An Impossible Task: Trinitarian Theology for a Radical Church?

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Abstract

This essay contends that only Trinitarianism adequately represents God's relationship with the world and offers a complete picture of Jesus, and that Trinitarianism is thus essential for Mennonite theology. The author considers Trinitarian thought and thinkers across the centuries; summarizes the Reformation's appropriation of the Nicene Creed and illustrates how Anabaptists applied it; offers historical examples of Mennonite engagement with Trinitarianism and anti-Trinitarianism; and assesses the Trinitarian views of six orthodox yet creative contemporary theologians (John Howard Yoder, J. Denny Weaver, James Reimer, Elizabeth Johnson, Jon Sobrino, and Jürgen Moltmann) as a source for a radical ecclesiology.

Introduction[1]

God is the ultimate mystery of being. Theology has a calling to speak meaningfully to each generation about God on the basis of Scripture and tradition. When all is said and done, theology is not an attempt to explain God but to worship God with our minds. Today, many churches and Christians in the West are in a crisis of belief: almost all of them are Trinitarian in doctrine but increasingly unitarian in practice. One reason for this dramatic progression is that God is talked about as an abstraction, unrelated to our world of experience. Jesus, on the other hand, is experienced concretely as one of the greatest human beings but not as both divine and human. Because of that, Jesus dies with us, in solidarity with his fellow humans. The problem with this picture is that if Jesus is only human he cannot die for us and for the whole creation; he cannot be our savior. Only the model of God as Trinity can

[1] This essay is based on a lecture given by the author at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre in February 2019. Seven responses to this essay appear on pp. 146-207 of this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review,* followed by the author's reply on pp. 208-14.

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make explicit the Bible's implicit claim that Jesus Christ is both human and divine. At its best, Trinitarian faith is not only the church's confession of God but also a comprehensive way of imagining God and all things in relation to God. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner summarizes thinking about God as Trinity with the double claim that "God has given himself in radical self-communication . . . while still remaining the sovereign, incomprehensible God."[2]

Imagining God as Trinity was done in a foundational manner by the Nicene Creed—the outcome of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). It provided an essential way, consistent with Scripture, to affirm that Jesus and the Spirit are one identity with the God of Israel. In this essay I want to challenge the widespread assumption about the patristic era that this belief is inherently conservative and aligned with violence. I will summarize the Reformation's appropriation of the Nicene Creed as the primal symbol of God and illustrate how this claim was applied in Anabaptism. I will go on to give three examples of Mennonite engagement with Trinitarianism and anti-Trinitarianism in Enlightenment Netherlands, Liberal Protestant Germany, and late 20th-century North America. I will conclude with sketches of six theologians, John Howard Yoder, J. Denny Weaver,[3] James Reimer, Elizabeth Johnson, Jon Sobrino, and Jürgen Moltmann. In all of them, to varying degrees, I see an unruly but accountable Trinitarianism as the source of a radical ecclesiology, signified by the practice of nonviolence. I choose these theologians because they are orthodox in a creative way. They 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.

Overall, I seek to make the case for a threefold understanding of God in an age in which inherited thought structures are suspect in their very nature. I hope to lure sceptics of orthodoxy into reconsidering this understanding, and I want to engage people who have tried orthodoxy and found it wanting. (Their cardinal complaint seems to be that many of them admire Jesus but have concluded that Trinitarian doctrine is speculation unrelated to human

[2] "Trinity in Theology," in Karl Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1975).

[3] Weaver only partly fits the pattern. He is a Trinitarian but not a Nicene one. He holds himself accountable only to the origins of Trinitarian belief.

experience.) My perhaps too-tightly-held hypothesis is that we cannot arrive at a true, complete picture of Jesus outside of a Trinitarian grasp of God, because Trinitarianism most profoundly addresses the question of God's relationship with the world.

My task is to go in pursuit of a mystery and its implications for what we believe and how we live. None other than the great dogmatician Joseph Ratzinger cautions us that we are going beyond where maps can guide us when we approach the Three in One:

> Any doctrine of the Trinity cannot, therefore, aim to be a perfect comprehension of God. It is a frontier notice, a discouraging gesture pointing over to unchartable territory. It is not a definition that confines a thing to the pigeonholes of human knowledge, nor is it a concept that would put the thing within the grasp of the human mind.[4]

Many seekers after love, truth, and beauty have found it possible to believe that there is a Source of Life. Fewer have found it possible to believe that there is an Eternal Word who has identified himself with the creation. Fewer yet have found it possible to believe that there is a Persistent Divine Presence, sustaining life and delivering us from evil. But the hardest reality of all to believe in is that this threefold God could be one! I intend to take this common conclusion seriously as a starting point for my task.

In the process of writing this essay I've become ever more conscious that I do my work from the vantage point of a generation that is passing the torch to the next one. Some of this essay's readers may belong to my generation, others to the next one. All will see that I am steeped in the era I belong to and my reference points are sages who have shaped my generation's identity. This is what we have to offer. To the new generation, I say, Take the torch! Meet us at the centerpoint of the Gospel, then trace out a faithful way of thinking and living that speaks into and out of your generation.

My thesis is that the Trinitarian picture of God, while more elusive than other pictures of the divine, is also more satisfying as the footing for interpreting the world. Part of the difference between the two pictures of God (Jesus as human; Jesus as human and divine) is that believing in God as

[4] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 122.

incarnate in Jesus holds together the divine and human, worship and ethics, in a way that they cannot be separated. I hope to show that it provides an alternative to the inherent reductionism of unitarianism in all its guises. To do so I rely on the Trinitarian logic of Pilgram Marpeck, a 16th-century Anabaptist theologian. I also point to the mindset of Thieleman van Braght, a 17th-century Dutch Mennonite minister who claimed that the Mennonite church of his day was in a state of crisis. Its remedy, he argued, lay in the fusion of Trinitarian doctrine with Sermon on the Mount ethics. I depend on John Howard Yoder for his conclusion that the Nicene Creed was the only formulation of the disputed God questions of the 4th century that did justice to the implications of New Testament claims.

A Word about Terminology

I use "Trinitarianism" in two ways. One is as a description of the three-ness of the one God found in the NT. The other and more common one is as a description of the Nicene Creed in its final form of 381. This creed is not an exhaustive statement of Trinitarian belief, but its claims remain the starting point for all further reflection on God. There were also forms of Trinitarian faith that were later judged heretical. Modalism, as the name suggests, thought of Father, Son, and Spirit as modes of the same divine revelation and not as distinct persons. Subordinationism taught that the Son was of like being but not of the same being as the Father.

"Anti-Trinitarianism" is a position taken in the patristic church by Christians who rejected belief in God as Trinity. Arianism is the first and best-known approach. In it Christ is the mediator between God and humanity; the Logos is a created being, not the eternal Son. A different kind of anti-Trinitarianism arose among theologians who taught that that the Holy Spirit was a substance and not a person. All these viewpoints were vying to become authoritative teaching from before Nicaea in 325 until after the Council of Constantinople of 381. The Nicene Creed was formulated in response to and over against these positions. All these stances recurred in the High Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and since then.

I occasionally use "unTrinitarianism" for the view of those who talk about God without a Trinitarian reference point but do not engage in the historical polemic. By "unitarianism" I mean the view of those who hold a

picture of God in which Jesus is a central figure but is not divine as well as human. This term includes the specifically named Unitarian denomination but goes beyond it.

The Issue

Christians today have inherited an approach to the Gospel in which God as Trinity hardly plays an explicit role. Implicit assumptions—for example, about God's infinite self-giving—are still at work within otherwise unTrinitarian approaches to God for which there is no longer a theological warrant. I wonder if the heirs of the Enlightenment and postmodernism have taken to heart the consequences of this reductive understanding for their primal symbols.

Let us take the Lord's Supper as a case in point. From the beginning there have been two actors in the Eucharistic drama—human and divine. Jesus gathered his closest friends together for a meal in which he gave himself to them. When we gather around the Lord's Table today we repeat the breaking of bread in Jesus' name and count on him to give himself to us. We pray for the *Spirit* of God to make the *Son* of God present in our midst with bread and wine. Everything about this founding ritual of the church depends on a Trinitarian picture of God. If Christ is not alive, if the Spirit is not the divine Go-between, the only actor in the breaking of the bread is *us*. Then all we have is *our* memory of Jesus and *our* resolve to be a community. We have not faced the starkness of an unTrinitarian Supper, to say nothing of an unTrinitarian world.

I have prepared this essay in a time of crisis. Assumptions that have sustained the Christian worldview and its role in shaping Western civilization are unraveling. The foundations are shaking: "The world has become detached from its enveloping skein of religious references."[5] Against this background I invite readers to consider a coherent core of belief with which to engage the incoherence of our time. In the West there are no longer universally held beliefs, practices, and loyalties in society, yet, by contrast, it is argued that there are universal values, like the human rights codified in the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948. These values

[5] Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning: A Liturgical Theology for Late Modernity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 2.

are arrived at on the basis of reason rather than revelation. On the religious level, thinkers like Joseph Campbell have made the case for mythological truth. But to the postmodern mind all myths are equal. On the everyday level, people receive their primary bearings from practices as different as yoga and identity politics. And in the church there is a relativizing of truth claims and the practices and loyalties surrounding them.

Some years ago a friend of mine was a fellow church member of the deconstructionist theologian Gordon Kaufman. My friend wrote me about a sermon by Kaufman that continued to trouble him. Kaufman had chastised the congregation for praying, since prayer is an irresponsible act in a world in which there is no personal being to hear us. The only adequate response we can make to the needs around us is our own action, Kaufman concluded. My friend, who calls himself a theological liberal, said he shrank from that conclusion, which he admitted was implied in his own theology.[6]

One of the implications of Trinitarian faith is that God discloses himself and binds himself to the creation. This is first revealed in God's covenant with Israel, and fulfilled in the incarnation in which the Son becomes flesh and makes the Father known (John 1:18). Christ comes to reclaim the cosmos for the Creator (Col. 1:15-20). This reclamation is accomplished in Jesus' ministry, cross, and resurrection. The Spirit is the divine promise that the inbreaking of God's reign will one day be completed. Jesus Christ is the human face of God (2 Cor. 4:6). In him we have confidence that God "sympathizes with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:14-16). Through the Spirit we now behold the glory of God as through a mirror (2 Cor. 3:17-18). The Trinitarian picture of God is inherently personal: Father, Son, and Spirit are in a mutual relational bond that embraces the world. In this bond we are persuaded to pray to the One who is always listening to us, always acting on our behalf (Isa. 55:1-12; Rom. 8:26-27). Our surrender to this reality frees us for radical discipleship. When we confess God as "personal," we are using an analogy, because it is as close as we can come to the truth of God.

The Road to (and from) Nicaea

I will begin this section with a brief summary of the theological rumblings

[6] I return to Kaufman in the section below titled "The Trinity in 20th-Century North American Mennonite Theology."

that led to the Council of Nicaea and conclude it with the often overlooked fact that the church engaged with theological subtleties where ethical rigor was inseparable from belief. Before the 4th century, regional churches created their own confessional statements, especially for use with baptismal candidates. The Apostles Creed was one of them. By about the year 300, certain debates about Christ's identity had spread to the wider church. This debate's two most famous antagonists were Athanasius and Arias: Athanasius held that Christ was the eternal Son of the Father, ever one with him, while Arius asserted that Christ was the created Son, a mediating figure between divinity and humanity. A wide representation of regional churches comprised the Council of Nicaea in 325. The starting and finishing point of a many-sided quarrel was the question of Christ as the eternal or adopted Son of God. Nicaea proclaimed Christ as God's eternal Son. Debate then subsided for a time, but was stirred up as the consequences of each position were played out.

So much was at stake that an even wider representation of bishops convened for the Council of Constantinople in 381. Its overall goal was to consolidate the theological and tactical gains the pro-Athanasians had won since 325. Early in the debate they realized that the dispute could not be resolved in their favor without unambiguously declaring not only the Son's but the Spirit's divinity and personhood. "Once the Spirit has been implicated in the Son's work," argues Lewis Ayres, "and been presented as completing that work, then all the arguments that have been used to link the Father and Son can be used of the Spirit."[7] This assertion heightened the paradoxical nature of God's three-in-oneness, inviting centuries of speculation.

At the same time, the Council of Constantinople set in place the theological foundation of Christian belief.[8] Within the next half-century it became the most universal of all Christian declarations, providing an unrivalled resolution of conflicting attempts to state the relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit. However, the Creed's moral and theological authority

[7] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 212.

[8] For a summary of the process that led to this fixing of terminology, see John McGuckin, "The Trinity in the Greek Fathers" and Michel Barnes,"Latin Trinitarian Theology," in Peter Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 49-69 and 70-86.

has been challenged by critics who fault Constantine's misuse of Nicaea's theological process to unify his empire.[9] Attached to this challenge are further criticisms, one of which is that the Creed confesses nothing about Jesus' life and ministry. Another is that it makes Christian theology the captive of Greek philosophy. A final accusation is that a Trinitarian understanding of God is inherently conservative, on the side of power, at odds with the radical nature of the Gospel.

The Creed was composed because what it stood for was in dispute. Jesus' teaching was not in dispute. While it is true that in the course of the 4th century the church had become a mass church, Jesus' teaching, especially in preparing baptismal candidates, still retained its rigor. We need look no farther than Canon XII of the Nicene Council of 325. It stipulates that "those who endured violence and were seen to have resisted, but who afterwards yielded to wickedness, and returned to the army, shall be excommunicated."[10] (Here and elsewhere in the essay I use "nonviolence" as a cipher for radical ethics in general.) Jaroslav Pelikan, the historical theologian, summarizes the final outcome of the Nicene process this way:

> The climax of the doctrinal development of the early church was the dogma of the Trinity. In this dogma the church vindicated the monotheism that had been at issue in its conflicts with Judaism, and it came to terms with the concept of the Logos, over which it had disputed with paganism.[11]

As great an achievement as it was, the Nicene Creed could not address all the Christological implications of its claims. Hence the Council of Chalcedon was called in 451 to address conflicts regarding the two natures of Christ. Most of the ancient and Reformation churches consider it to be an essential clarification of Nicaea's affirmations.

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[9] Competing interpretations are found in Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine: the Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010) and in responses in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 4 (2011): 547-656.

[10] "The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers, assembled in the City of Nice in Bithynia," in Henry Percival, ed., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 27-28.

[11] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: the Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 172.

The Question of Authority

When scholars speak of "Trinitarian syntax," they mean the principles and procedures that must be followed to take into account Scripture, tradition, and context. This does not mean that there is only one possible outcome to a theological inquiry, as we shall see, but that an argument is valid only if it follows agreed-upon ground rules. Thus, God's self-revelation becomes the paradigm, and belief in God as Trinity becomes the interpretive key for theology as a whole. As Disciples of Christ theologian Joe Jones summarizes it, "The doctrine of the Trinity is simply that set of rules and concepts proposed for the right understanding of the self-revealing God witnessed to in the Bible."[12] This definition, however, begs the question of when doctrinal language is authoritative. The ancient established churches (minus dissenting movements) accepted the Nicene Creed and its expansion at Constantinople because they believed it resolved crucial disputes undermining the churches' witness and order. Only in retrospect was the claim made that decisions of a universal council have *revelatory* status, that God discloses propositional truth beyond what is in Scripture[13] to the magisterium, the Catholic Church's hermeneutical community.

The authority of the Nicene Creed and similar conciliar doctrines was re-appropriated by the churches of the Reformation, but according to a different logic. Protestants accepted the Creed because they believed that it conformed to the Bible. They did not accept the Creed's propositions in a direct sense as revelation but as doctrine confirming and clarifying the revelation in Scripture.[14] Mennonites and later Free Churches were shaped by the Protestant stance but were more implicit than explicit about it. That is, the terminology of doctrine, the language of hymnody, and the piety undergirding discipleship assumed the three-ness and one-ness of God as confessed in the Creed, but the conciliar doctrines themselves were not formally confirmed.

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[12] Joe Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, vol. 1 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 151.

[13] In the mid-19th century when Catholicism had to explain the evolution of dogma, John Henry Newman expanded the patristic claim into "the development of doctrine." See J.M. Cameron, ed., *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Toronto: Penguin, 1973).

[14] Jon Vickers, *The Making and Remaking of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 58-78.

The Trinity in the Middle Ages

It would exceed the bounds of this essay even to sketch the main lines of Trinitarian thought in the West during the Middle Ages. Yet they cannot go unmentioned, because medieval developments influenced later thinking. The dominant church father during these centuries was Augustine. In liturgy as in theology, the Early Middle Ages was a time of order and system, a tendency reinforced by the increasing role of philosophy in addressing theological questions. Certain debates, like the nature of personhood, become more complex because greater weight was given to rationality and logic in relation to revelation. In the High Middle Ages, the time of Scholasticism, this approach became even more refined as well as differentiated, thanks to the writing of both scholars and monks. In the early period, Peter Abelard and Peter Lombard are the best known of the scholars and Bernard of Clairvaux of the monks. In the later period, the luminaries are Bonaventure and Aquinas. Joseph Wawrykow summarizes later criticisms of Aquinas that also apply beyond him:

> This account of Trinity is too rationalistic and jargon-laden; the intimate connection between the immanent and economic Trinity has been broken; Aquinas' talk of God overemphasizes the essence and is relatively inattentive to the persons; the account of Trinity, sophisticated in itself, has inadequately informed the rest of theology; the Trinitarian teaching is simply too speculative and fails to make a difference in Christian living and practice.[15]

By the Late Middle Ages one of the foundational debates had been settled: there are three persons in one essence. However, other simmering issues were still open to dispute. It became common to claim that the Son "is generated by" the Father while the Holy Spirit "proceeds from" the Father and the Son. Many debates flowing from this assumption are accessible only to those with a sure grasp of Aristotelian logic. This philosophical structure—the scaffolding for the development of dogma throughout the Middle Ages—

[15] Joseph Wawrykow, "Franciscan and Dominican Trinitarian Theology (Thirteenth Century): Bonaventure and Aquinas" in Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering, ed.,*The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 182.

was largely overthrown at the time of the Reformation, although theologians such as Calvin retained some of it and its methodology.

The Trinity in Anabaptist Thought

In the popular mind, the Protestant Reformation cast off the long tradition of the Western Church. Certainly, the Magisterial and Anabaptist reformers rejected the speculative nature of much late medieval theologizing and the many mediators of grace that had grown up. In keeping with a return to sources, the reformers reclaimed the primacy of the Bible in shaping the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet this is only half the truth. They were equally concerned to reform what was reformable. The Trinitarian imagination lived on in the Reformation's piety and theology, including Anabaptism.

The Protestant rupture of Catholic authority raises the matter of the relationship between the medieval church and orthodoxy. The Protestant principle was that where tradition conformed to Scripture it had a secondary authority. In general, the further away theologizing was from the apostolic age the less was its claim to authority. Since Protestantism had rejected papal authority as a whole, its break was truly a visceral rejection of the order and doctrine that the reformers had experienced while still Catholic. Concretely, this position was expressed in the positive doctrinal citations by Anabaptists, which are confined to the patristic era. Wawrykow's summary of Aquinas's modern critics, noted above, speaks for 16th-century Anabaptists as well.

This means that Protestant orthodoxy differs from Catholic orthodoxy, because the latter relies on an unbroken tradition of interpretation. This raises many questions in the search for church unity. Anabaptists who were concerned with a normative conceptual framework for belief defined orthodoxy primarily as fidelity to the Bible and secondarily to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds (and their early interpreters) because they were true to Scripture. At the same time, the Anabaptists took along with them medieval formulations of doctrine, like the perpetual virginity of Mary.

How did this mindset come to expression? The following questions are intended to shed light on this matter, but I will address only the first two of them: (1) Did Anabaptist theologians cite patristic authors and texts as authorities? (2) Did they deliberately retain an orthodox view of the Trinity? (3) Did any of them make a distinctive contribution to the relationship

between Trinity and ecclesiology? (4) Since they no longer regarded doctrinal and pastoral decisions of the old church as binding, what tied them to Trinitarianism?

Balthasar Hubmaier, a South German Anabaptist and a matriculated Catholic theologian, makes copious reference to the fathers in constructing his arguments.[16] His catechetical writings articulate God's work in humanity in terms of a dynamic in which Father, Son, and Spirit have different but inseparable roles.[17] He sees the Trinity as relevant to pastoral as well as academic theology, and God as Three in One is foundational for his ecclesiology. Hubmaier's understanding of God's provision for the universal church means that the church cannot err, because it is controlled by the Spirit, is assured of Christ's presence, and will be preserved by God throughout time.[18] Twice he mentions the Nicene Creed to clinch an argument about the relationship of baptism to the church.[19] This is a seminal case in point. Even though the long tradition teaches infant baptism, Hubmaier invokes the fathers in many of his treatises, claiming them as advocates for baptism on confession of faith. The most striking example is "Old and New Teachers on Believers Baptism," in which he cites Origen, Basil the Great, Tertullian, and others at length.[20] His Trinitarian mindset carries over into his anthropology. It holds that soul, spirit, and body are "made and unified in every human being according to the image of the Holy Spirit."[21] These examples illustrate that Hubmaier can distinguish between the Catholic Church as an institution, which he rejects, and some of its teachings, to which he holds fast.

This is also true of the Austrian Anabaptist theologian Pilgram Marpeck. The clash between orthodox and heterodox Christologies in the Radical Reformation came to a climax in the long-running debate between him and Silesian theologian Caspar Schwenckfeld, a Spiritualist. Marpeck sought a *via media* for Anabaptism between the Magisterial Reformers and

[16] For a comprehensive study see Andrew Klager, "Balthasar Hubmaier's Use of the Church Fathers," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 1 (2010): 5-65.
[17] H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, ed., *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 84-86, 349, 430-31.
[18] Ibid., 352.
[19] Ibid., 351, 370.
[20] Ibid., 250-56.
[21] Ibid., 430.

the Spiritualists. His original contribution was a well-worked out focus on the incarnation. He contended that the church as the body of Christ was the prolongation of the humanity of Christ. Schwenckfeld held that Christ's incarnation was into a celestial flesh and not into our fallen nature, and concluded that fallen matter cannot mediate spirit. In a section on baptism in the "Admonition," Marpeck chides his Spiritualist interlocutors with conflating the Trinity into a bi-unity by dismissing the ongoing role of Christ's incarnation. The Father always acts inwardly through the Spirit and outwardly through the Son.[22] In his pastoral letter "Concerning the Lowliness of Christ," he describes the dynamic of God's transformation of people in which Father, Son, and Spirit have inseparable but different roles.[23] His Trinitarian logic is unmistakable. In particular his writing on the incarnation depends on concepts present in Nicaea and Chalcedon.[24]

Menno Simons, a Dutch ex-Catholic priest, adamantly rejected Catholic moral and spiritual practice, and just as adamantly retained much of its doctrinal structure, especially the Trinity. His teaching included the already mentioned notion of Christ's celestial body. "Menno's view was an attempt to exalt the truth of Christ's having been conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, and of his having been sinless,"[25] writes Mennonite historian J.C. Wenger. Notably, Menno took hold of a late medieval theory in defence of Biblical teaching. In his thinking, the incarnation culminates in the atonement. Christ bears the sin of the world to the extent that on the cross he is forsaken by the Father.[26] For all their differences in working assumptions and theological structure, Hubmaier, Marpeck, and Simons saw the Trinitarian paradigm as foundational to belief, ethics, and piety.[27]

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[22] William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, ed., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 192-98, 223, 231.

[23] John Rempel, *Joerg Maler's Kunstbuch* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2009, 584-602).

[24] Ibid., 87, 113-15.

[25] J.C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1984), 420.

[26] Ibid., 429, 435.

[27] Thomas Finger offers an insightful overview in *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 329-464.

The Trinity among Enlightened Dutch Mennonites

The 17th century was the Golden Age of the Netherlands in economics, politics, and culture. The nation was more tolerant of religious dissent than any other country in Europe. At the same time it was ruled by an alliance of the state and the Reformed Church whose demand for loyalty included Protestant scholastic orthodoxy. On the margins, there was enough freedom for alternatives to political and religious orthodoxy that both the theistic and atheistic forms of Enlightenment philosophy emerged.[28] The most philosophically refined of the theistic dissenters were the Socinians, whose protest against orthodoxy was comprehensive. They argued by means of a strictly rational reading of the NT that Christ was a human being whom God made divine because of his virtue. Following the logic of their novel Christology they rejected Nicaea and became Anti-Trinitarian.[29]

Early in the century a Proto-Enlightenment dissenter movement open to the emerging scientific worldview emerged on the edge of the official Reformed Church. Out of this dissent arose two coalitions, Collegiants and Remonstrants. They quickly spread to all the Dutch cities, meeting regularly for philosophical debate as well as 'rational' Bible study. Through their focus on Jesus' life rather than his death, most of them had become pacifists. Central to their identity was a belief in the light present in the individual soul. As traditional religious norms receded, 'light' became more and more equated with the natural light of reason.[30] Urban Mennonite intellectuals were immediately attracted to the message of these radicals.

This would soon lead to a crisis within Dutch Mennonitism. All its confessions of faith were explicitly Trinitarian, though not cast into the scholastic form of the official church. They were marked by Biblical language and written in simple prose. In making his insightful contrast between the

[28] Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750 (*Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 3-17; *The Conrad Grebel Review 25, no. 3* (2007) features five essays on "Spinoza as a Religious Philosopher: Between Radical Protestantism and Jewishness."

[29] Lech Szczucki, "Antitrinitarianism," in Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 57-59.

[30] Andrew Fix, "Mennonites and Rationalism in the Seventeenth Century," in Alastair Hamilton, Sjouke Voolstra, and Piet Visser, *From Martyr to Muppie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 1994), 167-69.

confessions of faith of established churches and those of the Mennonites, Hans-J*ü*rgen Goertz describes the Mennonites' goal as greater unity. To achieve it, they focused first on the Trinity, then went on to ordinances and behavior.[31] Their convictions were shaped by an understanding of the atonement focused on its power to transform believers. Their ecclesiology, life of nonconformity, and nonretaliation flowed from their Christological Trinitarianism.[32] This distinctive form of orthodoxy became more elaborate in the course of the century as assimilating Mennonites encountered both scholastic Reformed theology and the dissenting movements mentioned above. This is especially true of the Thirty-three Articles of 1617, which played a key role in the emerging debate within the Mennonite church.[33]

Liberally and spiritualistically inclined Mennonite thought leaders, like Galenus Abrahamsz (1622-1706), a medical doctor and minister, honed their Enlightenment beliefs in the company of other proto-unitarians.[34] Abrahamsz and his fellow-minister David Spruyt composed Nineteen Articles to explain their position to critics. The heart of their argument is the claim that the church fell in the generations after the apostles. Thus, no one today has authority to compel conformity to belief, and no church is the true church.[35] Behind this stance lies the crucial premise of the Enlightenment: since religious truths are not provable by reason, they cannot be binding. Only moral truths can be proven true by means of reason, and are thus binding.

Following this premise, Abrahamsz rejected Trinitarian faith and the ecclesiology of a visible true church. At the same time he remained a pacifist and, as a counterpoint to the rationalistic bent of Enlightenment theism, turned to mysticism. This was the path many religious followers

[31] "Zwischen Zwietracht und Eintracht," in *Das schwierige Erbe der Mennoniten* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 103-110.

[32] Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527-1560* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 123-330.

[33] Ibid., 165-265, esp. 171-78, 199-212. Their strong Trinitarianism notwithstanding, the authors discretely affirm Menno's celestial flesh Christology—Christ brought unblemished flesh with him from heaven, 203, 207. Mennonites elsewhere in Europe had rejected this interpretation as undermining the nature of the incarnation.

[34] Fix, "Mennonites and Rationalism in the Seventeenth Century," 159-62.

[35] Michael Driedger, *Obedient Heretics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 51-57, esp. 54.

of Enlightenment Christianity took, profoundly identifying with Jesus and his teaching. In this first generation of innovators, devotion to Jesus and his teachings had an intensity greater than one would give to an ordinary mortal. The simplest explanation is that this generation brought along an inherited faithfulness to Christ that could not be passed on to subsequent generations—because giving him such exalted status went against the grain of explicit liberal beliefs.

Against this trend, led by Abrahamsz's fellow minister Thieleman van Braght (1625-1664), was the majority, holding fast to a disciplined church grounded in nonconformity of life based on Trinitarian faith. Van Braght and his movement were not making an Old Order-like retreat from modernity but rather repositioning tradition in a novel context. Ernst Hamm, a historian of science, writes that van Braght was "no less implicated in the ways of the modern world than Galenus."[36] To embody his vision van Braght continued the work of Hans de Ries, who had integrated martyr accounts of Mennonites beyond the Dutch Republic and of faithful Christians from other traditions into a massive tome with the Dutch accounts. Van Braght completed the task and called it the *Martyrs Mirror.* His greatest challenge was to urban Christians at ease in their prosperity and woozy in their belief.[37] He concluded his manifesto with the Apostles Creed. In addition, he insisted on including the Thirty-three Articles in the *Mirror* as the two most fitting summaries of the martyrs' faith.

In 1660—the very year the *Martyrs Mirror* was published—a synod of all Dutch Mennonite congregations met in Leyden to resolve the dispute between confessionalism and Enlightenment. Van Braght was asked to be the chair. Though pressed by the confessionalists to declare himself theologically, Abrahamsz refused to do so. He argued that the church today did not have the authority to impose conformity in matters of belief and doctrine. For their part, van Braght and the orthodox brought their list of conditions for unity to this Synod, desiring a new confession of faith, upholding the belief that the visible church expresses the faith of the apostolic age, speaking out

[36] Ernst Hamm, "Mennonites, Natural Knowledge and the Dutch Golden Age," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 30, no. 1 (2012): 22.

[37] *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs' Mirror of Defenseless Christians* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), 5-27.

against Socinianism, and warning ministers and congregations who ally themselves with non-Trinitarians.[38] However, van Braght and his allies were closing the barn door after the horse had bolted: they appealed for Galenus and his allies to help shape and give assent to a new confession of faith. But the latter group had already rejected the place of binding confessions because, in their view, no one faction had enough truth to make binding claims.

There was no reconciliation between the parties. Both maintained their strength for half a century. By then the anti-confessionalists were clearly winning the day. Both Mennonite conferences were becoming a church that belonged to the world of Enlightenment rationality—free from doctrinal and ritual norms, with an ebbing confidence that everyone who held the faith of the martyrs comprised the true church. Although Abrahamsz himself had been a pacifist, the anti-confessionalist alignment with ever-increasing Dutch nationalism was leading the next generation of Dutch Mennonites to abandon the peace position.

The Trinity and Liberal Protestant 19th-Century German Mennonites

No one shaped Protestant theologizing in the 19th century more than Friedrich Schleiermacher, who took the Enlightenment and its scientific method as the starting point for theology. At the same time, he reserved the realm of experience for what he called "religion." The immediate source of his influence on German Mennonites in mid-century was Carl Harder, minister of a Mennonite congregation in Elbing, Prussia. A prolific preacher and author, he popularized Schleiermacher's undogmatic belief accompanied by an intense piety.[39] He won a wide hearing by emphasizing devotion to Jesus without the traditional doctrinal structure. The gist of his position was that "theology requires the scientific method; religion concerns the immediate consciousness of God given to everyone."[40] In the 16th century, says Harder, only Menno was wise enough to leave theology to the scholars and make

[38] *By-een-Komste Tot Leyden Door eenige Doops-gezinde Leeraren en Diaconen…* (Amsterdam: Jan Rienwertz, 1661), 3-5.

[39] Samuel Powell has a crisp summary of Schleiermacher's approach to theology and religious experience. See his "Nineteenth Century Protestant Doctrines of the Trinity," in Emery and Levering, *The Oxford Handbook to the Trinity*, 269-72.

[40] *Religioese Ueberzeugungen*, n.p., n.d., 18.

religion relevant to the people. It is high time for the modern church to take this goal for itself.[41] He goes on to assert that God's Son never willingly sinned. Thus, he can be our model. Christ was not half human and half divine; he was a holy figure with a single identity.[42] Harder grapples with the perennial conflict between tradition (which he summarizes as the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds) and individual experience. The development of dogma has value but systematic concepts alone will not bring people to faith and "the restoration of their original humanity."[43] (Here he sounds like Richard Rohr, the current spiritual writer, who grapples with the interface of science and religion.) A transitional figure, Harder radically re-interprets but holds fast to Menno; he acknowledges the struggle to give both doctrine and experience room. His Christology deconstructs the Trinity from within but he does not explicitly abandon it.

The next generation of urban Mennonite scholars were more radical in their re-interpretation than Harder but lacked his theological depth. After German unification in 1866, intellectuals such as Hermann Mannhardt and Anna Brons repudiated the dissenting character of Anabaptism and urged assimilation into the political vision of the emerging German empire. The symbolic moment in this integration was rejection of nonresistance. Brons's writings are shaped by religious Enlightenment thinkers including Abrahamsz. She pits that stance against both Mennonite confessionalism and "the worn out confessions of the Protestants."[44] She praises Abrahamsz extravagantly and defends his theology, which she describes as "practical Christendom."[45] For her, Abrahamsz and those he spoke for wanted to "base their thought on the Gospel alone and demanded personal freedom in matters of faith. . . . Old questions about the divinity of Christ, his two natures and the three persons of the Trinity were brought up [simply] to counter him."[46]

A decisive factor in Mennonite theologizing was the new wave of

[41] Carl Harder, *Das Leben Menno Symons* (Königsberg: E.J. Dalkowski, 1846), 19.
[42] Ibid., 20.
[43] Ibid., 31-32.
[44] Anna Brons, *Ursprung, Entwicklung, und Schicksale der altevangelischen Taufgesinnten oder Taufgesinnten* (Norden: Diedrich Soltau, 1891), 370.
[45] Ibid., 150.
[46] Ibid., 151.

historical research into Anabaptist origins by scholars such as Ludwig Keller, a German Lutheran. What attracted him to Mennonitism was its dissident character both socially and theologically. For Keller and a growing following of Mennonites, doctrine had been of marginal concern to the Anabaptists; their originality lay in their attention to Jesus as the teacher of a radical ethic of love.[47] Keller points out that the true home of Hans Denck, the Anabaptist mystic, was with thinkers like Sebastian Franck, a mystical Anti-Trinitarian.[48]

The final act of this drama was written after World War I by ministers like Abraham Fast. His catechetical volume completes the movement away from orthodoxy and transcendence to heterodoxy and immanence. Fast's identification with the Free Thinker movement drew people disenchanted with traditional religion to his north German congregation in Emden. In his catechism for membership, he dismissed a personal God.[49] He was convinced that all the church's dogmatic decisions were opposed to Jesus,[50] and believed that there were many Christs.[51] Yet, despite his universalism, Fast fell prey to Germany's super nationalism that led him to fascism.

The Trinity in 20th-Century North American Mennonite Theology

In the years before World War I, mainstream North American Mennonites[52] were assimilating into anglophone culture. This development was greatly complicated by the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy that reached a fever pitch in the 1920s. For Fundamentalists, the church would lose its integrity if it did not hold to a literal reading of the Bible; for Modernists, it would lose its integrity if it did so hold. Modernists were attracted to the portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels; Fundamentalists were drawn more to John and Paul.[53] As the conflict became more extreme, the Modernist

[47] Abraham Friesen, *History and Renewal in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1994), 57-63.
[48] *Ein Apostel der Wiedertaeufer (*Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1882), iii.
[49] Abraham Fast, *Kurze Glaubenslehre fuer freie Protestanten* (Emden, self-published, 1928), 8.
[50] Ibid., 29.
[51] Ibid,, 34.
[52] In dealing with the 20th century I will refer to Mennonite Church USA and Canada as "mainstream Mennonites."
[53] These generalizations should not exclude striking exceptions. For example, William Jennings Bryan, a public intellectual, was both a spokesman for Fundamentalism and a pacifist.

attraction to Jesus focused almost entirely on his teaching, to the neglect of his death and resurrection. By the same token, the Fundamentalist attraction to John and Paul focused almost entirely on Jesus' death and resurrection, to the neglect of his teaching.

In 1914 Daniel Kauffman, a renowned (Old)Mennonite leader and lay theologian, published *Bible Doctrine,* a 700-page collection of theological essays (subjects included God, Bible, church, ordinances, ethical principles, spirituality, eschatology) written by ministers aware of the theological currents of the day. Its ambitious goal was to provide a comprehensive Mennonite theological and ethical system, including nonresistance, in an evangelical key in the midst of the Modernist-Fundamentalist conflict. It names Charles Hodge, the 19th-century American Presbyterian conservative systematician, as a main inspiration for the collection of essays but also Johann Arndt, the late 16th-century Pietist Lutheran theologian. Astonishingly, there is not a single reference to a Mennonite author![54]

All the chapters are written by contemporary Mennonites. The first chapter, "God," by J.S. Hartzler, is explicitly Trinitarian. Hartzler cites numerous OT passages that suggest the eternal three-ness of God.[55] He asserts that "Reason is in full accord with divine revelation" regarding God's existence.[56] He prefaces a section on Christ's two natures with a reference to Nicaea as where controversies about the Son's nature were resolved.[57] He makes most of his points with reference to the Bible, but quotes the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles approvingly on Christ's two natures.[58] Then he goes on to emphasize the personalness and oneness of the Trinity. The sixth chapter, on "Nonresistance," was written by Kauffman himself. He does not limit the NT's peace teaching to individual conscientious objection but sees peace as God's will for the world, and supports the contemporary peace movement as long as it is based on the Bible and promotes absolute pacifism.[59]

Bible Doctrine's goal is to instruct a church increasingly drawn into the orbit of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy. But it has

[54] Daniel Kauffman, ed., *Bible Doctrine* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1914), 8.
[55] Ibid., 22-25.
[56] Ibid., 27.
[57] Ibid., 37.
[58] Ibid., 39.
[59] Ibid., 538-42.

two major shortcomings: it does not integrate doctrine and ethics, and it makes no use of the flourishing historical research into the left wing of the Reformation in German-speaking Europe. Immediately after World War I this research became the subject of church historians who brought it to bear on North American church life, including the influence of the Modernist-Fundamentalist debate on Mennonites. Liberals championed the undogmatic mystics like Hans Denck, while Conservatives (but not Fundamentalists) championed the Swiss Brethren as the original, biblicistic Anabaptists and contended that other streams of Anabaptism flowed from Zurich.

The recovery of Anabaptist beliefs and practices was initially carried out by historians, not by theologians. Seldom were beliefs and practices placed within a systematic theological frame of reference, even though each leading figure brought a theological allegiance with him. It soon became irresistible to use history to score theological points. The most celebrated scholar, Harold Bender, saw the biblicism of Swiss Anabaptism as an alternative to both Fundamentalism and Modernism. For the charismatic Daniel Kauffman, Anabaptism was closer to Fundamentalism; for the academic C. Henry Smith, it was an early agent of modern individualism.[60] Once again, the strong Trinitarians—Kauffmann and Bender—gave pacifism confessional status, while Smith and other liberal luminaries like S.K. Mosiman, a college president, left the matter up to individual conscience.

After World War II, the first attempts were made to create an integrating method of theologizing among mainstream Mennonites.[61] In 1968 John Howard Yoder broke away from the prevalent practice of doing theology by means of history and started doing wholistic (if not systematic) theology.[62] In the same year Gordon Kaufman published the first truly

[60] Rodney Sawatsky, *History and Ideology: American Identity Definition through History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 40-47.

[61] John E. Hartzler, *The Supremacy of Christianity* (self-published, 1948); J.C. Wenger, *Introduction to Theology* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1954).

[62] John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology* [first published in mimeograph in 1968)] (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002). [Perhaps the most well-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/ and in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015).—Ed.]

systematic Mennonite theology.[63] The brilliance and subtlety of his thought notwithstanding, it is precisely the God to whom I have been alluding that Kaufman rejects.[64] God is "a serendipitously creative process;"[65] "The notion of trinity (sic) provides us with a pattern of ideas and a dialectical understanding of the interconnectedness among ideas."[66] The consequence of this reconstruction of "God" is a radical ethic but it is grounded, by Kaufman's own admission, in a fundamentally different picture of God, one in which ultimate reality is process, not person.

Kaufman closed the door to a realm that he believed was no longer inhabited, at least in the way tradition has thought of a divine inhabitant. Surprisingly and ironically, earlier in his career he had closed another door to an attractive place of refuge from traditional belief. He concluded a section on the Trinity in his *Systematic Theology* with a critique of historic unitarianism and its dependence on implicitly Christian assumptions that it denies in its explicit portrayal of God.[67] He notes that the most common form of anti-Trinitarianism nevertheless still focuses on God as Father. Kaufman argues that there is no justification within his rational thought system to call God "Father" (or another personal name). Claiming God as Father can be accounted for only with an implicit Trinitarianism. Where the Trinitarian imagination has been extinguished, its language becomes anachronistic and cannot bear the weight put on it.

Towards a Proposal

My deduction from this historical survey is that the Trinity as the central symbol of Christian belief is more stable and has clearer ethical consequences than the unTrinitarian alternative. It is capacious enough to make room for dissent and improvisation as well as accountability. Unitarianism in all its guises is unstable and reductive because it is impatient with mystery; its

[63] Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968). He later moved away from the systematic method of doing theology and would not let *Systematic Theology* be re-published.

[64] Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 267-72; 278-79.

[65] Ibid., 279.

[66] Ibid., 413, 417.

[67] Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, 244-52.

mindset is to reduce what must be believed. Trinitarianism has a greater capacity to cope with complex theological questions like the tragic nature of life, by holding together the fall and redemption in the person of Christ.

What emerges from this profile is something that seems at first glance to be an oxymoron: "radical orthodoxy." In this final section I will discuss a range of theologians who are radically critical of their own orthodox frame of reference. The first set consists of John Howard Yoder, J. Denny Weaver, and James Reimer. All are Mennonite and unmistakably pacifist; they creatively straddle the thinking of orthodoxy and dissent from it. Yoder honors Nicaea as groundbreaking for Christian theology but qualifies its authority for subsequent generations. Weaver sees an implicit Trinitarianism in the NT but rejects Nicaea as its authoritative interpretation. Reimer claims Nicaea as binding for all subsequent theologizing.

The second set comprises Elizabeth Johnson, Jon Sobrino, and Jürgen Moltmann, each of whom constructs a radical ethic in relation to a Trinitarian picture of God. At the same time they demand that this picture address a novel ethical context. Johnson is an American Catholic and a feminist who faults the church for absolutizing Nicaea's cultural context, such as its hierarchical categories. Jon Sobrino is an El Salvadoran Catholic and liberation theologian who gives priority to the NT witness to Father, Son, and Spirit, of which Nicaea is a guardian. Moltmann is a German Reformed theologian and a revisionist of orthodoxy in light of the horrible suffering in the 20th century, especially the Holocaust.

Five of these theologians stretch Nicene Trinitarian grammar as far as they can but remain within it. Weaver marginalizes the Nicene Creed and its theological method without disavowing belief in God as Trinity. This contrast highlights the fact that Yoder (with some qualification), Reimer, Johnson, Sobrino, and Moltmann follow one methodology and Weaver another. For the majority, the most important evidence of their creativity is what they do with the incarnation, the embodiment of God as Trinity. With their help, let me sketch the outlines of an internally consistent model of radical Trinitarianism.

Models of Radical Trinitarianism

John Howard Yoder was the defining Mennonite theologian of his generation. He offers a functionalist understanding of Nicaea, and does not dismiss

tradition in principle[68] but qualifies its authority. As soon as Christianity had spread beyond the Jewish world, according to Yoder, the most profound question it faced was how to hold together Jewish monotheism and the claims of the NT concerning Jesus. He approvingly cites the movement from "Sophia" to "Logos" within Scripture, calling it "the real beginning of the doctrine of the Trinity."[69] He notes the political machinations behind Nicaea but does not reduce the theological debate to the political one. He points out that the first version of the Nicene Creed is debated for the half-century following and only codified in the Council of Constantinople in 381.[70] He concludes—with significant qualifiers—that Nicea 381 was the only theological construct adequate to the philosophical challenges of the day. That is, it alone successfully made the claim that Jesus Christ shares in the identity of the God of Israel.

> The doctrine of the Trinity is the solution to an intellectual difficulty that arises if we accept the statements of the Bible. It is not itself a revealed truth but the solution to the word problem we get into when we accept revelation in Jesus, the continuance of that revelation in the Holy Spirit, and hold to monotheism at the same time.… But the problem that the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to resolve, the normativity of Jesus as he relates to the uniqueness of God, is a problem Christians will always face if they are Christian.[71]

Yoder disputes the claim that the Nicene Creed is normative in an absolute sense, that its Hellenistic thought forms are part of its normativity.[72] At the same time he acknowledges that the "naïve historical biblical Trinity" could not on its own deal with the concept of Christ's pre-existence[73] and required Nicaea's theological and philosophical grappling.

To grasp the nuances of J. Denny Weaver's position, we must understand his reading of key Anabaptist thinkers. For instance, he acknowledges that

[68] John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002), 149-56.
[69] Ibid., 190.
[70] Ibid., 199-203.
[71] Ibid., 204.
[72] Ibid., 204-205.
[73] Ibid., 208.

Hubmaier remained in the orbit of classic atonement thought and that Marpeck's Christology was orthodox.[74] Then comes a twist. Weaver concludes that if Mennonitism wants to remain orthodox in relation to its own origins, it must depart from the long tradition.[75] His goal is to show that a consistent Mennonite theology must be based on "peace church assumptions" rather than on "doctrine inherited from classic Protestantism."[76] From the vantage point of Anabaptism's dissenting ecclesiology it was bound over time to reject Trinitarian orthodoxy.[77]

At the heart of Weaver's quest is a re-interpretation of the atonement. Weaver settles on the patristic Christus Victor model but overall does not employ a Trinitarian thought structure. In fact, in his earlier writing on the subject he insists that holding to both a Trinitarian syntax and a radical focus on Jesus is a contradiction.[78] In the second edition of *The Nonviolent Atonement* he takes Trinitarian thinking more seriously without explicitly committing himself to it.[79] He makes use of a principle in the Nicaean tradition: each person of the Trinity participates in all the attributes of God. Weaver uses it to arrive at a major postulate: Jesus' nonviolence becomes the Father's nonviolence.[80] However, Weaver often uses the terms "Jesus" and "God" as if they designate two separate beings. He makes little use of the Father-Son relationship in the Synoptics and John or its later expansion in the process of formulating the Nicene Creed. To what extent, then, is a doctrine of the Trinity integral to Weaver's theology? A lack of clarity intensifies when he rejects any notion implicating the Father in Jesus' death.[81] God is not acting in Jesus on the cross; it is not salvific; it is the outcome solely of how Jesus lived.[82]

This cluster of concerns raises questions that go to the heart of our

[74] J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Modernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000), 100-104.
[75] Ibid., 100-107, esp. 107.
[76] Ibid., 94-97.
[77] Ibid., 106-109.
[78] Ibid., 112-15.
[79] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 204-205, 222-26.
[80] Ibid., 245, 271, but also 251.
[81] Ibid., 42, 46, 48.
[82] Ibid.,65.

inquiry. Is there an inherent conflict between discipleship and metaphysics in the formation of Christian identity? How high is the correlation some scholars find between Trinitarianism and violence? How high is the correlation other scholars find between un- or anti-Trinitarianism and violence? Was the Anabaptist affirmation of patristic doctrinal orthodoxy and the negation of its ecclesial orthodoxy a contradiction, or was it evidence of a deeper logic? Did the lingering ambivalence toward orthodoxy create an unstable doctrine of the Triune God, such that it was easily overturned in Mennonite encounters with the Enlightenment and one of its offspring, Liberal Protestantism? I invite readers to bear these questions in mind as I probe the following case studies.

James Reimer's first goal is to establish theology's accountability to tradition, especially to the Nicene Creed, in the face of undogmatic Free Churches such as mainstream Mennonites, where dissent and improvisation have become the norm. He appeals to "classical, confessional orthodoxy" for a way of theologizing adequate for the interface of Scripture and ongoing tradition.

> In this approach "doctrines" would not be considered as static, literalistic propositions (as in twentieth century Fundamentalism) but as a dynamic genre mediating between the diversity of biblical texts and the tradition and the complexity of the contemporary situation.[83]

Reimer offers a much less restrictive endorsement of classical orthodoxy in general and Nicaea in particular. He argues that Constantinianism and orthodoxy are not intrinsically linked.[84] He makes a case for the breadth of Nicaea in that it preserved several strands of NT Christology,[85] and asserts that "Nicaea and Constantinople represent a required development of doctrine beyond the Scriptures."[86] Reimer admits the political misuse of theology

[83] A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 210. Just before this he makes a detailed inquiry into Kaufman's theology, 138-60. Along the way he adds Denny Weaver to this list, 236ff.
[84] Ibid., 247-49.
[85] Ibid., 257.
[86] Ibid., 264-65.

woven into Nicaea.[87] This hermeneutic of suspicion creates common ground with feminists and liberationists (below), but does not itself decide whether Nicaea remains doctrinally binding.

Reimer uses several Mennonite theologians as a foil for his views. His foundational criticism of Robert Friedman, Harold Bender, John Howard Yoder, and Gordon Kaufman is that they share "an anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological worldview."[88] Ontology, the study of being as such, presupposes that there is an essence to reality; metaphysics is a method of thinking about reality in its essence. Reimer contrasts this worldview with that of historicism, which limits access to reality to the particulars of existence, places the nature of being outside the realm of human knowledge, and emphasizes the realm of ethics and human agency. Taken to its logical conclusion, historicism discounts claims to the knowledge of ultimate being, including revelation. In engaging with Kaufman, Reimer contrasts the two approaches as "ancient, eternal, structural" and "cosmic, evolutionary, historical." His clinching argument is that classic Trinitarianism makes room for both views.[89] Here he contrasts his view with that of Weaver.[90]

Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson describes herself as drawing "on the new language of Christian feminist theology as well as the traditional language of Scripture and classical theology."[91] While I am impressed with her creativity in placing herself in relation to current theologizing, I have a number of criticisms of her thought, which I make cautiously because of my conscious and unself-cautious male biases. Although her commitment to the normativity of Nicaea is stronger than Yoder's, it not only includes, but calls for, criticism of interpretations of the Creed that in her view misrepresent the Gospel. Theologizing that arises from the oppression of women judges traditional speech about God to be "humanly oppressive and religiously idolatrous."[92] Strikingly, she accuses Enlightenment theism (the compromise between Trinitarianism and atheism) of fashioning a God abstracted from

[87] Ibid., 269-70.
[88] Ibid., 162. Reimer unfolds his critique in the 100 pages that follow.
[89] Ibid., 139, 148-54.
[90] Ibid., 236.
[91] Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 8.
[92] Ibid., 18.

the world, self-contained, and shorn of attachment to it and healing for it.[93] Johnson carries out her critique on a foundational level; despite the Council of Chalcedon's stricture against confusing Christ's human and divine natures, Jesus' human gender was easily transferred by the church to the threefold God, violating the warning not to transgress on God's incomprehensibility.[94]

Without grappling with the wider texture of the NT, Johnson rejects any reference to Jesus' death as obedience to his Father. She sees it simply as an act of male violence against a defenceless person. Here her writing verges on a caricature of the biblical evidence.[95] As a feminist theologian she is combatting distorted male notions of Jesus' passion in which Jesus becomes a model of submission and passivity. Nevertheless, in completely dismissing the atonement she is violating the Trinitarian grammar central to Catholic tradition. Weaver is more thorough and substantive than Johnson is exploring models of the atonement. He re-interprets ancient thought on the subject but still recognizes that a theology with integrity requires taking seriously a category at the heart of the Christian narrative.[96]

Once she has made her critique clear, Johnson takes into account Christ's full humanity as well as divinity. As a counterpoint to the assumption that Christ must be male even in his divinity, she equates the divine Christ and the feminine Sophia. It is this Christ, as much female as male, who takes on human flesh.[97] Johnson is stretching the inherited categories of thought as far as she can without breaking them.[98] She reminds us "that God is *like* a Trinity, *like* a threefoldness of relation.[99] She adds that this way of speaking signals that God is ultimately unknowable.

The greatest contribution that German Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann makes to critical Trinitarian thinking is his radical interpretation of the incarnation in relation to God's identity. The culmination of the Word

[93] Ibid., 19. Sobrino is less pointed than Johnson but still critical of Enlightenment assumptions.
[94] Ibid., 35.
[95] Ibid., 158, 208.
[96] Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement,* 42-50.
[97] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 134ff, 150, 166-69, 193-97.
[98] Catherine Keller, by contrast, grapples with the Nicene syntax but goes beyond it as she constructs an expansive picture of God in *Face of the Deep: a Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 220-33.
[99] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 205.

becoming flesh is the cross. It is the place of God's fullest self-disclosure, as the title of Moltmann's most memorable book, *The Crucified God,* suggests. The starting point for his reflection is his four years as a prisoner of war at the end of World War II. In order to address the riddle of an all-loving, all-powerful God and the awfulness of suffering and evil, he returns to the Trinitarian paradigm "to inquire into the revolution needed in the concept of God."[100] He concludes that nothing less can be ventured than that God in Christ suffered on the cross and that God in Christ was forsaken on the cross.[101] This is the point at which the difference is greatest between the active Trinitarian model of God and other models.[102] In the latter, the cross is not salvific; it is solely the outcome of how Jesus lived.[103] In Moltmann's scheme, by contrast, the need for a crucified God is absolute. It is ultimately in Jesus' death with us and for us that the dark enigma of a loving Creator and a disfigured creation is illuminated and revolutionizes the concept of God.[104]

Human suffering, especially that of the poor and abandoned, provides Moltmann's starting point for this inquiry. For him it has immediate social, political, and personal consequences. He acknowledges his debt to his Dietrich Bonhoeffer as well as to Latin American liberation theologians, and uses Bonhoeffer's unforgettable words from to set the tone:

> God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He looks weak and powerless, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.[105]

In order to probe the deeper meaning of this assertion Moltmann places two motifs side by side. One motif is Paul's "word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). It looks back at Jesus' death from the vantage point of the

[100] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974), 4.
[101] Ibid., 227-35, also 151. This was Menno Simons' view. See footnote 26.
[102] Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 42, 46, 48, 65. Weaver rejects any notion that implicates God in Jesus' death. In his model there is no need of a crucified God.
[103] Ibid., 65.
[104] Ibid., 146-52.
[105] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged ed. (New York: Collier, 1971), 360.

resurrection and the realization that the Crucified One is the Lord of Glory. The other is that Jesus the historical figure must govern what is claimed for him as Christ.[106] Trying to hold these claims together raises four daunting questions: "How can the intransitory God be in a transitory human being? How can the universal God be in an individual? How can the unchangeable God 'become' flesh? How can the immortal God suffer and die on a cross?"[107] These questions arise from and depend on the incarnation. Without this supreme act of God's solidarity with humanity and creation, there would be no point in asking them.

Condensing the origins of modern German philosophy and theology into a few phrases, Moltmann cautions against the reductionism of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher in pursuit of ontological questions such as those above. In Kant's worldview, ethics replaces metaphysics; in Schleiermacher's, religious experience replaces metaphysics.[108] Thus, Kant provides the scaffolding for social activism as the essence of religion, while Schleiermacher provides the scaffolding for dependence on the Absolute as the essence. In Enlightenment thought, Jesus first becomes the perfect human and then one of a series of perfect humans in every religion. His death appears as the consequence of how he lived; it has no significance beyond that.[109]

Moltmann's prescription against such reductionism is twofold. One is to press the paradox of Christ's two natures as far as he can. He concludes that nothing can be said but that God in Christ suffered on the cross and that God in Christ was forsaken on the cross.[110] This is where the difference is greatest between Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian models. Weaver rejects any notion that implicates God in Jesus' death;[111] the cross is not salvific; it is the outcome solely of how Jesus lived.[112] For Moltmann the need for a crucified God is absolute. This necessarily raises the question of God's "impassibility."

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[106] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 73, 86. This is also a key methodological commitment of Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), xxiii; 102-108; 338-40.
[107] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 88.
[108] Ibid., 92-96.
[109] Ibid., 96-98.
[110] Ibid., 227-35, also 151. This was Menno Simons's view. See footnote 26.
[111] Ibid., 42, 46, 48.
[112] Ibid., 65.

In the orthodox picture, God cannot be moved by anything outside God, but God can will to move. Daniel Castelo sharply criticizes Moltmann for a simplistic reading of patristic theology on the subject, but the debate can continue because both Castelo and Moltmann share a common grammar to which they can be held accountable.[113]

According to the gospels, Moltmann argues, the earliest missionaries proclaimed the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. The resurrection was "a staggering novelty" oriented to the future that took Jesus beyond the expectations of Israel.[114] Thus the preaching of the resurrection of the crucified One is the apostolic form of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom. This surprising equation is the origin of Christology.[115] Behind it lies the unfathomable mystery of the Son's abandonment by the Father. What happened in that desertion tells us more than anything else who Jesus is. Since he was the faithfulness of God in the flesh, it is God's identity that is ultimately at stake. Thus, the resurrection revolutionizes the concept of God.[116]

Moltmann so focuses the question of God in relation to human and creaturely suffering that he portrays Christ mostly as a victim who bears all human brokenness in his body. In keeping with his strong incarnational bent, Moltmann might have made more of Christ's divine embrace of humanity: the Word taking on the fullness of our flesh in order to save it. Thomas Finger does just that. Interestingly, his thinking is indebted to Moltmann, especially at the point of the Father's abandonment of the Son.[117] But on the cross Jesus is not only victim but victor. Finger makes selective use of motifs from all the historic theories of the atonement to arrive at this assessment.[118]

Jon Sobrino, a Catholic liberation theologian in El Salvador, takes radical positions arising from that nation's poverty. Coming out of what he calls an abstract dogmatic tradition, he is interested in bringing Christology back to its starting point in the Jesus of history. This is the opposite to the

[113] Daniel Castelo, "Moltmann's Dismissal of Divine Impassibility: Warranted?", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008): 396-407.
[114] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 105-107.
[115] Ibid., 117-23.
[116] Ibid., 146-152.
[117] Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach,* vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 338-42.
[118] Ibid., 325-48.

starting point of theologians from dogmatically lean and concrete traditions, such as Finger and Reimer, who are eager to place the Jesus of history within a Christological framework. Sobrino's methodology roots theology in the historical Jesus. Yet his historicism is not reductive, because he places it within a Trinitarian paradigm: "This Christology is meant to be a trinitarian Christology. . . . Latin American theology of liberation . . . is reinstating trinitarian reflection as a serious theological theme."[119] The abstractness of doctrinal constructions is overcome in the concreteness of the incarnation and its culmination in the cross.[120] Jesus' engagement with the poor and their oppressors "flowed naturally from the inner dynamism of the incarnation."[121] Christology begins with seeing the historical Jesus from the vantage point of his resurrection. Dogmatic reflection is a necessary pursuit with the goal of summarizing the meaning of Christ, but it never displaces the historical figure as the first reference point.

Finger shares Sobrino's instinct to begin with the historical Jesus but makes it more explicitly part of his methodology. Finger's goal is to show how a Triune picture of God integrates everything. In order to develop a Christology shaped from the bottom up, he begins with anthropology and the rest of creation and then redemption; starting with the Spirit, going to the Son, and finally to the Father.[122]

Sobrino further qualifies the role of dogma as "an affirmation of faith formulated as doctrine and authoritatively put forward by the church's magisterium in order to defend the faith against some heresy."[123] Dogma makes explicit what is implicit in Scripture. At the same time, it does not exhaust the content of faith, nor does it replace the original witness in Scripture. Sobrino offers twin insights into the relationship between the Bible and church teaching: (1) dogma has a limit function—it helps us recognize when we have reached the boundary of knowing and when to surrender our egos to the mystery that is God; (2) dogma always points beyond itself—we "verify the truth of the Christological formula on the basis of the things said

[119] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, xxiii.
[120] Ibid., 201-202.
[121] Ibid., 207.
[122] Finger, *Christian Theology*, 407-39.
[123] Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, 317.

about the person of the historical Jesus and his destiny."[124]

Sobrino's acute focus on history is well grounded. It challenges the Catholic Church to measure its dogmatic pronouncements against the history in which they arose. It is on the historical plane that he sees the relevance of the Gospel, because he is addressing the injustices afflicting the country in which he is theologizing. Perhaps because of his understandable preoccupation with ending oppression he does not delve into the relationship between the incarnation and creation at large. Here Finger has something to offer, in that he integrates this concern into a coherent cluster of beliefs. The constant, eternal interaction of the three persons in oneness draws the creation into the divine orbit that ultimately issues in the incarnation.[125] Finger makes the most of his theology of the incarnation and the coming of the Spirit to back his assertion that God's very self dwells with the creation and is moving it toward its final liberation.

In contrast with the above models that arrive at radical worship and ethics by means of the Trinity, there are seminal thinkers who have left that model behind. Walter Wink is one of several prophetic figures who have radicalized Christians and others to think of peacemaking and justice-seeking as the heart of Jesus' ministry and the coming of God's reign. They have brought thousands of people (including me) closer to thinking and living in the spirit of Jesus. In his earlier books Wink was unconventional and convincing in his re-thinking of NT texts concerning Jesus' identity and mission. His Christology seemed to be accountable to an implicit Trinitarian understanding. I was one of many who read his books with that confidence.

It turns out in his final book, written with erudition and passion, that Wink's refashioning of the whole Gospel tradition was a long movement toward renouncing all readings of the NT that made themselves answerable to the long tradition.[126] Wink's foundational reference point is the 'Son of Man' motif. With the aid of Jungian archetypes Wink makes Jesus into a universal type whose historical identity fades into the background.[127] I can't

[124] Ibid., 325-26.
[125] Finger, *Christian Theology*, 447.
[126] Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002, 139-44.
[127] Ibid., 117-38.

do justice to Wink's thinking in a few sentences, but I will sketch three thoughts. One is to note the contrast between Wink and the other studies in my essay. They were no less original than Wink but developed their revision of the Gospel in relation to historic Christian belief, especially its expression in Trinitarian grammar. The second is that few people—theologians and readers—seemed alert to Wink's drastic re-interpretation. Was it due to a preoccupation with peace and justice to the exclusion of all other considerations? My final thought is that where the author and reader lack an explicit Trinitarian anchor for their thinking and worship they might still have aspects of a shared ethic but not a shared foundation for it. By contrast, the equally radical (and unruly) prophets of the nonviolent kingdom two generations ago—Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Lasserre, and André Trocmé—cannot be understood without the Trinitarian frame of reference that grounded their radicality.

I have argued that the starting point for addressing the chasm between God's love and human suffering is the incarnation. John's confession that "the Word became flesh" is the most profound claim of the Gospel. Everything else flows from that premise. That of God which we call "the Word" took on creatureliness, took on our humanity. This claim is beyond rational explanation.

Modern thought, as expressed in the Enlightenment, made the susceptibility to rational explanation the criterion for all contentions about reality. Orthodox teaching on the incarnation was suspect not only because of its non-rationality but because it had been formulated by a church that had stifled free thought. These arguments were also the basis of Enlightenment Mennonite thinking. The outcome of this reductionist way of thinking was the God of the Deists and Jesus as one of the great prophets.

I have pursued two related goals in this inquiry into several historic case studies. One goal was to make the case that the marginalization of Nicene Trinitarian patterns of thought has inevitably led to unitarianism. The other was to articulate a tentative correlation between Nicene Trinitarianism and radical discipleship, ethics, and ecclesiology.

Unscientific Postscript

Conclusions do not easily come to mind in a topic of this magnitude. But I will share a few provisional hunches the research has left me with. Several

years ago, in short succession I heard an address by a leader of Mennonite Church USA and read an article by a leader of Mennonite Church Canada. Both the address and the article urged our denomination to deal with conflicting convictions on fundamental questions by leaving them aside and focusing on "following Jesus." On one level no one could argue with this, but on another level it begs the question: Which Jesus—Galenus Abrahamsz's or Thielemann van Braght's?

In order to address such fundamental questions we need first principles that give a subject coherence and establish what is normative within a system of thought. I wouldn't dare to use the term "metaphysics" myself, but the Spanish Mennonite theologian, Antonio Gonzalez, does: "The fear of metaphysics is a hindrance for theology. Theology tries to understand reality in a radical way, and somehow is bound to use human conceptual instruments to think it."[128] The canonical Jesus Christ is the entry point for doing theology, but this task entails metaphysical reflection because all quests for meaning end up asking questions about the ultimate. In the case of the Trinity, we turn to Nicaea as the symbol of Trinitarian belief when more straightforward ways of naming and living God's revelation, like "following Jesus," aren't enough to keep us faithful.

As I pointed out earlier, Protestant traditions have a looser structure for the relationship between biblical and doctrinal thinking than does Catholicism. For one thing, the hermeneutical community is wider; for Mennonites it includes the congregation. In making my case I will go one major step further than Yoder's reading of the creeds. Yoder clearly affirms Nicaea as the most profound statement of Trinitarian faith in its day, but I would add that no subsequent engagement with God's threesome-ness can say less than Nicaea (along with Chalcedon's clarifications) in order to be faithful to the Gospel. What does this look like? The image that comes to mind is a circular movement between the Bible and the church as it grapples with the meaning of God's revelation. In this model, "tradition" is made up of each generation's engagement with Scripture, building on all previous ones. Thus, orthodoxy is not only teaching but process. Both need to be in place as a frame of reference for the unruliness that is inevitable in our ambiguous experience of reality.

[128] Personal correspondence, February 25, 2019.

The doctrine of the Trinity—both as a belief and a way of thinking—has shown itself able to hold together in a dynamic relationship between the Bible's witness to God's self-revelation, the Creed as its symbol, and its reception across the ages. Its grammar makes room for improvisations on the Trinitarian melody by the likes of Yoder, Weaver, Reimer, Johnson, Moltmann, and Sobrino. The church is obligated to take their dissent and innovation seriously because they hold their thinking accountable to a shared Trinitarian faith. By contrast, unitarianism in all its guises is inherently unstable and reductive, because it is impatient with mystery; its constant mindset is continually to abridge what must be believed.

My final observation is that Trinitarian theologizing is ecumenical by nature. This was obvious to the churches of the 4th century. They met at Nicaea because they realized that they needed one another in order to resolve the gaping discord among them concerning God's self-disclosure. The very structure of their belief was at stake. That is the case again today.[129]

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This electronic version, which corrects material that appeared on pp. 142ff in print, provides the authoritative text of John Rempel's article. The editorial team of The Conrad Grebel Review *apologizes to the author for the error and to our readers for any resulting confusion or misunderstanding.*

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