognize and bow to one and the same Object, in the presence of which the ruler and the ruled alike place themselves as they covenant with each other. In this society the oath is a sacralism-sustaining thing. In it one's religious loyalty and one's political or civil loyalty meet, in fact, coalesce. In this society the oath is the exact opposite of "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's"; in fact, in this society this Biblical expression makes no sense; deity and ruler are too indistinguishable for that.

It was to be expected, a priori, that the early Christians would get in trouble in regard to oath-taking, the oath being what it was. Their God was not the same Object as the one that informed the emperor. They were perfectly willing and ready to promise fealty to the emperor, but not to the emperor's god. These early Christians had a problem here, a problem very similar to the one that harassed the Jews, namely, "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar?" Their conscience forbade them to get involved in the oath, the oath as it existed in pagan Roman society.

The early Christians were therefore more than likely to develop a dislike for the oath. It seemed to them -- and in this they were quite right -- that the oath had been devised to catch them. Small wonder that they began to look upon the oath as a hateful thing, a thing inspired by the powers of darkness. It is perhaps this conviction that comes to expression in the saying attributed to Gregory of Nazianzus:

"What is worse than the oath? Nothing, I say."

It will be recalled that, in the days of Decius, men had been required to sign an affidavit (an instrument that may properly be called an oath-in-writing) attesting to loyalty to the imperial religion. This also was a net in which the Christians were caught, it being planned that way. And this, too, may have contributed to a dislike for the oath as a sacralism-serving thing.

It seems that this developing tradition of dislike toward the oath was not detained very much, nor very effectively, by the fact that the Old Testament not only tolerated the oath but seemed to have enjoined it. The early Christians realized that the New Testament comes with a new formula for human society, seeks to create a "people of God" that cannot be equated with any other "people." They were convinced that the "old," which had been "nigh unto vanishing away" (cf. Hebrews 8:13) had lapsed when the new regime had been launched. They were prepared for the idea that the oath might well be a part of the now obsolete; the fact that it had been an implement for the creation and preservation of a non-composite society made them the more ready to take the oath to the attic. In all events, the down-grading of the Old Testament and the disallowing of the oath have long been companions in travel.

The promoters of the Constantinian change were quick to appropriate the already-existing institution of the oath and to bend it to their purpose. The Constantinians were as much the friends of the oath as the "heretics" were its enemies. One's attitude toward the oath consequently became an index to one's position in regard to "Christian sacralism." Therefore we read, in the jurisprudence of medieval times, that "If any man by a damnable religious superstition rejects the religion of the oath, so that he refuses to swear, he shall because of this behavior be denominated a heretic." It became standard procedure among the inquisitors to try their victims by confronting them with the oath; if they refused to swear, this was *prima facie* proof of addiction to "heresy." One of the notorious inquisitors of medieval times, Bernard Gui, summarized the procedure in these words: "all who repudiate the oath and refuse to swear, these are *ipso facto* to be condemned as heretics."² Such policies only made the "heretics" the more convinced that the oath was demonic, invented by the devil in an effort to get the faithful in trouble.

So much was the oath a sacralism-serving thing that the medieval Church employed it freely in its expansion program. The oath helped create the kind of world the advocates of "Christian sacralism" wanted and it served to find and mark for destruction those who stood in the way of this objective. It was ordered, at Toulouse in 1229, as follows:

In order that ... heretics may be the more readily exterminated and the Roman faith the more speedily planted in this land, we decree, that you shall . . . make all males above fourteen and all females above

twelve to abjure all heresy and besides promise with an oath that they will defend the Catholic Church and persecute the heretics. All those who after such abjuration shall be found to have apostatized ... shall be punished as apostates deserve.³

Whenever there was an epidemic of "heresy," the medieval Church looked to the oath as the device wherewith to solve this problem. For example, the Council of Verona, held in 1184, which had as one of the main items on its agenda the problem of the rapidly-spreading "heresy," decided that in every community there were to be named three or more men who were to "bind themselves under oath to divulge the names of any who are heretical, who hold Winckelpredigten or err in any other way."⁴ It is no wonder that the "heretics" deprecated the oath as an institution.

In the early years of the thirteenth century the same policies were employed in the Netherlands. In order to locate and then liquidate the "heretics" in those parts, the following oath was extracted from the populace:

I, N.N., swear by God Almighty, to the magistrate or to his lieutenant, that I will tell the sincere truth, without fear, touching all matters known to me and concerning which I am interrogated, not only in regard to myself but also in regard to others. So help me God and His holy mother.

A somewhat expanded form read as follows:

I, N.N., swear an oath by God Almighty, to my lord, bishop N.N., without dissimulation, that henceforth I will go no more to people that call themselves ... , ... , ... , etc., and that I will have no fellowship with them nor with their leaders, teachers, etc., as long as they remain heretics. Moreover I forswear all manner of unbelief that is contrary to the open faith taught and maintained everywhere in the holy Roman church and Christendom So help me God and his mother.⁵

In view of the fact that the oath was constantly used as a weapon with which "Christian sacralism" was sustained, and which the "heretic" opposed, it is no wonder that hostility to the oath became a distinguishing feature of the "heretic." We find it listed as such:

The wicked blasphemies of this heresy are: the denial that in baptism sins are forgiven; the assertion that the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is a folly; that by the imposition of pontifical hands nothing is conferred; that no one receives the Holy Spirit unless good works go before; that marriage is condemned; that the whole Church is found with them only; that all oath-taking is a crime."

Anyone who hesitated in regard to the oath was at once under suspicion of "heresy," so indicative of heresy was it said to be. We find a well-informed man and a loyal son of the prevailing Church, Peter Cantor, the precentor of Notre Dame in Paris, asking the question, somewhat carpingly be it said to his credit: "Why do we forthwith proclaim that man who keeps this command [of Christ; i.e., 'Swear not at all'] to be a Cathar?"⁷

There was then a long tradition concerning the oath when in the sixteenth century reform was undertaken; for many centuries it had been a mark of orthodoxy to swear the oath, and a mark of unorthodoxy to have an aversion to it.

As was the case with respect to so much of the ancient Restitutionist heritage, the Reformers at the first were quite sympathetic toward the position which the earlier "heretics" had taken in regard to the oath. As one investigator has put it: "Certain ideas that were later called Anabaptist ideas had a great appeal for some of the early reformers in the Low Countries; consider for example, the aversion to the oath which

Willem of Utrecht revealed in 1525.⁸ This Willem of Utrecht was not an Anabaptist -- although he could easily have become one. In those early days, an admirer of Hendrik Voes and Johannes Esch (the first men to die for the "Lutheran" cause), a man by the name of Reckenhofer wrote that "The customary oath which the civil rulers require of their subjects is illicit and goes counter to the commands of Christ."⁹ This Reckenhofer had in all probability derived this conviction from the preReformation "heretic" -- where else had these things been said? As late as the year 1546 there were still some people, not Anabaptists, who had no use for the oath -- one Pierre Alexander, for example.

With the Reformers' swing to the right, which swing had landed them in neo-sacralism, any hesitation in regard to the oath came to be looked upon as a grievous fault. Calvin did not hesitate to say that this sensitivity in Pierre Alexander, whom we have just mentioned, was a "lourde fault," a serious error. ¹⁰ Calvin had become sufficiently sacralist to make him look askance at any man who frowned on the instrument that had so long served the sacralist cause -- the oath.

By the time the Heidelberg Catechism was being written, neo-sacralism had become firmly entrenched. In the meantime the Stepchildren had opened the Second Front and all the ancient dislike for the oath-refusers had devolved upon them. With them in mind, Question 101 in said Catechism was inserted: "But may we not swear by the Name of God in a godly manner?" The Palatinate, for which the Heidelberg Catechism was primarily intended, was a sacral State -- not without challenge by the Stepchildren -- and here was a good chance to put in a good word for the sacralism-serving oath; and so the answer in the Catechism was "Yes, "

The Stepchildren were as disinclined to the oath as the Reformers were inclined to it. They had inherited this negative attitude to it because they had inherited the Restitutionist vision that had long ago engendered this negative attitude. And now that the two camps had formed, the Reformers began to prod their' magistrates, precisely as the medieval sacralists had prodded theirs. They pressured the magistrates to stretch the net across the path of men, so as to catch every dissenter, the same net that Decius had used in the days of the ancient pagan sacralism and that the Constantinians had used in the days of "Christian sacralism." The Reformers whispered in the ears of the civil ruler, with specific reference to the Stepchildren: "If they refuse to swear the oath then let them be banished and told never to return Then if they thereupon re-enter the domains of my lord, then let my lord deal with them in such a way that they don't do it again."¹¹ (The last phrase is a euphemistic way of saying that they should be put to death.)

At Zurich the civil authorities, spurred on by the Reformers there, published an Edict, in 1539, intended to liquidate the Stepchildren by providing:

We strictly command all inhabitants of our domains ... that if they hear of any Anabaptists they are to inform us concerning them by virtue of the oath with which they are bound We shall punish without mercy, as having violated the faith and the oath which they have sworn . . . , all who assist, and do not drive away or report, or bring to us as prisoners, all such persons.¹²

It is easily understood that such tactics did not increase the Stepchildren's love of the oath.

At nearby Basel new and special oaths were devised, looking to the elimination of every last Anabaptist with his threat to the homogeneous society.

In the Reformed Netherlands the policy was the same. As late as the year 1574, at the Synod held in that year at Dordrecht, the question was asked, "How can the Anabaptists be eliminated or made to go on the right path?" The answer given by this ecclesiastical body was, "Admonish and petition the magistrates not to receive or tolerate any in the land save only those who take the lawful oath." A few years later, in 1601, the Edict of Groningen, mentioned earlier in these studies, proposed likewise to screen . out the Anabaptists by means of the oath.a Such use of the oath only made the Stepchildren the more sure that oaths are of the devil.

[a. The Edict read: "Oock sal niemandt tot eenighe Administratie bedieninge publicke ofte Privatie, noch oock tot cunschap ofte ghetuighenisse toeghelaten worden hij doe dan de solemnelen daer toestaenden Eedt, alsulcken Eedt weygerende sullen ghestraft worden, als nae recht behoort" (printed in No. 1172 of the Knuttel Collection of Dutch Historical Tracts).]

In their policy of severity toward the Stepchildren, the Reformers were not evil-intentioned men; they were simply mistaken men. They honestly thought that society can hang together only if it is bound together by a common religious commitment; the oath was both a symbol of such common commitment and a device for securing it. If this their premise is granted, then their rigor toward the Stepchildren is explicable, and even justifiable. As a recent writer puts it: "Since the ancient loyalties and traditions of the community found their symbolic center in the civic oath, this rejection of the oath was deeply disturbing." To the man who had not rejected the sacral premise, the repudiation of the oath was the beginning of the end of all order and decency. As Zwingli put it:

You seek to destroy the magistracy and the power vested in it. Take away the oath and you have dissolved all order You see, dear reader, all order is overthrown when the oath is abrogated Give up the oath in any State and at once, and in keeping with the Anabaptists' desire, the magistracy is removed and all things follow as they would have them. Good God, what confusion and up-turning of everything!13

In this matter both sides were honest with themselves and with others; but one side was mistaken. Every Protestant can only deplore the fruitage of this mistakenness. To think that they "stretched" as large-hearted a man as was Georg Blaurock in order to force him to repeat the words of the customary oath! This was undiluted devilry. And then when the tortured wretch, faltering at the prospect of even grosser torture, went through the motions of oath-taking, a "sin" for which his people did not censure him, then to hear Zwingli say to them, "You follow neither Christ nor your own ordinances" -- this is devilry multiplied.

All told, one must surely rejoice that men have come to see that the sacral premise in not tenable, have come to realize that it is not a prerequisite for civic peace that all citizens worship at the same shrine. One can point to Switzerland, the very land that made life well-nigh impossible for the oath-refusing Stepchildren, to demonstrate the fact that the sacralist premise is wrong. Here we have a land in which there are pronounced religious diversities (going hand in hand with racial and linguistic difference, moreover) but which for a long time now has been a classic example of peace and quiet. Manifestly it is not the repudiation of the sacralist premise, but rather the retention of it, that occasions turmoil and tension.

With sacralism's basic premise discredited, most of the noise and the tumult about oath-taking has subsided. We no longer feel the need for an oath of fealty; we no longer feel that men must be bound by

oaths to inform on their fellow men; we have only the oath of veracity left. And even here "I solemnly swear" may be replaced with "I solemnly affirm" -- an alternative intended for the man who feels that the oath is not quite permissible. And we are none the worse for it. The frightful dissolution of all order and decency, which was predicted so surely by the Reformers and by all the rest who were caught up in the pre-Christian view of human society, has not materialized. We have taken up our station where the Stepchildren stood in this matter and bedlam has not overtaken us.^b

[^b. In lands where the influence of Restitutionism was not strong, the oath was used until quite recent times, to prevent "revisionism." Less than a century ago one could not attain to the rank of Professor in the University of Vienna unless he was prepared to swear to be loyal to the Roman Catholic ideology. (Cf. Herzog, *Realencyclopaedie fur Prot. Theol. und Kirche*, IX, S. 204.)]

One does not have to listen very long at the Second Front to hear something said about the incarnation; the Stepchildren were accused of entertaining grossly incorrect ideas in this matter. This accusation finds its classical expression in Article 18 of the Belgic Confession, which speaks of "the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother." This heresy was sometimes put this way, a bit too graphically: that Jesus Christ did not take His human nature from His mother, Mary, but brought it with Him, from heaven, and simply carried it through Mary, very much as water is carried through a tube. This representation was considered highly objectionable because it would make Christ's humanity like unto, but not identical with, the humanity of those He came to save.

This aberration from traditional Christology was never an integral part of the Anabaptist vision. If this fact were commonly known and accepted, we could properly omit a discussion of it here. But since the Belgic Confession speaks of it as if it were common to Anabaptism as such we must give some attention to it, the more so since the unwarranted generalization of the Belgic Confession continues to be made.^c

[^c. Professor Berkouwer continues to speak of this error as an integral part of Anabaptism, deriving from a basic item in the Anabaptist vision, namely a "false dualism" of "nature" vs. "grace." Allegedly, it was this "dualism" that made the Anabaptists balk at the idea that Christ actually identified Himself with human nature. We think there are two errors implied in Berkouwer's views; one (in which Berkouwer has the Belgic Confession on his side) is that this deviating view of the incarnation was an integral part of the Anabaptist vision; the other is that it was the outworking of "een uitgesproken dualisme."]

It was Melchior Hofmann, it seems, who injected this deviating view of Christ's humanity into the stream of Anabaptism; why he was drawn to it is not altogether apparent. He did not invent this docetic^[d] notion, however. It had been entertained earlier; in fact, it was already on the scene when the New Testament Scriptures were being laid down. It was from Hofmann that Menno Simons, perhaps the most influential writer in the camp of the Stepchildren, appropriated this docetic strain. Principally by way of Menno, it entered the stream of Anabaptist thought more or less Widely. Menno had been an Anabaptist leader for some time before becoming entangled in docetic Christology; he had preached and taught the orthodox view, a fact that goes far to prove that docetism is not inherent in the Anabaptist vision. Moreover, docetism was never accepted in large areas of the Second Front, remaining confined quite consistently to those areas that were under Dutch influence. Even in these areas it was dislodged again in the course of time, so that for a very long time now the descendants of the Stepchildren have held the orthodox view. All this goes to show that the docetic Christology was a "sport," an accidens, a more or less foreign body in the tissues of Anabaptism.

[d. The word docetic is derived from a Greek verb meaning to appear or to seem; in the docetic view, Christ's humanity was only a seeming humanity, not really real. Docetism was one of the first errors to plague the Christian Church; we find it rebuked already in 2 John: 7.]

It is evident from the record that Menno was driven to adopt the docetic view, driven to it in the heat of battle. It was principally John à Lasco, the Polish nobleman who played a leading role in the Reformation in the northern Low Countries, that led Menno to take to the docetic road. This à Lasco had expressed himself in a way that left him wide open to the charge that he taught that Christ was clothed with the same fallen nature that characterizes those whom He came to save;e as one reads à Lasco one gets the impression that he held that Christ shared in original sin, both as to its guilt and as to its pollution. This was more than Menno could take; and to find a way around the position espoused by à Lasco Menno backed into the docetic corner.

[e. For reasons that have never been adequately explained, there was present in the Polish Reformation a pronounced tendency toward unitarianism. This tendency manifested itself from the earliest times, and it soon became dominant. It could be that à Lasco's startling assertions concerning the Christ's relation to original sin were in themselves symptomatic of this tendency toward unitarianism.]

The matter à Lasco had undertaken to theologize about is in the nature of things a theologizer's happy hunting grounds and a theologian's headache. How Christ could identify himself with the human race without thereby falling heir to the fallenness of that race is a major theological puzzle, one which in Catholic theology is "solved" by the invention. of the idea of the "immaculate conception" of Christ's mother, a device whereby men seek to secure the sinlessness of Christ by providing Him with a sinless mother. (Actually this is not a solution of the problem; it merely moves the problem back one generation, for it leaves unexplained how Mary came to be that way.)

Menno entered the fray reluctantly. He was not at all a speculative theologian. He refused to carry the matter into his sermons, it being too speculative for the common man. But à Lasco's theologizing left him no choice, especially when à Lasco's associates, notably Gellius Faber and Martin Micron, gave evidence that they stood with à Lasco. When Menno objected to à Lasco's views, saying that they robbed him of the Sinless One, à Lasco and his followers ganged up on Menno. They filled tedious reams of paper to show up another of the "errors of Anabaptism," and Menno filled equally many and equally tedious reams of paper with a defence of his position. It would have been better if à Lasco had not tried to deal with the mystery of the incarnation as though it were subject to exact science, better if he had realized that whatever he could do it would remain the "grote verholenthey" (the great mystery) that Menno said it was. One thing is unmistakably clear; it is that Menno did not relish theological speculation and that he entered into the argument only because he was honestly convinced that the dignity of the Christ was being jeopardized.

Now that the noise of the battle had died down, now that those gracious forces that keep the atmosphere of this planet from getting too polluted by the dust men stir up, as we look back at those turbulent times it is refreshing to discover that there was at least one clergyman who kept the poise that becomes every man who handles the mysteries of the Christian Faith. We are thinking of that freckle-faced preacher, Adrian van Haemstede, a native son of the Flemish soil, who said, as he beheld the theologians tearing at each other, that it reminded him of the coarse persons who played at dice at the foot of the Cross, fought with each other as to who was to have the robe, without great concern about Him whose robe it was. He asserted that the whole contention turned not about the incarnation as such but around the details, the

circumstantiae. He said that when Anabaptists died for their convictions they died for the Gospel; he referred to the Stepchildren as "weaker brethren in Christ." He was ready to grant that Menno had made some mistakes -- but he added, in the same breath, that this was true of others also, Calvin included. He tried to persuade the magistrates of the England to which he and his countrymen had fled, not to act on the advice of his countrymen but to leave the Anabaptists alone, since they did not disturb the peace. It was four centuries too early to say such things. The leaders of the Refugee Churches persuaded the authorities to depose van Haemstede and to expel him from the realm. He died a demoted man.

We have said that docetism is not constitutive of the Anabaptist vision. But it is possible that the drift toward the deviating view was somehow related to the Anabaptist vision nevertheless. The Stepchildren's quarrel with "Christian sacralism" may have conditioned them in that direction. They were pitted against a theology that slurs over the distinction of "regenerate" and "not regenerate," a theology that identifies the Yolk Gottes with the Yolk, a theology that equated the Corpus Christi with the Corpus Christianum, a theology in which there runs a continuity that cannot be harmonized with the authentic Christian vision. And, as Menno saw it, now à Lasco was continuing this line of continuity onward still, was extending it until it included the Christ also. This was too much for Menno. The Anabaptist theology had sought to recover the discontinuity that is inseparable from the New Testament vision, a discontinuity whereby "Church" and "World" are disjunct and not coextensive. Small wonder that Menno could not resist the opportunity to introduce discontinuity in the area of Christology. In the Anabaptist theology there is a marked awareness of a heterogeneity between the Church and Society as such; when Menno saw a chance, and a need, to posit a similar heterogeneity between the Head of the Church and human society, he was constrained to seize the opportunity. In the words of a contemporary investigator, "In Menno's view of the incarnation of Christ we see his customary sharp antithesis between regenerate and unregenerate, between Church and society, extended to the Source and Head of the Church."¹⁴ If this is so, then Menno's excursion into the field of the ancient docetic error becomes at least relatable to the basic thrusts of the Anabaptist vision, an explicable if unwarranted working-out of its basic thrust, that of a radical break with "Christian sacralism."

The Stepchildren fell heir to the concept of the "Cross" which one encounters also in the medieval "heretic." Because they were rebuked for this, the matter deserves a place in this study.

In authentic Christianity the Cross is God's most emphatic no to man's yes, His most emphatic yes to man's no. A clear example is to be found in Galatians 6:12, where St. Paul pits a religion of human achievement and merit (of which circumcision was the symbol among the people whom the Apostle was opposing) against a religion of grace. He brings the issue into sharpest focus by saying "they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ." The Cross is a sweeping declaration of man's inability to save himself from his predicament; this is bad news for every man who has not as yet capitulated to the speech from the beyond; hence it entails persecution against those who have so capitulated. When one experiences the hostility which the Gospel of grace is certain to encounter as it collides with unhumiliated man, then one experiences the Cross. This is the one and only meaning Cross-bearing has in the New Testament writings. To bear the Cross is to experience the dislike which confirmed unbelief is wont to heap upon the Christ and upon those that have aligned themselves with Him.

It goes without saying that when Christianity is thrust into the sacral pattern Cross-bearing becomes obsolete, there being no further occasion or opportunity for it. Who would vent his spleen, and on whom, and what for? The erstwhile tensions subside in the climate of "Christendom"; the controverting speech from the beyond is no longer heard; autosoterism is again enthroned.^f What further Cross-bearing will

there, can there, be?

[f. Autosoterism is, of course, the theology in which man is his own savior. The most subtle autosoterism comes to expression in the 'place assigned to Mary in the Catholic theology, the Mother of God. In this theology humanity has itself provided what was needed, by a sort of "miracle-of-Mary." The "heretics" refused a theology in which Mary becomes in any sense "co-redemptrix"]

If the Constantinian change made Cross-bearing obsolete, the word Cross was of course retained; it was too much a part of the erstwhile Christian vocabulary, too much a part of the heritage, to be simply excinded. It was therefore transvaluated. The old and only authentic meaning was dropped and a new meaning was infused into the word. On the one hand the Cross was carried into the liturgy of the Church; it became an object that henceforth occupied a prominent place in the Church's furniture. Moreover, the custom of "striking a cross" arose, a piece of pantomime that to this day marks the man who stands in the tradition of medieval "Christian sacralism." On the other hand a new content was poured into the expression "bearing the Cross." Whereas the New Testament reserves the expression for the unpleasant experiences that are wont to follow upon being a Christian, the expression was now made to connote the sufferings that dog our footsteps because we are men. Here is a man with a sightless eye, a palsied hand, a cloven palate -- what a "cross" for such a man! This spurious connotation, however, finds not the faintest support in the New Testament. It is part of the perversion which the "heretics" called the "fall of the Church."

Rebellion against the Constantinian change, whereby Crossbearing was precluded, was instantaneous. With the Donatist rebellion begins a long tradition of "heresy" in which one finds a studied attempt to conserve and preserve Cross-bearing, that experience which in authentic Christianity is the hall-mark of genuineness. When the coming of "Christian sacralism" had made martyrdom a thing of the past, the Restitutionists went to great lengths to preserve it. The followers of Donatus said expressly that to "bear the reproach of Christ" was as necessary and as definitive of the believer as it had been heretofore; the only thing that had changed was. that, whereas in earlier times the Christians had been molested by the pagan world, they were now being molested by "christians," who were another variety of pagans. This implied for them that not the Catholics but they, the Donatists, were the true continuation of the authentic Church. They said that "the true Christian must expect a life of continuous hardship, his fate is that of all just men, from Abel on down."¹⁵

Since Donatism was reactionary, it was a matter of course that something of fanaticism entered the picture. So sure were the Donatists that the hall-mark of the true Christian is that he experiences hardship because of the Faith that they began almost -- and sometimes even without the almost -- to seek martyrdom. Especially was this true of the Circumcelliones, that lunatic fringe of the Donatist movement, among whom men sometimes leaped from bridges and cliffs in order to accompany to their reward some who were being put to death for the Faith. These extremists were simply taking steps to make sure that they were not members of the now "fallen" Church, in which there was no longer any Cross-bearing. Although the mainline Donatists did not go to such extremes, they did exalt the martyr to great height. There was a tendency to glory in martyrdom. This is, of course, not far removed from the attitude of the earliest disciples of the Christ; had not they rejoiced "that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for His name"? (Acts 5:41).

In medieval times the Restitutionist camp kept alive the Donatist appraisal of Cross-bearing, sometimes even carrying it to the same extremes to which the Circumcelliones went. We read for instance in the

official report of the slaughter of a large pocket of "heretics" in the vicinity of Beziers, that "There was no need for our men to cast them in [i.e., into the fire]; nay, all were so obstinate that they cast themselves in, of their own accord."¹⁶ Possibly this is an exaggerated report of the martyrdom-seeking of these "heretics"; it may also be that the "fallen" Church recalled that it had once had to do with people who volunteered for martyrdom, so that this became part of the stereotyped image of the "heretic." But there can be no doubt that at times such fanatic willingness to die for the Faith did come to expression.

Nor must we be greatly surprised at this frame of mind. Life did not hold forth much promise in the case of a "heretic" who remained behind, when all that mattered was going to the fire! Better to enter at once into glory than to drag out an existence of almost total bereavement on earth!

This also explains the light-heartedness that often marked the "heretic" as he went to the flames. We read of a colony of such "heretics," apprehended in the vicinity of Cologne in 1163. They were called "Cathars" -- a designation with which we have become acquainted -- and they had lay-folk who preached; they were "well versed in the Scriptures"; they considered themselves to be "the true Church" and all the rest to be outside it; they disdained the Church's clergy and sacraments, etc. Of this group, we read, eight men and three women were going to the fire "cum exaltatione" (in high spirits) when an unusually beautiful young woman stepped forward, "touching whom the judges and the by-standers were moved to compassion, so that they tried to spare her But she, suddenly eluding the hands of them that held her, jumped into the fire and perished with the rest."¹¹

To quote but one more example. In 1414 when some forty-four "heretics" were about to be burned at Winckel, near Langensalza, in Thuringia, a man came riding up just as they were going to the stake. He, crying "I too am one of them!" leaped into the inferno and so died with his comrades.

Although the earliest rustlings of the Reformation occurred sub crucis, that is, "under the cross," the swing to the right put an end to the Cross-bearing. When the Reformers accepted the hand of the local rulers the sacralist climate returned; the Cross no longer awaited the person who walked the way of the Reform.

[g. There is a long and persistent custom on the part of historians to begin the story of the Reformation in any given area at the point when civil rulers appear on the scene ready and willing to support the Reform; this means that these historians begin at the point where some new and now Protestant version of "Christian sacralism" has become feasible. This makes them begin the story of the Reformation in Germany at the point where the Princes give evidence that they will support the Reform; it makes them begin the story of the Reformation in England with Henry VIII; in France with the coming of the Conde's, etc. In this school of thought, the Reform in the Low Countries begins at 1566, with the Compromis of the Nobles. Now it is quite true that the Reform that saw things through to victory in the Low Countries did begin with the Compromis. But this school of history must of necessity make light of all that went before 1566. This is to make light of a very important chapter in the story, the first chapter. After all, the Reformation was already fifty years old when the Compromis was drawn up. The Compromis did indeed start a new chapter; but it quite as certainly brought a chapter to its close, the chapter in which Restitutionism, and not neo-Constantinianism, calls the signals.

For men who had Restitutionism in their blood this looked like a betrayal, a betrayal very like to the one against which the Donatists had fought. To them a Cross-less discipleship was a contradiction in terms. As a recent scholar has put it: "The Anabaptists accepted suffering not as an incidental but as an essential to

discipleship. Baptism is a baptism into death. When the Church is true to its calling, it is a suffering Church. With the conversion of Constantine, however, it exchanged its status as a suffering Church for that of a persecuting Church and therefore lost its status as the true Church."¹⁸ Of, as another modern investigator has put it:

. . . a 'theology of martyrdom' developed among the Brethren, an understanding that the citizen of the Kingdom of God will necessarily meet suffering in this world The Anabaptist accepted the idea of the suffering Church in an almost matter of fact fashion, and every member of this group understood it without much explanation. In fact, we often discover even a kind of longing for martyrdom, a desire to be allowed to testify for the new spiritual world through suffering and supreme sacrifice.¹⁹

It is apparent that in the Second Front baptism was looked upon as the rite in which one lays bare his back, as it were, in anticipation of the Cross. As Conrad Grebel put it:

He that is baptized has been planted into the death of Christ True Christians are sheep among wolves, ready for the slaughter. They must be baptized into anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death." They must be tried in the fire and must reap the fatherland of rest, not by killing their bodily enemies but by mortifying their spiritual ones.

[h. The identification of Cross-bearing and baptism is of course well grounded in the New Testament. In Mark 10: 38f., Jesus, speaking of his passion, refers to it as a baptism, a baptism, moreover, to which His disciples would also be treated. The "baptism" mentioned in Luke 12:50 is also, so it seems, synonymous with the Cross.]

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

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