

Book Review:

The Reformers and their Stepchildren, by Leonard Verduin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1964), 292 pages. Paperback \$28.00. Reviewed by Timothy R. Nichols, third year Th.M. student at Chafer Theological Seminary.

“The history of the Church is, to a large extent, the story of a tension between two extreme tendencies: the one extreme makes so much of the principle ‘in the world’ that the Church loses her identity; the other extreme makes so much of the principle ‘not of the world’ that the Church becomes irrelevant.”¹ Anyone familiar with church history and ecclesiology has already learned the basic facts behind *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*. Even so, Verduin’s synthesis, unifying various dissidents to the mainstream Reformation under one banner, may come as a shock.

That banner is their opposition to sacralism, the union of the church and the secular state. Christian sacralism began with Constantine, who “had been *pontifex maximus* hitherto, the High Priest of the Roman state religion, and. . . entered the Church with the understanding that he would be *pontifex maximus* there too.”² At first, the Reformers viewed existing dissident movements as kindred spirits, because they (initially) agreed in rejecting sacralism in principle. This adoption was short-lived, because mainstream Reformers recast themselves in Catholicism’s sacralist image, when they gained ascendancy. The dissidents opposed the new form of sacralism as much as the old, and thus became the Reformers’ Stepchildren.

Every sacralist church regards all people within its territory as part of it: “By sacral society we mean society held together by

¹ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 277.

² *Ibid.*, 42.

a religion to which all the members of that society are committed.”³ The Stepchildren—and, Verduin correctly observes, the New Testament—had a radically divergent ecclesiology:

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.⁴

The eight chapter titles cite German epithets directed against the Stepchildren and their ecclesiology. Chapter 1 (*Donatisten!*) concerns the sacralists’ portrayal of the Stepchildren as anarchists bent on destroying civil power, because they insisted that secular power did not belong in the church. The second chapter (*Stäbler!*) examines their conviction that doctrinal agreement was to be voluntary, not coerced by the state’s sword. The third (*Catharer!*) is their insistence upon moral uprightness, which sacralists could not require. After all, a composite church by definition includes many who simply could not and would not live a Christ-like life.⁵

The fourth chapter (*Sacramentschwärmer!*) examines the Stepchildren’s restriction of the Lord’s Table to believers (not society at large). Sacral religion is necessarily ritualistic, for how else could all in a given land observe the sacrament? Christian sacralism makes the sacramental ritual an indispensable means to personal salvation. In fact, Verduin says, “The Reformation left undecided the question whether salvation is by believing re-

³ Ibid., 23.

⁴ Ibid., 24. The debate ultimately revolved around the question of which was composite: the church, or the society as a whole?

⁵ Editor’s note: An article in this issue of the CTS Journal, “Abiding in Christ: Dispensational Spiritual Life,” by Robert Dean, Jr., considers a related issue, the common practice of reading a composite church into John 15.

sponse to the Word or by sacramental manipulation. There is a tendency to believe the former without rejecting the latter. . . . It is only in the churches that trace their ancestry back to the Stepchildren that salvation by sacramental manipulation has been consistently repudiated.”⁶

Chapter 5 (*Winckler!*) considers the Stepchildren’s time-honored penchant for meeting secretly and for private, unofficial marriage ceremonies. This counter-cultural trait (dating to New Testament times) is hardly surprising for persecuted sects. Chapter 6 (*Weidertäufer!*, i.e., *Anabaptists!*) discusses the rebaptism of converts from the state church.⁷ Stepchildren objected to the sacralistic taint of christening into the state church, but many of these sects baptized their own infants.⁸

The seventh chapter (*Kommunisten!*) deals with accusations of unorthodox economics, namely that they “possessed their goods in common.” In the main, this was false: the Stepchildren’s “community of goods” directly applied 1 John 3:17’s admonition to care for the needy. Although exceptions (such as the Hutterites) held property communally, membership was always voluntary.⁹ The Münster debacle was an exception to voluntarism, but it clearly involved the movement’s lunatic fringe, since other Anabaptists fiercely denounced those of Münster.¹⁰ The final chapter (*Rottengeister!*) discusses various and sundry aspects of the Stepchildren’s movement.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190. Anabaptism started soon after Constantine, because not everyone accepted sacralism.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196–97. This is not as inconsistent as it might first appear. The issue in rebaptism was not necessarily the need for believer baptism, but the need for baptism into the true (i.e., nonsacralist) church.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 237–38. Even if the Münster occurrence were the secret dream of Anabaptists throughout Europe, who contends that they shed more blood than did the Reformers’ misguided attempts to destroy them?

In addition to his compelling account of this much neglected portion of church history, Verduin also adds a powerful voice to those contending that uniting civil and ecclesiastical power in a single entity always results in blood and horror. As an observant student of history will realize, this pattern is embarrassingly widespread: the Muslim conquests of North Africa and Indonesia, the Crusades, the forced conversions of various groups to Eastern Orthodoxy under the Russian Tsars, the Salem witch trials, recent violence between Hindu and Muslim factions vying for power in India, and many more. *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* adds the Protestant Reformation to the list. But Verduin's synthesis offers more than just history. It has staggering implications for today as well. Is it desirable to re-create America as the Christian nation that it allegedly once was? Is such a thing as a Christian America even possible? Or, as Verduin claims, does Christianity itself create a composite—not a Christian—society?

The theological implications of his work also need exploration. The sacralist church following Constantine could only view itself as the composite replacement of Israel. The Reformers bought into sacralism, replacement theology, and the idea of a composite church, understanding the three ideas as interwoven parts of a single whole. This observation leads to two questions. First, did sacralism and replacement theology predispose Calvin (for example) to read a composite church into the New Testament? The possibility exists that sacralist theology introduced a harmful theological bias into the Reformers' exegesis. Second, most modern Reformed theologians reject sacralism,¹¹ but accept its progeny (a composite view of the church). Are these two concepts legitimately separable?

¹¹ Verduin speaks from within Reformed theology. Not only did he deliver a lecture series under Calvin Foundation sponsorship, but that organization was involved with him in the publishing process (cf. *ibid.*, 7).

As is often true with historical works, this work's implications reach far beyond the course charted within his book.¹² Even taken strictly as a history, Verduin's clear and forceful writing immediately demonstrates his command both of his material and the requisite European languages. A must-read for ecclesiology and church history students, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* demands attention and respect from the first page.

¹² The lecture series was in 1963; the book was in 1964. Verduin's "Postscript," (ibid., 276–81), considers Kennedy's recent election as president. This was then a burning issue, because "the Catholic Church has not to this day rejected the sacral formula" (ibid., 277). In this light, Verduin's focus is understandable, but other theological implications require attention.