Doctrine, Stability, and Human Speech within God

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ABSTRACT

The doctrine of the Trinity, as doctrine, may not achieve the results Rempel is seeking. This paper argues for shifting away from foundationalist assumptions, and utilizes Sarah Coakley and Robert Jenson to reframe the conversation constructively. The "impossible task" is to speak truly about God, even with the challenges it presents.

John Rempel's essay is rightly premised on the conviction that theology is ultimately practical theology.[1] How a faith community thinks about and articulates its beliefs, with none more basic than the doctrine of God, has implications for all aspects of faith and life. His essay is expansive and programmatic since much is at stake. He writes out of concern for specific challenges and threats, such as the reduction of Jesus to a merely human ethical example, or the loss of commitment to pacifism. Rempel worries about denial of mystery in favor of a merely rational faith as well as the coherence of Mennonite theology within the wider Christian movement. Most basically, he proposes the doctrine of the Trinity as the key to the integrity of Christian theology.

My response shares with Rempel a deep personal investment in the faithfulness of the Mennonite church, and an ecumenism of gifts given and received. I also share a commitment to an orthodox account of the Trinity as "grounding" not only for theology in the Mennonite tradition but for faith and practice in church life more broadly. Within these commitments, I suggest a subtle shift away from some of the foundationalist assumptions in Rempel's approach. I develop the first phase of my response around two themes: the promise of the stabilizing effect of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the tensions that Mennonite ecclesiology presents to stability in faith

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[1] 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.

and ethics. In the second phase, I explore how the work of Sarah Coakley and Robert Jenson on reflexive understandings of God may constructively reframe the conversation Rempel has convened.

Method, Doctrine, and Stability

The idea of stability emerges at numerous points in Rempel's essay, most notably in the claim that "the Trinity as the central symbol of Christian belief is more stable and has clearer ethical consequences than the unTrinitarian alternative" (131). Throughout the essay, Rempel is much more explicitly engaged with questions of theological method and debates about the authority of tradition, especially the doctrinal formulations of the classical creeds, than with the being and acts of the triune God per se. This reveals what seems to underlie his diagnosis of the problem and his proposed solution. For example, in his subsection "The Trinity in Anabaptist Thought" a key issue is how early Anabaptists navigated the positions of the Protestant reformers on the question of authority in matters of faith. He notes approvingly how the Anabaptist reformer Balthasar Hubmaier distinguished between treating patristic sources as authoritative and denying the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Similarly, Dutch Mennonite leader Thielemann van Braght makes the case that the Trinitarianism reflected in the Apostles Creed is at the center of the faith of the non-conforming church through history. These are primarily claims about the systematic location of the doctrine and the nature of its authority.

Debate among Mennonite theologians about the authority of doctrines and creeds is associated with other key figures of Rempel's generation, such as A. James Reimer, Thomas Finger, and J. Denny Weaver, and I read Rempel's essay as an intervention in these discussions.[2] In one illuminating exchange, Finger argued for an Anabaptist theology rooted in affirmations that are universally Christian to which are added particularities rooted in the Anabaptist traditions but that also draws selectively and positively (i.e.,

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[2] A bibliography of exchanges in the 1980s in *The Conrad Grebel Review* is provided in A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 247. See also chapters by J. Denny Weaver and Thomas Finger in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 83-119.

not just defining itself by what it is not) from other Christian traditions.³ By contrast Weaver criticized most Mennonite theologizing for adding Mennonite distinctives to a presumed "theology-in-general" foundation that typically includes the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the creeds. He argued that this approach characterized the fundamentalist Daniel Kauffman, the conservative H.S. Bender, and the liberals J.E. Hartzler and Edmund Kaufman, as well as contemporaries such as Finger and Reimer. For Weaver, the supposed "theology-in-general" reflects particular accommodations of doctrine with violence and war (as epitomized in the Council of Nicea) and therefore a Mennonite tradition that rejects violence ought to articulate a theology starting from the story of Jesus that is distinct all the way down.⁴

Reimer repeatedly argued for an orthodox/creedal doctrine of the Trinity as authoritative foundation and methodological point of reference for all theology, including Mennonite theology. The key is the balance of immanence and transcendence as a bulwark against the tendency to emphasize one or the other. Even in an essay on "Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Radical Protestant Theology," Reimer is less concerned with explicating speech about God than with defending on methodological grounds a particular relationship between scripture and tradition. He concludes that "classical dogmatic formulations are essential for assuring an ontological-metaphysical grounding for ethics."⁵ Reimer worries that if the tradition follows John Howard Yoder and Weaver, then ethics as human response becomes the measure of theology, a concern most realized in Gordon Kaufman's account of theology as imaginative construction. For Reimer, the doctrine of the Trinity functions to ensure that theology starts with God and appropriately balances transcendence, historical particularity, and immanent presence.

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³ Thomas Finger, "Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 52–68.

⁴ J. Denny Weaver, "The General versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th-Century Mennonite Theologizing," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 28-51. Finger's argument is about "Anabaptist theology" whereas Weaver addresses "Mennonite theology." The two subjects are not exactly parallel. In such a debate, "Anabaptist" comes to stand for a set of ideal commitments in contrast to the actual theology of Mennonites represented by specific individuals and their communities.

⁵ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 265.

My concern with this discourse is that it risks instrumentalizing the doctrine of the Trinity. I agree that the theological task is creativity with accountability, and that right diversity, rather than uniformity, should be the aim of Christian life together. Yet I want to be cautious about whether such positions may be derived or deduced from the doctrine of the Trinity. Any doctrine of God risks projection, but the dangers are magnified for an instrumentalized one. Also, Reimer's urgent insistence that the doctrine of the Trinity stabilize and balance theology may produce a functionally modalist account of God's three-ness.

I wonder if sounding the drum of the *doctrine* of the Trinity is enough to ensure adequate recognition of the otherness of God, the grounding of faith outside of ourselves, and the delineation of right diversity in unity. Will this do what Rempel hopes it will do? Will it provide stability for the church? Will it fund a pacifist ethic? Ultimately the effort to place any doctrine at the center will be a human effort. In light of this, I question whether Rempel's concern is truly about the *doctrine* of God (and the function of doctrines and creeds typically Trinitarian in their structure), or whether he means to turn our attention to the *reality* of God as experienced by communities of faith.

Confessional and Ecclesial Stability
Rempel observes how challenges arise for the stability of Mennonite congregations, and for accountabilities beyond the congregation, because of the significant role of individual conscience. If authority in matters of faith and life resides in the local congregation or in individual conscience, such a tradition may well fragment theologically. One solution historically has been confessionalism and its enforcement through discipline. Rempel points to 17th-century Dutch Mennonite non-confessionalism and 19th-century German Mennonite liberalism as cautionary examples of such fragmentation and consequent compromise of witness. He laments the current fragmentation of Mennonite denominations in North America over issues of sexuality, hermeneutics, authority, and acceptable diversity in the church, and he worries that a simple appeal to "follow Jesus" (143) will not be enough to hold these bodies together. Can confessional agreement on a robust Trinitarianism accomplish this?

In Rempel's survey of 17th-century Dutch Mennonites, developments

culminating in conflict between confessionalist and non-confessionalist groups were influenced by various cultural, political, and intellectual factors, as well as the personalities of leaders. On the non-confessionalist side, the "proto-Unitarian" Galenus Abrahamsz emerged as a key leader, countered by the confessionalist Thielemann van Braght. Abrahamsz did not believe any presently fallen church should compel a person in matters of belief. Van Braght sought enforcement of discipline in matters of faith and ethics through the production of confessions of faith that exhibited the visibility of the true church. This vision was reinforced rhetorically in account in *Martyrs Mirror* of the continuity of a true "baptism-minded" and "defenseless" church through time: "Mennonite confessions of faith were simply restatements of the faith of the first Christians."[6]

On my reading, the authority of particular doctrines to determine faith, ethics and theology, as well as effective discipline, were crucial issues. Yet, it is not clear that the material content of Trinitarian theology protected the outcomes important to Rempel. Some non-confessionalists did align with Dutch nationalism and reject pacifism, although such a development may be correlated with non-Trinitarianism only in the sense that without a central ecclesiastical authority, both beliefs about God and beliefs about right action were free to develop in directions deviating from prior commitments.

For Rempel, developments among 19th-century German Mennonites show the danger of giving authority to individual experience and conscience over the tradition epitomized by the classical creeds. Karl Koop traces how Wilhelm Mannhardt argued against an "ontological linkage between Christ and Christian identity" in the regenerated person and therefore against the logic of Chalcedon.[7] Instead, for Mannhardt, the essence of Mennonite faith is a particular account of the church as a "freely self-determined, constantly renewing brotherhood of persons determined to become disciples of Christ dedicated to mutual admonition, assistance and encouragement to act ethically."[8] It is within the strong congregationalism governed by a "democratic

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[6] Michael D. Driedger, *Obedient Heretics: Mennonite Identities in Lutheran Hamburg and Altona during the Confessional Age* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 56.

[7] Karl Koop, "A Complication for the Mennonite Peace Tradition: Wilhelm Mannhardt's Defense of Military Service," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 40.

[8] Ibid., 39.

principle" that pacifism is a matter for discussion and potential rejection, as Mannhardt argues it should be. But which caused which? While one could argue that the rejection of Chalcedon led to a self-determining ecclesiology that led to the rejection of pacifism, an ecclesiology that placed authority in individual conscience, which the rejection of Chalcedon fostered, allowed an ecclesiology accommodating such a development to emerge.

Rempel's discussion of the early 20th-century U.S. Mennonite controversy between fundamentalism and modernism could also be taken as a debate about authority, in particular whether the church (here, "denomination") or the individual should define a particular doctrinal or ethical issue. Trinitarians Daniel Kauffman and Harold S. Bender may have given pacifism confessional status not because it emerged from a Trinitarian framework (Rempel acknowledges that Kauffman failed to integrate doctrine and ethics) but because consistent confessional identity was important for the institutional visibility of the church.

Rempel's appeal to the doctrine of the Trinity is one potential strategy for counterbalancing the fragmenting tendency built into Mennonite ecclesiology. Yet, I doubt that the doctrine will deliver on what is hoped for. Holding to, or being held to, a Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is itself not enough to ensure any particular ethical stand, as is already obvious from the diversity of views on war and peace within Nicene Christianity. Nor is it enough to fund a particular ecclesiology over against others. Ecclesiologies of communion, for example, articulated explicitly as reflective of Trinitarian communion can range from radically egalitarian to rigidly hierarchical.[9] While beliefs about God are obviously connected to beliefs about the church, decisions on the authority of traditions, creeds, and confessions of faith seem to be made primarily in the sphere in ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is high on agenda of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches precisely because different understandings and practices, especially around matters of ministry, authority, and continuity over time, seem to perpetuate separative logics despite doctrinal agreement on many themes.

There is not space here to analyze the instability built into Mennonite

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[9] Nicholas M. Healy, "Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note," *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (1995): 442-53.

ecclesiology.[10] Rempel's comment that Trinitarian theology is properly ecumenical (145) is a key insight about the necessity of Mennonite theology and Mennonite churches to be profoundly and vulnerably engaged with other Christians about the calling of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church to bear witness to God's intention for all persons and indeed all creation. In this respect, the calling of one particular tradition such as the Anabaptist-Mennonite may be to be less concerned about internal stability than about a shared, common movement with other Christians in the Spirit towards Christ as the center. Such movement may be characterized by strangeness, astonishment, disruption, and perhaps even the death of cherished distinctives.[11]

Reflexive Accounts of God

I welcome Rempel's exhortation for an approach to the doctrine of God that is patient with mystery (cf. 131). Indeed, one way to understand the classical Trinitarian heresies (tritheism, modalism, and subordinationism) is that all seek a somewhat rational and impatient explanation for how God is both three and one in ways that ultimately deny something about the inadequacy of all human concepts and analogies. In that respect, orthodox Trinitarian doctrine may serve a more apophatic function than is often supposed.

The "impossible but necessary" task may be to concede that no particular doctrinal formulation can ultimately bear the weight of providing stability to the faith and life of a community. Thus, I advocate shifting from the *doctrine* of the Trinity to the *reality* of the triune God. This might initially seem like a distinction without a difference. After all, our experiences of God are always human experiences, and therefore mediated and expressed in human terms and language. Yet, to the extent that church communities may be in need of anything, it may be to perceive an encounter with God in which they experience stability as well as interruption.

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[10] For a relevant discussion, see Gerald Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), especially chapters 1 and 2.

[11] See Jeremy M. Bergen, "The Ecumenical Vocation of Anabaptist Theology," in *Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision: New Essays in Anabaptist Identity and Theological Method*, ed. Laura Schmidt Roberts, Paul Martens, and Myron Penner, T&T Clark Studies in Anabaptist Theology and Ethics 1 (New York: T&T Clark, forthcoming 2020).

Here I point to the work of Sarah Coakley and Robert Jenson—without proposing either of their approaches as *the* solution to Trinitarian or ecclesiological woes. These thinkers emerge from different denominational and intellectual traditions but each observes how the person or community speaking about God may already be caught up by the reality of God's being and action in the world, a pattern that is noticeably Trinitarian. The issue is less how a *doctrine* about God may function or be deployed, and more about how communities of faith and the theologies emerging from and serving them are themselves implicated in this pattern. Significantly, both foreground the Holy Spirit's work and the Holy Spirit's role in shaping human speech about God.

At the core of Coakley's reclamation of the systematic theological project is the act of contemplative prayer, "an act that, by grace, and over time, inculcates mental patterns of 'unmastery'"[12] According to Romans 8:26, it is the human impossibility of prayer together with the Spirit's initiative to make it possible that is the paradigm of God's drawing human persons into God's triune being.

> There is . . . an inherent reflexivity in the divine, a ceaseless outgoing and return of the desiring God; and insofar as I welcome and receive this reflexivity, I find that it is the Holy Spirit who 'interrupts' my human monologue to a (supposedly) monadic God; it is the Holy Spirit who finally thereby causes me to see God no longer as patriarchal threat but as infinite tenderness; but it is also the Holy Spirit who first painfully darkens my prior certainties, enflames and checks my own desires, and so invites me ever more deeply into the life of redemption in Christ. In short, it is this 'reflexivity in God,' this Holy Spirit, that makes incarnate life *possible*.[13]

Coakley revisits Maurice Wiles's thesis that adoption of the Trinitarian formula for baptismal practice in the first centuries prematurely "fixed" an orthodox notion of the Trinity and thereby foreclosed critical reflection of

[12] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 43. This is the first of a projected four-volume systematic theology.
[13] Ibid., 56.

what kind of experiences are true data for Christian reflection. For Wiles, once experience pointed to the Spirit as a hypostasis, which issued in a Trinitarian formulation, the experiential ladder was kicked away in favor of demands for assent to a creed. This analysis leads him to conclude that the church was, in Coakley's words, "duped all along by its own authority and tradition."[14] Although she rejects Wiles's conclusions, she notes how his line of reasoning reveals the pervasive but problematic assumption that the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity is in the knowledge it conveys and communicates (and enforces) rather than in how it names the "incorporative" reality of the triune God. For her, "orthodoxy" is more a spiritual process than a doctrinal product demanding assent. While I do not agree with all of her arguments, I read her as cautioning us about how we think about "doing" anything with the doctrine of the Trinity, insofar as such doing succumbs to arbitrary assertions of authority as well as assumptions of "mastery" in language about God.

Throughout his writings, Jenson provides tools for Christians to unlearn assumptions that block or skew encountering the biblical God; one of these is the Hellenistic philosophical assumption about the necessity for deity to be immune from time. Jenson charges that Western Christology is functionally Nestorian in its distinction of the divine and human natures of Christ, a distinction driven by the perceived need to protect divinity from contamination by contingency, particularity, change, and death. However, this is not the God whose story in the Bible is one in which God is irrevocably *involved*. Thus, "the doctrine of Trinity is but a conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified by and with the particular plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ."[15] Jenson writes that the being of God is "not a something, however rarefied or immaterial, but a *going-on*, a sequentially palpable event, like a kiss or a train wreck."[16] In the first instance, God is "what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit," and thus also "what happens to Jesus and

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[14] Ibid., 109.

[15] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 60.

[16] Ibid., 214, emphasis in original.

the world."[17] Echoing Karl Barth, Jenson affirms that God's act is identical with God's being. However, unlike Barth's tendency to collapse God into God's primordial decision to be God in Jesus Christ, and thus for the Spirit to inspire mere human response, Jenson emphasizes the future of the story and its end. The Spirit *is* the power of God's future. God's future is one of true anticipation, and as the Spirit moves it animates and liberates humans and all creation in their contingent twists and turns to be truly enclosed within God's own being, God's own story. The "time" of the story of God plays out among the persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as such is both cosmic and personal. Paradigmatically, as humans pray they find themselves taken up by the Spirit into the dialogue of Jesus and his Father.

Jenson's pneumatology provides helpful guidance for thinking about the nature of tradition, especially the irrevocable developments in the Spirit such as the establishment of the canon, a development of the tradition that Mennonite theology would generally affirm. Some of his consequent assertions—about the meaning and status of dogma, and the necessity of a teaching office in the church—pose a considerable challenge to the Mennonite tradition. But to Rempel's concern about the link between ecclesial stability and doctrinal integrity, Jenson offers this: "At bottom, the chief thing to be done about the integrity of the church across time is to pray that God will indeed use the church's structures of historical continuity to establish and preserve it, and to believe that he answers this prayer."[18] The veracity and meaning of any confessional statement are rooted in trust and prayer.

The point, then, may be not to start with doctrine but rather to find ourselves, including our human speech, already within the reality of the God who creates and redeems. The impossible task set before churches in the Mennonite tradition, and all Christians, is to speak truly about God. Nevertheless, Rempel rightly calls Mennonite churches to this task, despite and even because of the challenges in doing so.

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[17] Ibid., 221.
[18] Ibid., 41.