

General Topics :: The Reformers and Their Stepchildren

The Reformers and Their Stepchildren - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2008/12/12 9:14

VERDUIN'S THE REFORMERS AND THEIR STEPCHILDREN

In *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, the author Leonard Verduin focuses on the relationship between the Magisterial Reformer's and the Radical Reformers (what the author calls 'the Stepchildren'). Verduin's controversial thesis is that when the 'second front' of the Radical Reformers started, the Magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) made a theological (and political) shift contrary to the direction of progress which began in the early days of the Reformation. Verduin believed that the Magisterial Reformers heated reaction towards the Radical Reformers was thoroughly unbiblical in two important ways: (1) the Magisterial Reformers reverted back to Constantine's Sacramentalism which blurred the identity (or at minimum, the role) of the Church and the State and (2) an ecclesiology which lacks the Biblical prerequisite of voluntary membership on the basis of faith in Christ. These two errors spawned other errors mentioned in the book such as the use of political coercion against the Stepchildren and the persecutions expressed against those who believed in believer's baptism.

The book is organized into various chapters, each titled after a various derogatory name given by the Reformers to the Radicals. These names drew important aspect of the disagreement between the Reformers and their stepchildren. All the names which are the chapter titles are in the original language which the name originated from.

One of the book's strength is that very few books concerning the Radical Reformation have receive as much attention as this one did among those who identify themselves with Reformed Theology. It is also stimulating for those who are sympathetic towards the Reformers to consider who these Radicals were that the Reformers dealt with. A further strength of the book is that it provided much documentation. As with any controversial thesis, having many references from primary sources in order to substantiate one's conclusion is always a plus. Reading the explanatory footnotes and checking the endnotes in the back of the book to know the source of the quotation was actually a delight for me.

The book repeatedly would cite the Reformers' own words or the words of their followers. These extensive quotes provide much force behind the author's argument that the Reformers shifted from the early days of the Reformation. For instance, I was surprised to read on page 198 from the early Zwingli who believed that infant baptism was wrong and "ought not to be done." The author then documents on page 199 of Zwingli compromising during another occasion until finally he renounced his earlier position and fully embraced infants.

One of the weaker chapters in the book was the first chapter titled "Donatisten". It is a surprise to me that the author viewed the original Donatists of the fourth century in a favorable light. This is new to me, as my limited experience with various sources for church history has portrayed the Donatist as heretical. This interpretation of the Donatists as simply reacting against Constantine's merger of Church and state was heavily dependent upon secondary sources rather than primary sources. In addition, the author avoided interaction with the Donatist's theology to see whether they were heretics and he writes on the footnote on page 34 that there were dissenting heretical Donatist groups and that other Donatists disowned the heretical Donatists. It was rather unsatisfactory to see the author's assertion was just left at that with no further documentation provided. For the caliber of the author's scholarship throughout the book, this seems inexcusable, especially since the author was trying to present to them as being biblical.

The book could have also been strengthened if the author was able to expound more on the Biblical text that he cited against the Reformers.

Though a small peripheral issue, I also believed that other weaknesses in the book arises when the book goes on to discuss things beyond the treatment of the Reformers and their Stepchildren. On pages 274 and 275, as the last chapter is about to close, the author discusses about the problem of Christians' vocation as a policeman or an agent of the State. The author simply concludes that it is better to leave such an assignment to unregenerate men. My own biases is clearly shown here, having been a former Marine for six years and a veteran of the first year in Iraq in 2003, but it appear that the author's counsel that it is better for Christians to stay away from being servants of the state is contrary to the spirit of Luke 3:14, where John the Baptist didn't tell a group of soldiers to depart from the military, but rather commands them to be upright, which assumes that it was possible.

These weaknesses are minor when one takes into consideration what one can learn here. It definitely made me reconsider my thoughts towards the Reformers. This book is not for the faint-hearted fans of the Reformers! If anything, it reinforces the Reformers' teaching on sin, that no one is righteous and perfect. The book proves that the Reformers were no exception to the rule. Many times I cringed reading about the various torture and coercion upon the Radicals by the Magisterial Reformers. The accounts of the Stepchildren's martyrdom was not easy to read, when one realizes that what was taking place was Christians murdering other Christians. The book is a tour de force memorial to the fact that the Reformation was just only beginning of the Reformation, and not the final end product! Having had much of my understanding of the Reformation impact upon theology, culture, and society from sources such as Timothy George, Francis Schaeffer, John Robbins and even Max Weber, that paint the Reformers impact in a positive light, The Reformers and their Stepchildren is a much needed balance to the historical account of the Reformation, the Reformers, and the source of religious freedom. I plan to study more on this in the future.

from: <http://veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2008/11/19/verduin's-the-reformers-and-their-stepchildren/>

Re: The Reformers and Their Stepchildren - posted by philologos (), on: 2008/12/12 10:20

Quote:
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There is a saying among historians that "one of the chief spoils of victory is that you get to write the history."

This means that most of our history of the Donatists, coming from the likes of Augustine, is the testimony of a hostile witness. That doesn't mean that we can discount such a testimony but only that we must take that into consideration when reading 'primary sources'. 'Spin' is not a new idea!

The Torch of the Testimony and The Pilgrim Church both tend to work on the assumption that the Roman Catholic church has 'spun' the facts. Those sympathetic to the Step Children of the Reformation ie groups like usually described as Anabaptists were a wide spectrum of positions and it is likely that the Donatists were similar. In the way that we might bundle together 'the emerging church' so the 'orthodox' historians bundle together all the non-orthodox and slap on a label.

The Anabaptists were much more radical and literal in their interpretations of scripture and this caused many of them to adopt pacifist views, as today. Add to this the tendency, well known in the study of revolution, for a 'middle class' to take over the leadership of a movement and you have the Reformation. Luther was strongly in favour of the peasants until it seemed that they would unravel the whole of society; then he dug in his heels and took his stand in a state-church. Cromwell did exactly the same thing.

This doesn't mean that this writer, me, is claiming objectivity, I am not. I am simply saying that the distorting lenses of theological position affect all historians.

Re: - posted by tjservant (), on: 2008/12/12 10:30

Quote:
-----I am simply saying that the distorting lenses of theological position affect all historians.

Amen.