

The Children of the Reformation

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Beloved Children of the Reformation!

In this pamphlet I wish to write not only *to* you, but *about* you. This you may have gathered from my subject already. It is not my chief purpose to deal with the Reformation and the Reformers, however necessary and instructive that may be. It is rather my purpose to write about the children, the spiritual children, of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, in the historical line of which all Protestant churches, to one degree or another, stand. And all that I have to say may really be summed up under the one main question: *who* and *what* are the Children of the Reformation?

However, my purpose in talking *about you* to you is practical. That practical purpose is: *self-examination*.

There are, I would say, four kinds of children of the Reformation. In the first place, you could speak of *historical children* of the Reformation. They belong, probably by birth, to some church which historically is an offshoot of Protestantism. But they do not care about their relation to the Reformation, and they probably even resent it and certainly are not concerned about it. In the second place, you can speak of *traditional children* of the Reformation. They belong to a church which to some degree still confesses the great truths of the Reformation and of our Reformed heritage; but they are themselves dead and utterly unconcerned about their Reformation heritage. They probably even chafe at its supposedly narrow restraints, and frequently they openly express themselves as desiring to get rid of those restraints. In the third place, there are *slumbering children* of the Reformation, who are at heart true children of the Reformation. But they have become drowsy or have even fallen fast asleep; and they are, therefore, themselves in great danger because they are out of touch with reality. They are, moreover, also instrumental in bringing the church in the midst of the world into grave danger. Such slumbering children must, of course, be awakened - and they will be, too, if they are true children of the Reformation. Finally, there are the *true, lively, alert children* of the Reformation, to whom their heritage is dear, to whom their heritage is a matter of a lively faith, and who strive to live and to manifest themselves in the midst of the church and in the midst of the world as children of the Reformation, unabashedly and without compromise.

With respect to the above four fold classification, let us each one ask himself the question: who am I, and what am I?

If we are anything but that last class that I have mentioned, may we be pricked into recognizing ourselves for what we are, and pricked thereby into repentance before the face of God. And if, by the grace of God, we may belong to that host of God who are the true and live children of the Reformation today, may we be encouraged and heartened and moved to an ever greater faithfulness and zeal.

With that practical purpose in mind, I call your attention to:

The Children of the Reformation

asking you to note with me these three main characteristics:

I. A Reformatory Heart

II. A Reformatory Obedience and Discernment

III. A Reformatory Militance

A REFORMATORY HEART

I would say, briefly, that a Reformatory heart is a heart that is gripped by what has come to be known as the "material principle" of the Reformation. It has become rather common to speak of that material principle. With reference to Luther that material principle of the Reformation is said to have been the truth of *justification by faith*, or, more simply, *by faith only*. And in Calvin's case, which is essentially the same, we say that that material principle came to a fuller and richer expression in the term "by grace only"; or, more specifically, in the expression, "the absolute sovereignty of God"; or, more specifically still, "the truth of God's sovereign, particular grace," summed up in the well-known Five Points of Calvinism.

But put that way, in terms of a "material principle," I think the matter is rather cold and formal and abstract; and it does not really explain very much. It does not tell us what actually happened in the Reformation. It does not tell us what is essential to *all* reformation, also today, and what is characteristic of the children of the Reformation today. Hence, I would take you back for a moment into history, in order to face this question and find an answer to it: what is it that actually happened in the Reformation, and what is essential to all reformation?

This is illustrated in the case of Martin Luther.

We may ask the question: what moved Martin Luther to do what he did? What moved him to break with the church in which he was born and baptized and brought up? That is a serious matter! To break with one's church is never an insignificant thing, except for those indifferent natures like an Esau or a Gallio. What moved Luther to break with the church which was his spiritual mother, and apart from which - according to the doctrine of the day - there was no salvation, so that to a faithful and true son of the church eternal life or eternal death depended on one's connection with that only church as an institution? What moved Luther to break - though that church was the only church that existed at the time, so that if he broke, it was incumbent upon him to conceive of and to establish something different in its stead?

The answer to this question lies in the personal history of Martin Luther himself, first of all.

There was a tremendous break in the personal life of Luther which lay back of his break with the church.

Luther had a problem, a deep problem, a soul-problem. That problem was: how can my sins be forgiven? How can I be justified before God, so that I may have eternal life? That was his question!

To that question the church answered him: you can obtain forgiveness and peace by self-denial and self-torment. And Luther himself says: "I tormented myself to death to make peace with God." But he found no peace.

The church answered: you can find forgiveness and peace by making a pilgrimage to Rome and doing homage to the pope. He went thither as early as 1511 - in vain.

They answered: you can obtain forgiveness, and thereby peace, by buying indulgences, signed declarations of the church, of the pope, guaranteeing forgiveness and deliverance from the torments of purgatory. No doubt, as many others did, Luther tried that too - in vain.

And then, having been urged to read the Bible by a town-preacher at Erfurt, and with the question of his soul ever more urgent because of the sudden death of his friend, who was struck by lightning, and because of a dangerous illness that had attacked himself, Martin Luther found at last in a cloister, under the dust, safely locked to a chain, a volume of Scripture. And there he found the answer to his question for the first time: "The just shall live by faith!" He did not yet realize it. As yet he had made no personal application of that truth; he did not, in fact, until after his visit to the seat of Roman supremacy. There at Rome he was astounded and shocked by the corruption of the church; and he returned home deeply hurt and thoroughly dissatisfied in his soul, pondering all the time the question, "How can I be justified before my God?"

Then it was, finally, that those old words rushed back to his soul, now in their full force and significance: "The just shall live by faith!"

Right there and then, justified by the faith that is in Jesus Christ, Martin Luther had become a different man, far different than he himself was aware of at the moment. The break had been accomplished - the break that was necessary, should a public rupture with the church ever be realized. It is that break in Luther's soul, in his heart, in his personal life, that accounts historically for all that followed.

The same was true of John Calvin.

The manner was a bit different, and the form of that break may have been different. There was more than one reason for this; but we need not enter into these reasons at the moment. (We must remember that Calvin did not stand at the beginning of the Reformation, but he stood in the light of Luther.) But the manner and the form and the circumstances were such that they caused John Calvin to see and to develop as never before the truth that God is *God*, the truth of the sovereign God of our salvation, the truth of the God of sovereign, particular grace.

But what took place in Calvin's case was essentially the same as it was with Luther.

Just ask the question: what was it that moved John Calvin? What was it that moved him to risk his life already in France, his homeland? What was it that moved him to forsake all, to flee his fatherland, and to go to Geneva? What was it that moved him to listen to William Farel's urgings and to stay at Geneva to teach and to preach? What was it that moved him in the face of the Libertine enemies at Geneva to protect the sanctity of the table of the Lord with his own body, even in the face of the sword? What was it that called him back to Geneva after he had been banished and that moved him to burn up his life and all his energies in the cause of the church and the cause of the academy there at Geneva?

The answer is the same.

It was the truth of the gospel: the gospel of justification by faith; the gospel that God is absolutely God, the sovereign; the gospel that salvation is of the Lord, of free, sovereign grace!

That truth of the gospel, that faith of our fathers, that material principle of the Reformation, as it is called, had a grip - a singular, exclusive, all-consuming grip - on their hearts! It made them say, in the language of [Psalm 46](#): "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge!" It made them say in the language of the forty-eighth Psalm: "This God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death!"

And the same is true of any reformation that ever was or that ever will be. It was true of any reformation that took place in biblical times in the old dispensation already. It was true of the thousands upon thousands in Europe who were awakened through the instrumentality of a Luther and a Calvin. It has been true ever since the Reformation in all the minor reformations that have taken place when Protestantism developed and when departures from the faith began to make their appearance, down to the present, where we stand today!

Let us analyze this for a moment with application to ourselves as children of the Reformation.

It means, in the first place - and this is central - that the work of reformation, *all reformation*, is not first of all the work of men, but of Almighty God, the God of His church. This distinguishes, in principle, all reformation from revolution. Revolution is always the work of men, mere men, sinful men. Reformation is always the work and accomplishment of God, who through His Spirit and Word calls and prepares the reformers, whether they be the leading lights of any reformation or whether they be the "little people" of a reformation. God calls them to a superhuman task, a task that no mere man can accomplish.

That is the only way you can explain the Reformation. It was not because Luther was a hardheaded German. It was not because John Calvin was a hot-blooded Frenchman. It was not because our Dutch forefathers were stubborn Dutchmen. It was not because they were rugged individualists with a new idea. It was because God Himself apprehended them in their hearts with the irresistible conviction of the truth of the gospel, so that it became *all-important* to them. That is the essence of reformation.

That means, in the second place, that the children of the Reformation have a *reformatory heart* and that this reformatory heart is a *single heart*. They are not double-hearted. A double-hearted man, the Bible tells us, is unstable in all his ways. He is a man who halts between two opinions. Such a man can never have a part in reformation. From the heart are the issues of life. And if a man is double-hearted, he is double in his thinking and double in his willing and double in his desiring. The result is that today he seems to be for God's cause, and tomorrow he appears as being for the cause of the world. Today he stands for the truth; tomorrow he flops over to the lie of human philosophy. Today he stands for the kingdom of God; tomorrow you find him joining the world in the vain attempt to cleanse the well by washing the pump-handle. Today he stands with you; tomorrow he stands with the opponent. And especially in times of stress, when opposition becomes strong, when the enemy threatens, when self-denial is demanded, when it becomes mandatory to suffer in the cause of Christ, a double-hearted man will ultimately not go along with you. That is definitely not the stuff of which children of the Reformation are made.

Children of the Reformation are single-hearted. They have a heart that is single for good. That, you understand, is a regenerated heart, a heart that is born from above, a gift of sovereign

grace. That is a heart, too, that has been grafted into Christ, that lives by faith out of Christ. It is a heart that has said farewell to the devil and to the kingdom of the devil and to the methods of the devil and to the lie of the devil, in order to cling to Christ, the revelation of the God of our salvation. It is a heart that has been gripped, apprehended, by the grace of God, by the faith of the gospel, a heart that is single with love for God's kingdom, for His cause, for His church, for His truth, for His precepts. It is a heart that is dominated exclusively by one principle, controlling all of a man's thoughts and all his desires, and all his strivings and all his actions.

For as a man's heart is, so is he!

Such are the children of the Reformation!

A REFORMATORY OBEDIENCE AND DISCERNMENT

It is sometimes said that the formal principle of the Reformation is the authority of the Word of God, of the Scriptures, and its twin principle is the office of all believers. And this is true.

But again, when you put the matter of the principle of the Reformation in that form, there is something abstract and very formal and cold about it. It does not quite express the idea of reformation; nor does it express the real character of children of the Reformation.

We must understand that reformation inevitably involves conflict. You can never avoid that. There has never been a reformation without conflict. In the second place, reformation not only involves conflict; but in one degree or another, to one extent or another, reformation involves necessarily conflict with *authorities*, primarily church authorities. This also is inevitable in all reformation; you cannot avoid it. And the question is: is that right? Is it right to stand in conflict with the authorities in the church? Is that not revolution? What is the difference in this respect between reformation and revolution?

It is important to know this difference!

It is important to know because if there is one thing of which we, as children of the Reformation, must be absolutely certain, it is this, *that we are not revolutionaries*. We must be certain that when we are engaged in the work of reformation, we are engaged in the work of *God*, not the work of man. It is important to know this also from the practical point of view in this respect, that as a child of the Reformation you will exactly be accused of being a malcontent, a rebel, a troubler of Israel (as Ahab accused Elijah), a policeman, a narrow-minded, bigoted, stubborn, sectarian, heresy-hunting troublemaker! You had better believe it! As surely as you are a child of the Reformation, you will hear that! What are you going to say? What is going to be your position then? What is going to be your assurance?

There is no doubt about it: revolution is always wrong, and reformation is always right! And you had better be right!

To see the difference, I ask you to go back with me once more to the history of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

When once that break was accomplished in Martin Luther's own soul, it was but inevitable, you understand, that when that shameless monk, Tetzl, came to town selling the pope's indulgences, Martin Luther was going to nail his ninety-five theses to the door of the castle-church in Wittenburg. That was inevitable, as soon as that break took place in his soul. And that nailing of the theses was an act of protest and an act of reformation.

Yet that was not the actual break, historically. The actual break did not come immediately then, but some time later. It took time.

First the attempt was made quietly to persuade and to soothe the aroused Luther. His righteous indignation was not to be allayed. Then the attempt was made to squelch him by high-handed

methods and by threats. There was also a lengthy attempt to defeat him by debate: and there were the famous debates between Luther and a certain Von Eck. All those attempts only served to sharpen Luther and to bring his reformatory consciousness to clearer development and his awareness of the truth and of his own righteousness to clearer light, as his writings in the period from 1517 to 1521 plainly show. Finally, the papal bull arrived, condemning Martin Luther as a heretic and banning him and his teachings from the church. When it arrived, Martin Luther announced that he would burn it in the public marketplace. And when the set time came, he went out at the head of a procession of his students, and he did so: he burned it. Thereby he plainly showed that he was fully conscious of his position; and by this act he very graphically demonstrated that his conscience had been liberated from the yoke of the papacy and that he acknowledged the authority of the Romish institute no more.

But why?

If you would know why, then you must go along with me to the Diet of Worms. In that august assembly were gathered the pope and the emperor and all the great and noble of church and state. On a table are piled Luther's books, his alleged heretical writings. And when he is placed before the demand to recant, he answers by asking for time for consideration. This was a crucial moment, both for Luther and for the Reformation. But soon he returns. He speaks at length to the Diet. And finally he challenges them to prove *either by Scripture or by sound arguments derived from Holy Scripture* that he was wrong. And, that being impossible, he spoke clearly, his voice ringing through the assembly hall, the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do nought else. God help me. Amen."

There is your answer.

That is the same principle that you find in Calvin and in all reformation down to the present time, the principle that has always moved and attracted the faithful people of God in times of apostasy and reformation. It is the principle of *obedience to the absolute authority of the Word of God*.

What does that mean?

It implies much more than a mere acknowledgment of the doctrine of the inspiration and infallibility and sufficiency of the Scriptures. The latter is important: for this is fundamental doctrine. But this is not enough.

Reformatory obedience means that in *all* your doctrine and with respect to *all* your practice, or life, you are obedient to the supreme authority of that Word of the Scriptures only. Reformatory obedience means, in the second place, that you apply to everything - in your personal faith, in your life and walk, in your church and its preaching, in your school and its teaching, in your ecclesiastical assemblies and their pronouncements and decrees - apply stringently the test of the Word only. It means, in the third place, that what stands that test you approve, and that whatever cannot meet that test you reject and disapprove. And it means, in the fourth place - because all this brings you into conflict - it means that whenever it becomes a choice between bowing to the authority of that Word or bowing to the authority of the institute of the church, even if ultimately that means that you must break, as Luther did, with a given institution, *you*

always resolutely choose the former and reject the latter.

You see why, do you not?

When things become a question of obedience to the authority of the Word of God, they become a question of obedience to GOD! That is why Luther did not merely say, "I *will* do nought else," or, "I *do* do nought else," but, "I *can* do nought else." It was impossible for him!

This reformatory obedience is the inalienable right, by grace, but also the sacred calling, of every true child of the Reformation!

This already means that the child of the Reformation exercises discernment.

Discernment means that you understand the times. Discernment means that you are acquainted with what is going on, that it does not go past you. You make it your business to know what is going on. Discernment means, in the second place, that you are acquainted with the views and the ideals, the movements and the tendencies and the aspirations, and the conditions and spirit of the times and of the events of the times. And discernment means, in the third place, that to those events and that spirit and condition of the times you apply the test of the Word of God, and, applying that test, are able to pass judgment with a view to the spirit of the times. It means that you are able to answer the question, "Is that a right spirit, or is it a wrong one? Is it in harmony with the Word of God, or is it opposed to it? Is it something I must go along with, or is it something that I *must* oppose?" That is discernment!

Such discernment is *necessary*.

If Luther had not understood his times and seen that there was something thoroughly corrupt in what Tetzl was doing, if he had not seen that his mother church was altogether wrong and that he, Luther, was right, there could have been no Reformation. There would have been no Ninety-five Theses. There would have been no burning of the papal bull. There would have been no solemn declaration at Worms.

The same is true today. Discernment determines whether one will go along and help with the tendencies of the times, or whether he feels it his calling to oppose, even though he must stand all alone.

Such discernment is not so easy to exercise.

I know, in the fundamental sense, principally, it is very easy. It is easy because we have a clear test, the test of the perspicuous Scriptures, which even the simplest child of God can apply. It is easy, too, because the truth of the gospel, as over against the lie, is always very simple and clear. It is not involved, but simple, very simple. And it is easy, too, because all God's children - not just a Luther or a Calvin - all God's children have the anointing of the Holy One, and principally they know all things.

But from a practical point of view, such discernment can be very difficult. It is easy to look back upon the past. We can look back today and see very plainly that Luther was all right and

that Rome was all wrong. But when you are in the present, and when there is a certain spirit pervading everything, and when the tide is against you, and when perhaps your leaders fail to lead you, or even mislead you, and when the majority goes along with the current of the times, and when they taunt you and reproach you for being "narrow" and insistent - then, I say, from a practical point of view, when sometimes virtually the whole church can be arrayed against you, discernment and the exercise of discernment are not so easy. But say it *you must*: "I am right. I am right because I have the Word of God on my side."

From that point of view, these are dreadfully serious times!

If you have discernment, spiritual discernment, if you have eyes to see, you will soon perceive that all is not well in Zion today by any means, not any more than it was 449 years ago. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that is fast becoming ashamed of the authority of the Word of God and fast becoming addicted to unbelieving criticism and human reason. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that has, for the most part, become tired of that beautiful and sharply defined heritage of the Reformation; a church that has become either thoroughly modern or vaguely evangelical and universalistic - frequently in the name of that insidious excuse of "relevance" and "communicating to the twentieth century man." You know, the twentieth century man is no different than the man of the sixteenth century essentially. He is just as totally depraved. He is just as much in need of pure, sovereign grace!

If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that is "ecumenically minded" - interested not in the unity of the faith, but in union - and that increasingly sacrifices its Reformation confessions upon the altar of church union. You will behold a church that hankers after the World Council and after Consultation on Church Union. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church today that despises the day of little things, that is interested in bigness, in a power-structure, in having a place in the ecclesiastical sun, that desires recognition from the world. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that makes common cause with the humanistic social gospel of modernism which even the world will embrace, a church that finds its interests and its calling in international affairs, in politics, in poverty programs, in civil rights and civil disobedience. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that has forsaken the spiritual isolation of the absolute antithesis, that has erased the lines of demarcation between church and world, between light and darkness, in virtually every sphere of life, and that finds much "good" in this world, and that - on the pretext of "witnessing" - is more conformed to this world than transformed according to the mind of Christ. If you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that is cooperating in the building of a kingdom of the false prophet of [Revelation 13](#), rather than seeking the kingdom of God and its righteousness.

In a word, if you have eyes to see, you will behold a church that is essentially *shot through with Pelagianism*. And if you do not know what that means, it means simply this, that everything revolves about *man*, not about God. Nor need you look far afield to discover these things today. You can discover them right in the Reformed community - in your own churches and in your own church denominations.

A REFORMATORY MILITANCE

From the above it is plain that the third main characteristic of a child of the Reformation is that he is militant, that he is marked by a reformatory militance.

Children of the Reformation are militant!

Luther was militant. Calvin was militant. They took a stand. They protested. They protested even at the expense of being cast out. Well, we are Protestants. We are Protestants - only today we have largely forgotten our name. To be Protestant means that you not only hold the truth yourself, but that you *protest!* You are a protester! It means that you stand foursquare over against the lie and against all corruption in the church.

This implies, briefly, that you recognize that there is a battle to be fought. The church is militant! It sees that the world is not a playground, but a battlefield. It always has been; and it will be to the end of the age. We must not listen to those in the church, plagued with a sickly tolerance of everything but the truth, who cry, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. In the second place, militance means that you are ready for the battle: a battle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places. It is a battle that requires not human might, but the power of the Spirit and the whole armor of God - the armor of which, according to [Ephesians 6](#), the girdle of the truth is the unifying element. And do not forget, let me say in parentheses, that the buckle of that belt is the truth of sovereign predestination. That holds the belt together. This militance implies, in the third place, that you keep rank. You are not a number of scattered soldiers, but you stand shoulder to shoulder with all everywhere who profess like precious faith with you. You stand in the unity of the faith.

If such militance means internal conflict in your church, so be it. If it means separating and affiliating yourself elsewhere, thus let it be. That is not my point now. My point is that we must be *reformatory!* If that means that you seek our fellowship and counsel and leadership, then I want you to know that we extend that fellowship to all who hold the Reformed heritage dear. But again, that is not at present my point. I want to emphasize that militant children of the Reformation *stand in the unity of the faith, whatever the manifestation of such unity is and whatever the consequences may be.*

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me point out two things.

The first is this: I have brought you in this pamphlet nothing but the truth of the Word of God. Let me point you to but one passage. There is a striking parallel between the description of the children of the Reformation as I have given it and the Scriptural picture of the "host of God" that came to David at Hebron, according to [1 Chronicles 12:32](#) and 33. You read of them that they were men which had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do; they were expert in war, with all instruments of war; they were able to keep rank; and they were not of a

double heart.

And in the second place, this: yours, children of the Reformation, is the victory! You may go under in this world. Your lot will be reproach and shame and sacrifice and even persecution. But the victory is sure! The church is surely preserved! For the Lord of hosts is our God; and the God of Jacob is our help. We are more than conquerors.