Trinitarian Worship for a Radical Church?

Sarah Kathleen Johnson

Abstract

Three principles for radical Trinitarian worship emerge from John Rempel's argument for radical Trinitarian theology: attention to deep structures, extension of historical memory, and pursuit of disciplined creativity. These principles are applied to two examples of worship practices: the place of creeds in denominational worship books and the Trinitarian dynamics in congregational song.

John Rempel begins his argument that creative Trinitarian orthodoxy is vital for radical ethics and ecclesiology with the claim that *theology is worship*: Theology "is not an attempt to explain God but to worship God with our minds" (110).[1] One can also claim that *worship is theology*. Worship, the term used to describe the activity of the assembly of the Christian community, is a principal place for meaningful speech about God, in dialogue with Scripture and tradition, that expresses and forms the faith and life of the church. The phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the law of prayer [is] the law of belief"), ascribed to 5th-century Prosper of Aquitaine and embraced in 20th-century liturgical theology and reform,[2] succinctly expresses the interconnection of liturgy and theology. At times a third phrase is added that resonates with Rempel's claims: *lex vivendi* ("the law of life")—as we worship, so we believe, and so we live.

Attending to how creative Trinitarian orthodoxy is expressed and formed in liturgy and life is particularly important for Anabaptists, for whom Trinitarian theology has historically been more implicit than explicit (118). For present generations, speech about God is ever more concentrated in the Sunday assembly. Participation in worship is how most Christians who are

[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.

[2] Kevin Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 3-43.

not academic theologians "go in pursuit of a mystery and its implications for what we believe and how we live" (112). Worship is the living theology of the church. Therefore, if robust Trinitarianism is required for radical discipleship, the question becomes, What is Trinitarian worship for a radical church?

Anabaptist worship is extraordinarily diverse. In Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA alone, congregations worship in more than 25 languages and in expressions that are formal and informal, structured and spontaneous, and exuberant and contemplative. Rooted in local tradition and context, each community establishes its own practices drawing on a range of resources. It is therefore challenging to speak of "Mennonite worship" in general. Nevertheless, I extract three principles for radical Trinitarian worship from Rempel's discussion that can be applied to specific cases, including the place of creeds in denominational worship books and Trinitarian dynamics in congregational song.

Principles for Radical Trinitarian Worship

The first principle is attention to *deep structures*. Rempel focuses on an expansive rather than reductive approach to the central symbols, the deep structures, of Christian theology, especially the Trinitarian faith that clarified the revelation in Scripture and is "the interpretive key for theology as a whole" (118). An extension of this focus is an invitation to consider the deep structures of Christian worship, how the Trinity, in each Person and in relationship, is encountered expansively in the assembly—in Scripture, prayer, song, and central practices such as baptism and communion. It implies that the Trinitarian dynamics of worship—space for mystical silence, singing "Holy, Holy Holy," and the celebration of the Supper, for example—are as important for ethical formation as explicit engagement with ethical matters such as embracing the Season of Creation, singing global song, or hearing from speakers from local service agencies. More foundationally, however, attention to deep structures demands worship that is patient with mystery (cf. 131), that refuses reductive approaches that limit the activity of the assembly to personal encounter with God, relationship building in community, or formation of better disciples of Jesus, although each of these dimensions may be present. Radical Trinitarian worship aspires to sink ever deeper into the expansive mystery and paradox of a Trinitarian and

incarnate God.

Second, radical Trinitarian worship stretches *historical memory*. Through a sweeping historical narrative that spans the late antique period to the 21st century, Rempel invites Anabaptists to claim a long and ecumenical vision of Christian history. Encounter with the practices and voices of every era in worship is one way to strengthen connection to Trinitarian tradition, not because Christians got theology or worship "right" in the 4th, 16th, or mid-20th century, but because we are all part of the same conversation and we need one another (145) to engage the challenges of today. Stretching historical memory does not involve rigid adherence to past practices, but dynamic exploration of how they can live anew in the present.

Third, Trinitarian worship for a radical church strives for *disciplined creativity*. Rempel constructively engages interlocutors who are "orthodox in a creative way," those who claim "the freedom to dissent and innovate on behalf of the Gospel but hold themselves accountable to the understanding of God as Trinity in doing so" (111). Creative "improvisation" (131) in worship that attends to particularity and context is essential, especially for opposing violence and oppression associated with gender, race, religion, economic status, and colonialism, as Rempel's interlocutors demonstrate. But creative improvisation must be disciplined in stretching the inherited categories as far as possible "without breaking them" (137). Because decisions about Anabaptist worship are made congregationally by a diversity of leaders, there is tremendous potential for contextual creativity; the challenge is often whether and how to discipline it.

Creeds in Mennonite Worship

For Rempel, the creeds of the early church—especially the Nicene Creed—are the central symbol of the Trinity and the orthodox Trinitarian tradition. While acknowledging critiques of the Nicene creed, he also highlights its use in 16th-century Anabaptism, its implicit reception in Free Church traditions, and its affirmation by key Mennonite theologians in the 20th century. Nevertheless, in recent decades the creeds have rarely been used consistently in Mennonite worship, although readily available to congregations.

Creeds are included in *The Mennonite Hymnal* published in 1969,[3] and in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* published in 1992.[4] *The Mennonite Hymnal* includes a small section titled "Additional Worship Resources" that includes four "Affirmations of Faith" (Items 720-723), including the Apostles' Creed (Item 721) and the Nicene Creed (Item 722), which are preceded by this introduction:

> Four affirmations of faith are given to provide an opportunity for congregations to express unitedly and in summary form the essentials of Christian belief. These affirmations do not represent official documents of any church body; but they are, in a sense, the church's answer to the Word of God. No one statement covers the entire range of Christian doctrine. The Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed are confessions that were developed from the fourth to the eighth centuries. A contemporary Affirmation of Faith (no. 4) was created by several leaders for *The Mennonite Hymnal* and was completed in 1967. Every hymn that a congregation sings is, in a sense, an affirmation of faith. Scripture readings can also be used as a confession of faith.

Hymnal: A Worship Book likewise incorporates "Worship Resources," including a section of eight items titled "Affirming Faith" that includes the Apostles' Creed (Item 712) and an adaptation of the contemporary Affirmation of Faith from 1969 (Item 713) among other resources (Items 710-717). It does not include the Nicene Creed. The *Hymnal Companion* describes the different attitudes toward the use of creeds in worship in the Mennonite and Brethren traditions, the two groups collaborating on the hymnal:

> Brethren claim the New Testament as their only creed; thus they have not drafted confessions of faith during their history. . . . Reading affirmations of faith in a worship setting is an accepted

[3] *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969). *The Mennonite Hymnal* is a collaboration between the General Conference Mennonite Church and the (Old) Mennonite Church.

[4] *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992). *Hymnal: A Worship Book* is a collaboration between General Conference Mennonite Church, the (Old) Mennonite Church, and the Church of the Brethren, with contributors from other believers church traditions.

> practice. However, many Brethren are uneasy about using creeds. . . .
>
> On the other hand, Mennonites have a long history of making confessions of faith to reflect their biblical beliefs and understandings, their tradition, and their current practice. . . . While Anabaptist/Mennonite confessions of faith have been used in worship rarely due to their length, other creeds, confessions of faith, and affirmations have been used frequently.[5]

Personal conversations with both Mennonite and Brethren members of the *Hymnal: A Worship Book* committee reveal that including the Apostles' Creed but not the Nicene Creed in the volume was a compromise for both traditions that fully satisfied neither.

Since 2015, Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA have been developing a new hymnal and worship book called *Voices Together*[6] that will include a section of "Worship Resources" for "Confessing Faith." From the outset, the "Confessing Faith" section prompted spontaneous and diverse feedback. Therefore, a consulting process was established to invite advice from Mennonite theologians, pastors, and worship leaders on 13 potential resources. Certain points of consensus emerged;[7] however, at least one consultant was "not in favour" or "strongly opposed" to 9 of the 13 resources. The Nicene Creed was the point of greatest divergence, with one theologian indicating it "absolutely must be included" and another being "strongly opposed to including this item." Discussion among the Mennonite Worship and Song Committee was also characterized by strong and divergent perspectives, along with ample ambivalence. At a minimum, this division and uncertainty indicates that Mennonites are far from settled on the role of the Nicene Creed in worship. Since this creed is readily available

[5] *Hymnal Companion* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1996), 413.

[6] *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, anticipated 2020).

[7] No one opposed inclusion of: the Apostles' Creed; the Shared Convictions of Mennonite World Conference (https://mwc-cmm.org/article/shared-convictions); the Spanish-language creed known from the *Sing the Journey* supplement (Justo Gonzalez, in *Sing the Journey* [Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2005], 135), or a version of Menno Simons's "True Evangelical Faith" statement from Menno Simons, *Why I do Not Cease Teaching and Writing* (1539).

for use, regardless of whether it is included in *Voices Together* or whether a community uses *Voices Together*, the question of the place of creeds in Anabaptist worship remains.

It is fruitful to apply the three principles for radical Trinitarian worship that emerge from Rempel's paper to the conversation about including creeds in *Voices Together*. First, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds articulate the Trinitarian *deep structures* at the heart of Rempel's argument. One challenge that emerged in conversations about the hymnal was a reductive understanding of the creeds as lists of modern truth claims that fully summarize the Christian faith and require cognitive assent rather than an expansive understanding of the creeds as multivalent symbols. Exploring ways to engage creeds as symbols rather than checklists could facilitate their use in worship and allow their deep Trinitarian dynamics to infuse Mennonite theology and practice.

Second, recognizing the creeds as contextual rather than comprehensive can stretch the *historical memory* of the church. Seeing these symbols as historical products limited by the time period and debates that formed them, yet used continuously and ecumenically over the centuries, may help communities discover in them an expanded vision of faith and life that transcends and speaks into contemporary tensions.

Third, *disciplined creativity* is encouraged when using the creeds in Mennonite worship settings. From a theological and ecclesial standpoint, congregations are free to frame or juxtapose the creeds with more expansive ways of naming God and alternative approaches to affirming central theological commitments. However, the most common objection to including the Nicene Creed in *Voices Together* was not theological but practical: it was viewed as too long and complex to be "usable" in worship. Millions of Christians around the world voice these words together in worship each week, but since this is not the practice of most Mennonite communities, it is perceived as difficult or out of place.

One way to introduce this practice could be speaking a creed together for a season such as during Lent or the season of Easter, or during a related sermon series. Another option is to set apart the three main sections with an introductory question, Do you believe in God the Father?, or to respond to each section with a short song such as a sung "Amen" or "Alleluia." An

alternative to speaking the creeds is singing them; many musical settings are available. Options that may be especially at home in Mennonite congregations include strophic texts paired with familiar four-part tunes, such as Sylvia Dunstan's "I believe in God Almighty" set to PLEADING SAVIOR[8] or versions of the creed expressed through Contemporary Worship Music, such as Hillsong's "This I Believe (The Creed)."[9] While any rearrangement of the text to facilitate congregational song is open to critique, these expressions of creative orthodoxy may make the creeds accessible to communities that would never otherwise engage them.

The Trinity in Mennonite Congregational Song

Singing arrangements of the Apostles' and Nicene Creed is only one example of how Anabaptist worship can manifest radical Trinitarian orthodoxy through congregational song. As Rempel observes, a primary way that Trinitarian faith has been transmitted in Anabaptist contexts is through "the terminology of doctrine, the language of hymnody, and the piety undergirding discipleship" (118). Although an analysis of Trinitarian content in the historical development and current practice of Mennonite congregational singing is worthy of study, it is beyond the scope of this response. Therefore, I will comment on only a handful of examples as they connect to the three principles for Trinitarian worship aligned with radical discipleship and ecclesiology.

Deep structures and expansive symbolic language for the Trinity are characteristic of congregational song. Some of the most widely-sung, ecumenically-known classic hymns are profoundly Trinitarian, such as Richard Heber's "Holy, Holy, Holy"[10] or Thomas Ken's "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," whether sung to the tune DEDICATION ANTHEM or OLD HUNDREDTH.[11] Trinitarian stanzas conclude many traditional

[8] Sylvia Dunstan, "I believe in God Almighty" (GIA, 1991); Joshua Leavitt, *Christian Lyre* (1830).

[9] Ben Fielding and Matt Crocker, "This I believe (The Creed)," (Hillsong, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtUNQpu2b7Q.

[10] Reginal Heber, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" (1826), in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 120.

[11] Thomas Ken, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" (1674); Lowell Mason, *Boston Handel and Haydn Society* (1822); Louis Bourgeois, *Genevan Psalter* (1551); in *Hymnal: A*

European and American hymns. There are also Trinitarian songs from beyond Europe and North America, such as Nobuaki Hanaoka's "Praise the Lord" from Japan.[12] Although many classic Trinitarian hymns are more metaphysical, several recent Trinitarian hymns make explicit the ethical implications of Trinitarian theology. One example of a new hymn text set to the familiar tune Lauda Anima is "Praise with joy the word's Creator" from the Iona Community, which dedicates one stanza to the liberating work of each person of the Trinity.[13] A Contemporary Worship Music approach to a similar theme is "Trinity Song" by Sandra McCracken, whose simple lyrics speak to the deep metaphysical and ethical structures of Christian worship.[14]

Congregational song is an aspect of Mennonite worship where there is a longer *historical memory*. Denominational hymnals include texts and tunes written throughout the history of the church—from the late antique, medieval, and early modern periods, to the present— and songs based on the writings of significant figures from the past. Whether or not the Trinity is the focus of the song, singing with Trinitarian theologians of the past keeps present-day communities in conversation with Trinitarian tradition. Points of connection to Rempel's interlocutors include links to the 16th century, such as the writings of Balthasar Hubmaier[15] and Menno Simons.[16] *Voices Together* aims to expand this early Anabaptist collection to include Pilgram Marpeck, whose writings inspired a communion hymn by Mennonite hymn writer Adam M.L. Tice, "Spirit, Do Your Work in Us," that explores the Trinitarian and ethical dimensions of the central symbol of communion,[17] and hymns

Worship Book, 118, 119.

[12] Nobuaki Hanaoka, "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord" (1980), in *Hymnal: A Worship* Book, 52.

[13] Iona Community, "Praise with joy the world's Creator" (WGRG [Wild Goose Resource Group], 1987), in *Sing the Journey*, 16; John Goss (1869).

[14] Sandra McCracken, "Trinity Song" (Drink Your Tea Music, 2016).

[15] Balthasar Hubmaier, "Rejoice, rejoice in God" (1520), versified by Ruth Naylor (1983), in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 313.

[16] Menno Simons, "We are people of God's peace" (1552), versified by David Augsburger (1978), adapted by Esther Bergen (Mennonite World Conference, 1990), in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 407; Menno Simons, "O God, to whom then shall I turn," adapted by Kenneth Nafziger (1996), in *Sing the Story* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2007), 61; Menno Simons, "True Evangelical Faith" adapted by Jeremy Kempf (2014).

[17] Adam M.L. Tice, "Spirit do your work in us" (GIA, 2004); MARPECK, Chris Ángel (GIA, 2015).

based on the stories and writings of Anabaptist women, including those told in Thieleman van Braght's *Martyrs Mirror*. Sources from before the Reformation are also being set to music in new ways, such as "Christ Be All around Me,"[18] a contemporary worship song based on words attributed to St. Patrick as part of his robustly Trinitarian "Breastplate Prayer." "Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth," a contemporary hymn text based on the writings of Julian of Norwich, was created by Mennonite poet Jean Janzen for *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and is included in at least 13 hymnals.[19] By employing feminine imagery for all three persons of the Trinity, in addition to stretching the historical memory of the church, this text is an example of creative orthodoxy.

Congregational song, as a fusion of poetry and music, is a generative space for *disciplined creativity* in worship. The examples mentioned above are instances of this disciplined creativity, and of deep structure and historical memory. Many writers are crafting Trinitarian hymns that expand our understanding of this symbol of the divine. One powerful example is Ruth C. Duck's "Womb of Life and Source of Being,"[20] which links the central practices of Christian worship, the ethical life, and the interrelationship of the persons of Trinity, with an expansive layering of Triune names for God.

Rempel frames the question of a Trinitarian theology for a radical church as a potentially impossible task in a time of crisis. But radical Trinitarian theology may not be impossible if it is formed and expressed—maintained and developed—in and through the activity of the Christian community gathered in worship. The deep structures, historical memory, and disciplined creativity required for Trinitarian liturgical theology may be chosen and cultivated by leaders and communities. Mennonite worship that is patient with mystery in pursuit of the Holy One, Holy Three, could have powerful implications for radical faith and life. As we worship, so we believe, and so we live.

Sarah Kathleen Johnson is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Notre Dame and a Visiting Fellow at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre.

[18] David Leonard, Jack Mooring, Leeland Mooring, and Leslie Jordan, "Christ be all around me" (Jack Mooring Music, 2014).
[19] See https://hymnary.org/text/mothering_god_you_gave_me_birth.
[20] Ruth C. Duck, "Womb of life, and source of being" (GIA, 1992).