

# The Anabaptists' Tie to Trinitarianism

Breanna J. Nickel

## ABSTRACT

The writings of Balthasar Hubmaier and Pilgram Marpeck exemplify a willingness to re-describe Trinitarian meaning, but it is difficult to apply their theological viewpoints today. Nevertheless, this essay affirms that a human world without a divine Trinity is not enough for intellectual or spiritual growth.

What tied [the Anabaptists] to Trinitarianism? This is only one of many formidable questions posed by John Rempel in his sweeping assessment of Trinitarian theology in multiple perspectives.<sup>1</sup> The larger questions with which he contends—those involving the defense of theological orthodoxy, and especially those approaching the Trinitarian heart of Christianity—are so complex that it is tempting to leave them up to the “experts,” whoever they may be. However, this temptation is precisely what Rempel encourages us to overcome. In his discussion of the ecumenical councils, the Creed, and a diverse range of subsequent Trinitarian thinkers, as well as in his exhortation to new generations to “take the torch” (112), he reminds us that the great divine mysteries of Trinity and Christ are common property. Therefore I do not discount the scholarly sophistication of Rempel’s survey when I say that his argument for Trinitarian “accountability” is also a legitimate plea for us all to practice intellectual courage.

The 16th-century Anabaptists practiced this type of courage, which is why they are well worth considering even if they had not helped to originate the Reformation movements. On the one hand, first- and second-generation Anabaptist figures such as Balthasar Hubmaier and Pilgram Marpeck never published extensive treatments of Trinitarian or Christological doctrine. They have also not always been considered deeply theological thinkers—

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a response to John Rempel, “An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?”, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 110-45. Page references to Rempel’s essay appear in parentheses.

alternative adjectives such as biblicist, ethical, or polemical are common in later descriptions of their work—and they have not been consistently called “orthodox” except by their own definition, as Rempel observes (120–21). Furthermore, they are far removed from the initial urgency felt in the Trinitarian debates of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Thus, despite their reforming dispositions they treat the Trinity as an assumption rather than as a problem to be solved or a scaffold to be built.

On the other hand, both Hubmaier and Marpeck are clearly (if often implicitly) Trinitarian, and both are distinctly creative in how they navigate and utilize the Trinitarian framework. Yet none of the above characteristics—not their “return” to the Bible, nor their partial rejection of traditional doctrinal authorities, nor their desire to reform long-standing ecclesial practices, and not even their implicit Trinitarian assumptions—answer Rempel’s open-ended question, What tied them to Trinitarianism? To this line of inquiry I would assign a second question that Rempel implies: What value do Anabaptist Trinitarian understandings have for our theological work today?

### **Two Trinitarian Anabaptists: Hubmaier and Marpeck**

At least part of the answer to both questions must lie in where Trinity appears in Anabaptist thought, and on this point there are major differences between Hubmaier and Marpeck. Again, as Rempel notes, both viewed “the Trinitarian paradigm as foundational to belief, ethics, and piety,” but nevertheless they each subscribed to a Trinity in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit maintained “different but inseparable roles” (121).<sup>2</sup> On Hubmaier’s part, there are Trinitarian echoes in his baptismal treatises, which are also the writings in which he most frequently cites patristic authorities (121).<sup>3</sup> Yet arguably the more crucial and curious connection (one that is foundational for his sacramental thought) is the connection between his Trinitarian convictions and his tripartite anthropology, the latter of which depends

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<sup>2</sup> Do Rempel’s comments on Hubmaier reflect a departure from his prior view that Hubmaier “has no Christology explicitly set in a trinitarian framework”? See John Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Klager, “Balthasar Hubmaier’s Use of the Church Fathers: Availability, Access and Interaction,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 1 (2010): 5–62.

primarily upon his extensive knowledge of medieval rather than patristic authorities.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, for Marpeck the most obvious connection to a Trinitarian God is found not in anthropology but in Christology. Marpeck's contemplation of Christ's incarnation, and particularly Christ's humanity, colors not only his perception of the Triune God but also his sacramental apologetics. Both thinkers, then, have the Trinity firmly in the back of their minds, but when, if ever, does it come to the forefront?

### Hubmaier's Perspective

In each of his two treatises on the human will, Hubmaier conceives of human beings as joined to God by reason of their creation and their essential tripartite structure. He opens the first treatise by presenting tripartite anthropology as deliberately chosen by God in the creation of human beings and as a clear reflection of the Trinity. Not only does Hubmaier suggest that the Genesis creation story shows God forming each of the three "substances" of body, soul, and spirit,<sup>5</sup> he concludes his opening comments by asserting that human beings are created not in the image of God but in the "image of the Holy Trinity."<sup>6</sup> Thus the standard that he sets for the rest of his discussion of human nature, sin, and freedom--the same standard for his discussion of Christ's nature as well, given that he specifies Christ's humanity as tripartite--is one wherein human beings are intended to know God intimately by reason of their very composition.

However, the picture of the Trinitarian "image" in humanity that Hubmaier draws is complicated by the rest of his anthropological analysis. This is partly because his primary goal is not to speculate upon the divine essence; in fact, elsewhere in his writings he counsels against investigating anything that belongs to the mystery of God's essence or the actions of God's hidden will.<sup>7</sup> Rather, he aims to explain the potentialities and failings of the tripartite human will (encompassing the wills of the body, the soul, and the

<sup>4</sup> Breanna J. Nickel, "Balthasar Hubmaier as a Scholastic Anabaptist Theologian," Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 429-30.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 430; referred to by Rempel, 11. Hubmaier does use the terms "image of God" and "image of the Trinity" interchangeably. See, for example, *ibid.*, 432.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

spirit). In doing so, he spends most of his time describing the postlapsarian struggle between the “worthless” bodily will, the “wounded” or captive will of the soul, and the “upright” will of the spirit.<sup>8</sup> As a result, he seems to cast doubt on whether the Trinitarian image remains in sinful human nature. After all, how can the three substances of body, soul, and spirit (along with their respective wills) demonstrate a Trinitarian connection unless they are “three in one” in some comparable way—that is, unless they are whole and undivided in their purpose as well as distinct from each other in how they move? What is more, the apparent challenge to the Trinitarian image in the inner conflict of the tripartite will leads to an even more troublesome conclusion: namely, that if the Trinitarian image is so soon lost or darkened in human nature, then the concept of Trinity may have no real contribution to make to earthly human life and action marred by sin.

Admittedly, Hubmaier makes no obvious attempt to trace the continuation of the Trinitarian image in the postlapsarian state, but this does not mean he did not consider the aforementioned complications. In fact, he never intends to lose sight of the Trinitarian image, as shown by his consistent attention to all three kinds of will, by his repeated affirmation of the spiritual will’s undamaged capacity, and especially by the utter dependence upon the Trinity and the Trinitarian image that he displays in explaining the restoration of the human will’s freedom. At various points in discussing the tripartite will’s restoration, Hubmaier indicates the spiritual will as the unmoved location of the divine image. He also names multiple ways in which the Persons of the Trinity act in the human will’s restoration, such as when he credits the divine Spirit’s power as the source of the human spirit’s power, or when he states that without Christ’s coming no restoration of the will’s capacity, knowledge, and goodness would have been accomplished. As he says concerning the will of the soul, the will “has been awakened by the heavenly Father . . . made whole by his dear Son, and enlightened by the Holy Spirit—as the three main articles of our Christian faith concerning God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit show—by this the soul now again . . . can will and choose good.”<sup>9</sup> Thus it is not the case that Hubmaier treats the Trinitarian image as a mere starting point, nor does he find the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 433-35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 439.

Trinity to lose its relevance in the realm of sinful human nature. Instead, the continued activity of each of the three divine Persons is all that allows sinful nature to be restored, and at the root of this activity is the bond between God's essence and humanity's tripartite substance that is forged by the enduring Trinitarian image.

### Marpeck's Perspective

Like Hubmaier, Marpeck demonstrates a Trinitarian orientation, while often expressing it implicitly rather than explicitly. In stark contrast to Hubmaier, though, his preferred avenue into Trinitarian thought is not the created tripartite image but Christ's incarnation. Marpeck everywhere demonstrates the "focus on the incarnation" and its "ongoing role" that is succinctly stated by Rempel (122). Yet it is questionable whether Marpeck succeeds in upholding an ongoing role for the Trinity (at least one that can be observed by human beings) along with Christ's humanity or "body" that is constituted by the church community. At times in his treatises, he appears content to leave the Trinity to its own devices and only to treat the "physical" Christ (whether his teachings, his moral example, or the sacramental ceremonies he institutes) as something directly active in human life, as when he writes:

I comfort myself, as do all believers, who are unprofitable servants that do not work, but simply receive the physical words and voice of Christ in order that we may confess them and thereby testify to His physical works, leaving the effect to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who have worked until now and have reigned from eternity and will reign in eternity.<sup>10</sup>

Although Marpeck here acknowledges the eternal working of the Triune God, his recommendation to "simply receive the physical words" gives the impression that while the human Christ is readily accessible, the full meaning and activity of the Trinity is several steps removed from the domain of human concern. A similar ambiguity arises whenever he addresses Christ's intermediary role. For instance, when he remarks that "it is precisely

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<sup>10</sup> William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 77; cf. 96.

the humanity of Christ which is our mediator before the Godhead,”<sup>11</sup> his explanation leaves unclear whether he is simply reminding his Spiritualist opponents of the validity of physical externalities,<sup>12</sup> among which lies Christ’s humanity, or whether his apparent relegation of Christ’s mediating role to Christ’s humanity actually renders the Trinitarian Godhead more distant and harder to access.

Then again, Marpeck’s emphasis upon the human Christ does not prevent him from conceiving of the incarnation and its ongoing role as accomplished by the three Persons. Marpeck does not commonly refer to the Spirit as a separate divine Person but rather to the eternal working of Christ’s Spirit,<sup>13</sup> and he takes seriously the commitment to a specifically Trinitarian God that is conveyed in Christ’s baptismal commission in Matt. 28.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly it is still one of the primary implications of Marpeck’s view that the activity of both Father and Spirit<sup>15</sup> cannot be known or recognized apart from the incarnation. Therefore the particular Trinitarian declaration from Marpeck that Rempel specifies—that the Spirit is the Father’s inward working while Christ is the outward working<sup>16</sup>—may reflect a somewhat contradictory or unfinished aspect of Marpeck’s thought. Nevertheless, Marpeck does offer a creative interpretation in which the incarnation and the Trinity are inseparable, and consequently he can still assert that they are equally essential to the life of the body of Christ.

### **The Value of Trinitarian “Ties”**

What do we gain by this consideration of two Anabaptists’ Trinitarian thoughts, especially in light of Rempel’s much more ambitious survey? At the least, it is evident that the concept of a Triune God is everywhere

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Neal Blough explains this aspect of Marpeck’s thought as a differentiation between the “material” and “historical” functions of Christ’s humanity. Neil Blough, “Pilgram Marpeck, Martin Luther and the Humanity of Christ,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61, no. 2 (1987): 203-204.

<sup>13</sup> Klassen and Klaassen, *Writings of Marpeck*, 49-50, 58, 77, et passim.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-85, 187.

<sup>15</sup> Marpeck speaks of the “drawing” of the Father and Spirit. *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 195; also stated by Rempel, 12.

assumed, implied, and depended upon by both Hubmaier and Marpeck.<sup>17</sup> Hubmaier's examination of the human will is constructed according to the will's possession of the Trinitarian image, while Marpeck's concept of the incarnation draws its aspect of "eternity" from the Trinity despite a focus on Christ's humanity. Both thinkers tie themselves to Trinitarianism, and they do so not just on the basis of accepting an inherited framework but because the Trinity is what provides them with their individual explanations of why the divine/human relationship continues (whether because of the human will's restoration to the image, or because of the incarnation's eternal role). Thus the Trinitarian framework, far from something they felt a need to reject, is considered by both to maintain both its relevance and its orthodoxy.

Whether these Anabaptists' thoughts have an ongoing value for contemporary generations remains to be seen. Hubmaier and Marpeck may have followed the "calling" that Rempel names in their own time (110), but they also represent two significantly different Trinitarian accounts each addressed to their own particular, contextualized theological debates and personal concerns. On the one hand, the differences may reflect the kind of capacity for improvisational or creative formulations that Rempel thinks possible within the bounds of Trinitarian accountability. If so, and given that a certain amount of theological improvisation is necessary over time, then their writings exemplify a willingness to re-describe Trinitarian meaning and theological methods, a willingness that remains applicable for contemporary Christian thinkers. On the other hand, it may be far more difficult to apply these two Anabaptists' particular Trinitarian viewpoints to contemporary theology--or to the life of the contemporary church beyond the realm of formal scholarship--than to apply their creative methods. Thus, if I might state one primary concern in regard to Rempel's conclusions, it is this: It is possible that his compelling proposal defends the preservation of the initial (Nicene) Trinitarian structure and language, as well as the essential methodological willingness to re-describe the Trinity again and again,

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<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the evidence for Marpeck's Trinitarian assumption seems sufficiently clear to dispute the multiple previous studies that deny his Trinitarianism, which J.C. Wenger already felt the need to argue in 1938. Wenger, "The Theology of Pilgram Marpeck," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 12, no. 4 (1938): 214-15.

better than it defends the ongoing validity of past particular Trinitarian interpretations.

Undoubtedly a stronger argument for the lasting value of both the content and the methods of past Anabaptists' (and others') Trinitarian-based contributions could be made by expanding the "tentative correlation" that Rempel offers between the Trinitarian framework and "radical discipleship, ethics, and ecclesiology" (143). This kind of expansion in relation to Hubmaier's and Marpeck's thoughts must wait for a future time, except to say that the connection Rempel desires to make between thoughtful consideration of the Trinity and "clearer ethical consequences" (131) seems highly persuasive. This is because, to recall my opening remark, we should not expect to sustain any kind of moral courage apart from a dedicated application of intellectual courage.

Beyond the analysis, questions, and recommendations offered above, I cannot come to any better conclusion than the gem that Rempel offers in his "unscientific postscript." There he writes that we turn to Trinitarian belief "when more straightforward ways of naming and living God's revelation, like "following Jesus," aren't enough to keep us faithful" (143). So, if I may side with "sages" (112) of my own choosing and echo Rempel's informed sentiment to some extent, I re-affirm that a human world without a divine Trinity is not enough for either intellectual or spiritual growth. Such a world was not enough for Hubmaier or Marpeck, and it is not enough for us.

*Breanna J. Nickel is the Conrad J. Bergendoff Visiting Fellow in Religion at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.*