

Sacramental Spirituality for Free Churches? Pilgram Marpeck Considered

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Summary

In light of the currently resurgent search for spiritual wisdom within both ecclesial and secular societies, this article proposes a rethinking of the often-marginal role of sacramental theology in contemporary free-church traditions. A particular voice from the distant past of the free-church tradition (namely, that of Pilgram Marpeck, a sixteenth century Anabaptist) deserves an attentive, critical hearing from evangelicals in our day. By shifting the emphasis of theological reflection from specific sacramental objects to the total dynamic of a Christian community's action in submissive synergy with divine action, Marpeck offers seminal insights fruitful for developing an indigenously free-church sacramental spirituality for our own day.

Ours is an age searching for spiritual identity. A fragmented world longs for a transcendent reality cheerfully cast off but now desperately needed.¹ In such

- 1 A cursory perusal of titles on the local bookseller's shelf will suffice to indicate the widespread desire for spirituality. One can find books discussing the 'spirituality' of everything from hiking to education and from menopause to gardening. Indeed, if one were attempting to formulate a definition of spirituality to name the commonality between such variegated accounts, one might be reduced to something as general as 'odd practices the individual feels deeply about.' For an attempt at formal definition and the crafting of a methodology for academic research in the newly recognized field, cf. Waaijmann, C. J. (2003). *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods*. Leuven: Peeters. The burgeoning growth of parachurch organizations like Renovaré in the last couple decades and the establishment of journals such as *Spiritus*. (2001-). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press and, most recently, *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*. (2008-). La Mirada, CA: Institute of Spiritual Formation at Biola University all witness to the ubiquity of rising concern for and confusion over spiritual things.

a situation, sacramental theology leads the church to a more thorough self-understanding, a deeper sense of who it is as the body of Christ. Sadly, the free-church tradition has had difficulties in finding its theological voice in this important area. It has tended to follow either Zwingli in dispensing with any role for the sacraments beyond memorial cues, or occasionally, Calvin in affirming “spiritual presence.” Neither approach has really seemed at home within a free-church ecclesiology, however, and thus has typically been relegated to the periphery in their theologies. In fresh preparation for engagement with the spiritual ailments of our age, the question must be asked: what might an indigenously free-church sacramental theology be?

At the beginning of this search, it might be asked what such a theology would look like if it were seen. The following is this author’s hunch. Minimally, a free-church sacramental theology would cohere with the following emphases central to free-church identity. First, the visibility of the church as a reality, separate from the state, witnessing in and to the world has been a common theme within free-church traditions and ought to be accounted for in any indigenous sacramental theology. Second, free-churches have strongly affirmed both justification by faith and the possibility of visibly discerning the church by its moral fruits. ‘Regenerate church membership’ has been the term used by those free-churches with a Calvinistic accent to name the visible church motif. But other descriptions, without utilizing Calvin’s categories, are certainly possible. Hand in hand with this emphasis has been the practice of believer’s baptism. A free-church sacramental theology would therefore hold a central role for both faith and moral life and provide a rationale for affirming the practice of adult baptism. Third, the free-churches have tended to radicalize the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Thus an indigenously free-church sacramental theology would locate meaning and efficacy at the lay, congregational level rather than in the merits of an institutionalized clergy. So again it is asked: what might an indigenously free-church sacramental theology look like if one were to be seen?

In this search, a particular voice from the past finds new significance. Pilgram Marpeck, a sixteenth century Anabaptist of Austrian stock, articulated a distinctively free-church understanding of the sacraments in the midst of lively dialogue with Roman, Spiritualist and Reformed traditions. Within his theology, the free-church tradition finds a starting point – but certainly only that – for thinking through its spiritual and sacramental identity.

Procedurally, Marpeck will be introduced, he will be placed within the context of his dialogue partners and his understanding of the sacraments will be presented in some detail. Second, the fruitfulness of his theology of the sacraments for the church today will be considered. Finally, a few brief suggestions to supplement his thought will complete this investigation.

Biographical Turning Point

Pilgram Marpeck was born into a house of privilege and wealth in Rattenberg which is located in the Inn Valley of Tirol.² Nothing is known of his childhood. The first record of Marpeck is from 1520 when he and his wife joined the mining guild. In 1525, Marpeck received three civic appointments. First, on 24 February, he was appointed to the Lower Council, then on 20 April he was instated as mining magistrate, and finally on 11 June he was appointed to the Upper Council.

His prosperity continued to grow during this period. He had a yearly salary as mining magistrate of 65 pounds. And in 1528 he was comfortable enough to lend Ferdinand I 1,000 guilders at five percent interest. Marpeck's wealth makes his Anabaptist convictions somewhat paradoxical. Thus the historian is faced with the question: what could have prompted his conversion?

Presumably, his initial contact with the Anabaptists came through the miners who were under his charge and for whom he gradually gained respect. The year 1528 proved to be a time of chaos and then conviction for Marpeck. 14 December of the previous year, Ferdinand I had issued a royal order that all Anabaptists be imprisoned. Evidently, on 1 January a letter was sent from Bartime Anngst, a magistrate at Rattenberg, which indicated that Marpeck was reluctant to comply with the royal order. That letter is now extinct but it is known through the extant letter by which the government officials replied to Anngst. Their reply is quite stern, "deal seriously with him in these matters pertaining to the Anabaptists... We are... confident that if he is negligent in these matters you know what is best and what is necessary. If he persists in not following the royal prescription you must report it to us." (Marpeck, 1978, 19). Little over a week later, 10 January, another letter, apparently in response to a request for aid in forcing Marpeck to submit to the royal order, indicates that Marpeck has reconsidered his stance and agreed to enforce the royal order.

... We inform you that you have no need for additional protection... For when the assistants of our Royal Highness negotiated with the same magistrate recently in Schwaz, he promised seriously to prevent the mining workers under jurisdiction from practicing rebaptism and to observe scrupulously the mandates of his Royal Highness. In addition where it would come to his attention that one or more of the same miners was not living according to the mandates and adhering to the new sect of the Anabaptists he would indicate this to you, capture them, not hinder you, but upon your request to proceed with the appropriate punishment against such... (Marpeck, 1978, 20).

2 For a thorough account of Marpeck's life, cf. Klaassen, W., & Klassen, W. (2008). *Marpeck: A life of dissent and conformity*. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite history, no. 44. Waterloo, Ont: Herald Press., Also, Boyd, S. B. (1992). *Pilgram Marpeck: His life and social theology*. Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, 147. Mainz: Von Zabern., pp. 5-24.

Four days later, 14 January, Leonard Schiemer, a local Anabaptist leader was beheaded and burned within a couple hundred meters of Marpeck's home (Boyd, 1992, 23). 28 January, a letter arrived from Ferdinand I, addressed to Marpeck himself, honoring Marpeck's request to be released from his position as mining magistrate. Soon thereafter Marpeck left Rattenberg. At that time his estate, including two houses, was confiscated and appraised at a value of 3,500 guilders. The only other record of Marpeck on the city records in Rattenberg is a request received 31 July 1529, about a year after his departure, that some of the goods confiscated from him be used for the care of his adopted children whom he was forced to leave behind.

It is impossible to know precisely what happened, but is it inconceivable that Marpeck was responsible for apprehending Leonard Scheimer? Or, in his role as magistrate, did Marpeck simply find himself impotent to prevent Scheimer's execution?³ Did he bear some responsibility in his execution? It can never be known with certainty, but it does seem that Scheimer's execution precipitated a major change in Marpeck's life. What else could prompt an obviously wealthy and respected man to leave his position, estate, and children to become an advocate for a predominately peasant based movement? Whatever the motivation, once he left Rattenberg, Pilgram Marpeck would forever more be an acknowledged Anabaptist.

Marpeck on the Sacraments⁴

Contrasting Influences

Caspar Schwenckfeld served Pilgram Marpeck as an instantiation of one of the

- 3 Boyd, 1992, 23, hints that Marpeck may have been one of those who sat in trial and sought unsuccessfully to release Scheimer.
- 4 A preliminary note on the sources is in order. Happily, there are no shortage of translated works by Pilgram Marpeck. There is, however, one complication in studying Marpeck's understanding of baptism. Approximately two-thirds of *The Admonition of 1542*, the largest and most complete statement on the sacraments by an Anabaptist, is adopted verbatim from an earlier work by Bernhard Rothmann, the *Bekentnisse*. When searching for the views of a redactor, a number of different approaches can be argued for. As a working model, I will use the following presupposition. Unless the text demands otherwise, I will assume that the redactor, in this case Marpeck, ascribed to the whole of the final text, not just those portions which she or he inserted. For the sake of highlighting Marpeck's personal thought, I will nonetheless indicate in a few of the more important passages where the text is from Marpeck's own pen. For relation between Rothmann's text and Marpeck, see Frank J. Wray, 'The *Vermahnung* of 1542 and Rothman's *Bekentnisse*', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 47 (1956), pp. 243-51.

extremities he wished to avoid.⁵ Schwenckfeld, as a leader of the Spiritualist wing of the Radical Reformation, rejected all outward ceremonies as mere accretions to true spirituality. Marpeck's second book, *A Clear and Useful Instruction*, was written in direct response to Schwenckfeld's teaching.⁶ Therein, Marpeck charged that such extreme spiritualism was a virtual denial of the humanity of Christ. God has given the ceremonies of the church for our improvement and growth in the same manner as he gave us the humanity of Christ.

On the other hand, Marpeck wanted to avoid the distorted account of *ex opere operato* he encountered in the Roman Church of the time.⁷ The sacraments could not be seen as automatically efficacious in themselves. To hold such a view, for Marpeck, was in effect to rob God of the external witnesses of his work in human lives by severing the sacraments from divine initiative (Marpeck, 1978, 194). To demarcate his middle road, Marpeck needed to find a way of articulating both the solidarity of inner and outer baptism and the inadequacy of any view that the sacraments are automatically efficacious. He found this language in a Trinitarian account of the action of God.

The Function and Nature of the Sacraments: Witness and Co-Witness

Having seen, in the Zwingli - Luther controversy,⁸ the difficulties encountered when one focuses solely on the elements of the sacraments, Marpeck decided that such tunnel vision was fundamentally misleading. Instead he chose to focus on the interaction between human and divine action in the sacraments. Though he never states it precisely this way, it is fair to say that for Marpeck a sacrament

5 For an introduction to Schwenckfeld's life and thought, see McLaughlin, R. E. (1986). *Caspar Schwenckfeld, reluctant radical: His life to 1540*. New Haven: Yale University Press, and Séguenny, A. (1987). *The Christology of Caspar Schwenckfeld: Spirit and flesh in the process of life transformation*. Lewiston, N.Y., USA: E. Mellen Press.

6 The relation between Schwenckfeld and Marpeck prior to 1535 has been a source of some scholarly debate. The weight of scholarship now falls on the side of a tense interaction from the beginning, cf. summary of scholarly debate in William Klassen, 'The Legacy of the Marpeck Community in Anabaptist Scholarship', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004), pp. 7-28.

7 For the seminal formulation, see Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* III, quaestio 62. Given the thinkable options within thirteenth century theology, this doctrine clearly presented a counsel of pastoral comfort in context. Of course, the social, political and ecclesial consequences of uses made of the doctrine over the next three centuries were utterly unforeseen and unintended by its original formulators.

8 He was quite aware of the arguments on both sides. cf. Marpeck, 1978, pp. 284-290. For an introduction to the controversy see in socio-historical perspective see Spitz, L. W. (1971). *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

is an activity in which human and divine actions coincide, indeed coinhere. As the Spirit, on the divine side, evokes faith witnessing to God's action inside the believer, the human church, as the body of Christ, simultaneously externalizes and co-witnesses to God's movement. Thus sacrament, in Marpeck's telling, is marked by a submissive synergy between human activity and divine activity.

Human Aspects

Marpeck's sacramental theology moves in two directions. The first direction is toward a clarification of the human side of the sacraments. Water, bread, and wine are not the primary locus of significance. Rather, the total action of the church had to be considered if one were to understand the human side of the sacraments. Since the word sacrament (*sacramentum*) itself means an oath, the total action must reflect that reality.⁹ Within that practice, the smallest unit of meaning is a given occasion when the sacrament is practiced, not some element within the practice:

Sacrament signifies all kinds of events which take place in the presence of an oath and are handled, or are dealt with, by an oath. Thus, sacrament is not to be understood as a single essential thing, but only as the act that is carried out. If the act is carried out with an oath or a similar commitment, then it can be called a sacrament... Paul, and all the other apostles, do not place a high value upon the elements and, indeed, attribute no special holiness to them; rather, as we shall see in a later time and place, they consider the total action and usage (Marpeck, 1978, 170-171).

This dynamic understanding allowed Marpeck to avoid what he considered to be tunnel vision. At the same time, the concept of oath focuses on the human intent in that "the person vouches for the fact that the sign truly represents what is being signified: faith" (Rempel, 1993, 122).

Marpeck understood well that many battles are lost because one side commandeers the right to set the issues and terms of debate and he refused to be trapped in such a situation. As Marpeck saw it, the key terms that had preceded him (namely the *res – signum* distinction) were both too narrow in focusing on the elements and biased in favor of a segregation of inner and outer realities.¹⁰ In

9 For an account of movement in this direction among Roman Catholic theologies surrounding Vatican II, cf. Neal Blough, 'The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank' *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004) pp. 29-52.

10 Of course, Marpeck was not theologically trained, had never read Augustine's seminal writings and did not recognize the subtlety afforded by properly utilizing Augustine's distinctions. Thus one might forgive Marpeck in this instance for throwing the philosophical baby out with the controversial bath water.

order to more adequately describe the interplay between divine and human, inner and outer realities in the totality of action, Marpeck developed the terminology of witness and co-witness.¹¹

Inasmuch as the Gospel and First Epistle of John are among Marpeck's most quoted sections of Scripture, it is likely that he discovered this terminology in 1 John 5:6-11.

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and with the blood. And the Spirit is the witness because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three are one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for the witness of God is this, that he has borne witness concerning his Son. The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself... And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

For Marpeck, the Spirit of God is the true witness of our reception of eternal life through faith. The co-witness which is one with the witness of the Spirit is the external water of baptism and the physical participation at the table. This is the essence of a sacrament: we the church externalize and physically co-witness to the divine action through the Spirit which is the invisible, inner witness of our participation in the divine life. Thus a sacrament is logically a verb, not a noun, and it transpires on the level of a total action.

Since the meaning is in the entire event, not isolated elements, the fashion in which the event of immersion or breaking of bread transpires is all important. Here Marpeck focuses on two aspects of the human practice, the attitude ("spirit") brought to it and the manner ("how") of the action. First, with regard to human attitude he says:

The sacrament must be practiced with the deep earnestness which Christ had ordained; how, and in what spirit, it happens are more important than any other considerations... The words themselves indicate this interpretation, for what is baptism other than immersion? What is the Lord's Supper other than

11 The term is so ubiquitous in Marpeck's writings that one is hard pressed to find a single appropriate passage to illustrate his understanding. The following show a number of ways in which he uses this concept: "Wherever, then, the Holy Spirit touches the heart, so that man can truly believe the gospel, a child of God is born and his birth is witnessed in baptism" (Marpeck, 1978,181). "God's covenant depends on God's assurance and not on man, for man has not been able to help himself. However, our covenant which we make with God is real only for him who is united with God and who has consented to it in the power of the Holy Spirit in faith, of which the water is a witness and not a sign" (ibid,142). "The true assurance of God and Christ which is received with certainty and which is written in the heart, believed and trusted even to death, characterizes the birth of the Spirit, to which water baptism is only a witness" (ibid,145).

eating, an activity to which one must pay more attention, and especially to the spirit in which it is carried, for the spirit of the action is more important than the elements which are used, a fact to which Scripture also openly testifies (Marpeck, 1978, 170-171).

Because he understood the work of God to occur initially and primarily through the Holy Spirit eliciting faith within a human heart, Marpeck's focus on the inner, spiritual dimension of the sacraments is essential to his understanding of the sacraments as simultaneously human and divine. But it is also part of his rationale for rejecting the separation of "res" and "signum":

We ask you, however, what does the sign signify when the essence is not there? Whoever gives a sign of a certain thing or matter, and pays no attention to the essence, is he not a traitor? Kissing is a sign of friendship and of love. Judas gave the sign to him; he did not, however, have the essence of this sign, and what happened to him? ...

The Lord's Supper...is to be considered as a true sign of the remembrance of Christ's death and as a sign of the true participation in the suffering and blood of our Lord Jesus....To dunk into water or to pour water over someone in baptism is a sign, namely, a sign of the burying of the flesh, of the laying aside and washing of sin, and of the putting on of Jesus Christ. Whoever has the truth in the heart, the truth which is pointed to and signified by the external sign, for him it is no sign at all, but rather one essential union with the inner... Accordingly, if one desires to receive the external sign correctly, he must certainly bring with him the inner and the outer essence together; wherever and whenever that happens, then the signs are no longer signs, but are one essence in Christ, according to the inner and outer being (Marpeck, 1978, 194-195).

Thus, Marpeck's resolution of the Zwinglian dilemma is founded upon his consideration of symbolic action rather than symbolic elements.

The second aspect of the human side of the sacraments is the manner in which they are practiced. Marpeck wants to focus on connecting content and action; the meaning of the sacraments (i.e., death to sin, etc.) with their function in the church. Thus the Lord's Supper is not only a symbol of fellowship; it is actual, embodied fellowship. Forgiveness of an old life and birth of a new life are not only symbolized in baptism, but occur in baptism. In the very change of relationship to the human-divine community of the church, forgiveness and new life become concrete realities. This feels very contemporary. Here Marpeck is wonderfully earthy and embodied in his interpretation, and that for a theological reason which will be considered below – namely, his emphasis upon the church's share in the humanity of Christ.

[Scripture] not only commands us to do both [sacraments], but it also commands us as to how we are to do them.... Christ says... that we are to baptize them in the name of God (Mt. 28:19). It is the same as if he would say, baptize them in such a way that they may call upon the name of God and remain in God. With reference to the Lord's Supper, the Lord says, "Do this in my remembrance" (1 Cor. 11:24), as if he were saying that, as often as you eat with one another, think of me and think about the way I feel about you so that you may have the same mind among yourselves.

... merely to plunge somebody into water or to baptize them is no sacrament. You must baptize in such a manner that the one who is baptized dies to his sins in a sincere way and in the power of a living faith in Christ. From henceforth, he commits himself to a new life, and only then is baptism truly a sacrament, that is, when the content and action of baptism happens with the commitment to a holy covenant. It is the same way with the Lord's Supper (Marpeck, 1978, 171-172).

In this passage, Marpeck's focus on the dynamic, active aspect of the sacraments nudged him toward an understanding that would cause some to cringe, perhaps even to suspect him of Pelagianism. This is primarily because, viewed from a purely human level, Marpeck sees the sacraments working in an almost organic cause-effect relationship to their benefits. Human achievement, one might say, is the true nature of this account of the sacraments. But such a judgment would be premature and false. For this critique must look only to the human side of the event, ignoring the integral relation between Christ and his body.

Divine Aspects

Since, for Marpeck, the Holy Spirit is the witness and the sacrament is the co-witness, to accurately interpret Marpeck's sacramental thought, one must read it in the context of the second focus of his view, the divine aspect of the activity. Two emphases characterized his thought in this area: the humanity of Christ and the Trinitarian nature of divine activity in human lives. Each of these themes will be looked at below. For the sake of clarity, however, let us simply affirm that within Marpeck's thought, human causality was not incompatible with absolute divine grace.

Christological Basis in the Humanity of Christ

The human, even organic, connections affirmed in the above passage are wholly in keeping with Marpeck's understanding of God working through the humanity of Christ. That was so in the days of his flesh; it is still true through

his body which is the church. For Marpeck, the earthy, human interactions of the church are divine action inasmuch as the activity of the Holy Spirit is the precondition of her action and the connection between Christ and his body is the presupposition of her life.

Marpeck first articulated his Christological emphasis when confronted with the excesses of the Spiritualists. They had carried a spiritual – physical dichotomy to its extremes, thus denying God’s ability to work through common, physical means. This included baptism and the Lord’s Supper. What they understood to be spiritual, Marpeck saw as implicitly contrary to the physical, embodied nature of God’s self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth.¹² Precisely the humanity of Christ makes possible our true vision of God.¹³ And we ought always to be wary of assuming ourselves more spiritual than our Lord. Such is the guilt of the Spiritualists:

[They] will not learn to walk with the support of the humanity of Christ, as children walk with the aid of the bench, but rather sit upon it and elevate themselves upon it. ... They are not ill and therefore, they despise the physician, which is the humanity of Christ (Lk. 5:31), whereby God himself is despised (Lk. 10:16), for, without Christ’s humanity, it is impossible for them to come to God (Jn. 14:6; 15:1-11) and, without Christ’s humanity, they are unable to recognize the Godhead (Mt. 27:11; Jn. 14:6; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Jn. 5:10)... (Marpeck, 1978, 99).

Behind their arrogance, Marpeck saw a fundamental outlook gone awry. True spirituality is not otherworldliness and denial of the physical nature, but learning to find the promise and activity of God within the humanity of Christ. Conversely, the spiritualists are incapable of finding spirituality within the bonds of human flesh and activity. The favorite text to which they appeal is 2 Cor. 5:16, and initially it would seem to serve their purposes quite well. Marpeck, however, repudiated their interpretation:

So then they say: “We do not know Christ any longer according to the flesh, ...” (2 Cor. 5:16). My answer: Their attitude determines their understanding of Paul. They themselves are precisely those who recognize Christ only accor-

12 For secondary discussions of Marpeck’s Christology, cf. Blough, N. (1984). *Christologie anabaptiste: Pilgram Marpeck et l’humanité du Christ*. Genève: Labor et fides. Also, see Thomas Finger, ‘Pilgram Marpeck and the Christus Victor Motif’ *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004), pp. 53-77.

13 Here Marpeck reflects the Augustinian notion of Christ’s humility in becoming flesh saving us from our pride. cf. *conf.* 7.18; *doc. chr.* 1.14. For the role of humility in Augustine’s mystogogic itinerary, cf. Daniel Napier, (forthcoming). *From the Circular Soul to the Cracked Self: A History of Augustine’s Anthropology from Cassiciacum to the Confessions*. Louvain: Peeters.

ding to the flesh, just as the unbelieving Jews recognized him; they regarded his humanity, word, and deed as merely fleshly, and desired no improvement or spiritual understanding from Christ's humanity but cast it away and despised it. The believers, however, recognize, respect, and employ the humanity of Christ; his words, works, deeds, and ceremonies serve no longer for our improvement according to the fleshly understanding, but serve for improvement according to the spiritual understanding. Until he will return (Acts 2:17-21), the believers...know him according to the Spirit and according to the new creature, his spiritual body planted by faith, for the old fleshly nature has passed away in us, and we are spiritually minded according to the humanity of Christ...(Marpeck, 1978, 100).¹⁴

Marpeck thus subverts their reading of Paul and inverts their boast of spirituality. But his emphasis on Christ's humanity runs deeper still. For Marpeck, it is paradigmatic for God's redemptive activity in the world.

In response to a Spiritualist doctrine that the elect are caught up into a state of spirituality that so transcends the natural order as to be above it, Marpeck states, "The Lord Christ thus became a natural man for natural man in order that, by the natural, the destruction of his nature might be translated again into the supernatural and heavenly nature" (Marpeck, 1978, 85). By "destruction of his nature" he evidently means the process of debasement and corruption which people continually undergo as a result of sin. For he affirms that Christ "does not contradict the created nature which is created by the Father through him as a lord of nature" (Marpeck, 1978, 85).¹⁵ Thus the previous phrase is somewhat akin to that of Irenaeus, "Christ became as we are in order that we might become as he is." The humanity of Christ belongs to the very ground of salvation; "in redemption, the created order of things is neither contradicted nor abrogated." (Rempel, 1993, 121).

For the purposes of this article, it is important to notice in the above quote that the "ceremonies" of the church are associated with the humanity of Christ. More specifically, Marpeck states, "the secrets of God lie hidden under the outward speech, words, deeds, and ceremonies of the humanity of Christ." (Marpeck, 1978, 81-82). They are given us by the incarnate Lord to maintain our created nature and to reveal and connect us to the supernatural within that

14 Klassen, W. (1968). *Covenant and Community: The Life, Writings, and Hermeneutics of Pilgram Marpeck*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., pp. 61-67 includes a citation of this passage as support for his contention that the humanity of Christ served Marpeck as a hermeneutical criterion.

15 For Marpeck's adaptation of Medieval natural law theories, cf. Brian Cooper. (2006). *Human Reason or Reasonable Humanity? Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Menno Simons and the Catholic Natural Law Tradition*. University of Toronto Ph.D. dissertation., esp. chapter 4.

created order. The external created order is in fact an appropriate window to the divine transcendence. Thus, spirituality is not absolute inwardness but submissive synergy – in other words, outward expression coinciding with the divine action that gives it life. “Therefore, whoever presumes to discover the secrets of God... without the outward...casts away...the very means by which he could...discover the divine secrets, for it is precisely the humanity of Christ which is our mediator before the Godhead (1Tim. 2:5)” (Marpeck, 1978, 82).¹⁶

Trinitarian Understanding of the Relationship of Ceremonies to the Work of God

Having early¹⁷ emphasized, in correlation with his focus on the humanity of Christ, the need for faithfully observing the ceremonies of the church, Marpeck needed a way of holding together the inner and outer dimensions of the sacraments (especially baptism which was more contested in his context). Without such a means of articulating the solidarity of inner and outer realities, his focus on the humanity of Christ could easily deteriorate into a barren form of ceremonialism.

In his mature thought,¹⁸ Marpeck found the language for such an articulation in a Trinitarian account of the action of God in human lives. He understood the sacraments, as an external co-witness to the inner realities of faith and its harvest, to be an expression of the solidarity of the Trinity’s life and action. For the sake of brevity, focus will momentarily be placed on baptism. Faith, death to sin, cleansing from sin, and new life are all internal realities; no necessary connection (in the philosophical sense) exists between these spiritual events and physical washing with water. Immersing or sprinkling a person with water is clearly an external act and in itself cannot give life; for the flesh has no life of itself. The connection between the inner and outer events, therefore, must stem from God’s involvement at both levels. (This also produces the possibility of integrating physical, social and ontological realities.) The Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Father’s will, produces faith, repentance and new life in the hearts of individuals. This is both evoked and witnessed to by the human Christ, through his body the

16 For a stringent, but often hyperbolic, critique of the interiority stemming from Augustine, cf. Cary, P. (2008). *Outward Signs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

17 His emphasis on the humanity of Christ is strongest in his writings against the spiritualists, Hans Bunderlin and Casper Schwenkfeld. In 1531, he wrote first against Bunderlin, in his *Clear Refutation*, and then against Schwenkfeld in his *Clear and Useful Instruction*.

18 This understanding emerges primarily in the *Admonition of 1542* some eleven years after his first writings against the Spiritualists.

church. The teaching of Christ's body is the occasion and condition for the Holy Spirit to evoke faith. Baptism is the witness and seal of that faith to the church and before God. The two levels are inseparably intertwined and simultaneous inasmuch as the Trinity is truly one and united in its action. In essence, what Marpeck has done is integrate the idea of a sacrament with the classical themes of the divine missions and Augustine's *totus Christus*.¹⁹

This is not really a move in a new direction for Marpeck. In fact, it is dependent upon his emphasis on the church as the body of Christ, the extension of the incarnation through space and time. If the indissolubility of the church's ministry and the ministry of the earthly, human Christ were broken, the inner and outer dimension of the sacraments would be severed and his Trinitarian account would become nonsensical. In the following account, he seamlessly moves from speaking about the human Christ to speaking about the church:

For that which the Father does, the Son of Man does simultaneously: the Father, as Spirit, internally; the Son, as Man, externally. Therefore, the external baptism and the Lord's Supper in Christ are not signs; rather, they are the external work and the essence of the Son. For whatever the Son sees the Father doing, the Son also does immediately. Thus, the children born of the Spirit and nature of Christ also do that which the Father, through the Spirit, performs in the inner man; they also perform externally as members of the body of Christ in baptism and the Lord's Supper (Marpeck, 1978, 195).²⁰

Here, Marpeck's vision of the church clearly and beautifully shines through to inform his understanding of the sacraments. For all his emphasis on the human side of the sacraments, he can only understand that human action as the gracious

19 Augustine's theology of the *totus Christus* was well-developed before the time of the *Confessiones*. The first substantial usage dates from sermons delivered in 393., cf. *en. Ps.* 3.9; 4.1-2; 9.4; 9.14; 15.5; 16.1; 17.2; 22.1; 24.1; 29.1-2.; cf. also *c. Adim.* 9.1. Significant later uses include, *c. Faust.* 2.5; 3.5; 11.6; 12.39; 16.14-15; *cons. eu.* 1.54. For secondary discussions of the *totus Christus* theme in Augustine's works, cf. Grabowski, Stanislaus Justin. 1946. "St. Augustine and the Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ" in *Theological Studies* 7:1, pp. 72-125.; McGinn, Bernard. (1991) *The Foundations of Mysticism*. New York: Crossroad, pp. 248-251.; Cameron, Glenn Michael. (1996) *Augustine's Construction of Figurative Exegesis against the Donatists in the Enarrationes in Psalmos*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago Divinity School, esp. pp. 272-301; Fiedrowicz, Michael. (1997) *Psalmus Vox Totius Christi: Studien zu Augustins "Enarrationes in Psalmos"*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.; Fiedrowicz, Michael. 2000. "General Introduction" in Augustine and Maria Boulding and John E. Rotelle. (2000) *The Works of St. Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century. Part III. Volume 15: Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*. New Rochelle: New City Press.; Cameron, Michael. 2005. "Totus Christus and the Psychogogy of Augustine's Sermons" in *Augustinian Studies* 36:1, pp. 59-70.

20 Incidentally, Marpeck added this passage in the course of his redaction of the *Bekanntnisse*.

working of God. He could not be further from Pelagianism; the natural, including natural causation, is only given life through the Spirit.

Ordering of Divine and Human Aspects

Marpeck's emphasis on the primacy of the Godward side of the sacramental event is further seen in his discussion of "the proper order of God and Man." This theme provides an unspoken assumption when speaking of the Lord's Supper, but finds articulation primarily in his rationale for believer's baptism. Some of Marpeck's interlocutors (e.g. Martin Bucer) had appealed to the omnipotence of God as justification for disregarding temporal orderliness in the practice of baptism. After all, the Reformed theologians would say, 'God is eternal, atemporal. Therefore he can see the future and the past. God foreknows if an infant will have faith and her or his future confession of faith is the basis of baptism.' Thus the foreknowledge of God is the explanation for an action that is otherwise temporally out of order.

Marpeck's Logos Christology, however, furnishes him with a more elevated estimation of the importance of time. Since God created this world according to the order of his Word, his own nature, and redeemed it through the incarnation of that very Word within time, the structures of this orderly universe ought not be despised. There is such a thing as the "proper order of God and man" (it is closely related, in Marpeck, to the humanity of Christ, the incarnate Word). The order in creation and redemption, including its temporality, is an expression of the Word of God. Although God is omnipotent, he has subjected his power to the order he established and revealed. Therefore, in Marpeck's eyes, to appeal to God's eternal or sovereign nature to support a doctrine that is not revealed in the Word of God constitutes not only special pleading but an actual denigration of the adequacy of the Word. This is important for a free-church theology because only with a high doctrine of the goodness of temporality and development in the created order can the appeal for believer's baptism transcend a shallow biblicism.

Within his creative and redemptive order, God ordained that his work in human lives should follow an orderly design. "God's order," for Marpeck, is played out at a number of levels. The first is within the Trinity itself; God's power operates within the bounds of his order, his Word.²¹ Second, the order of God

21 "We freely concede that God certainly has such powers! We thereby recognize and know that his might is placed in the order of his Word and will. Otherwise, God would exercise his powers capriciously, according to each man's thought.... For God has sealed his might in the order of the Word; he who attributes other powers to God blasphemes his order and power, and suggests that God has not adequately demonstrated his power and glory in and through the order of his Word" (Marpeck, 1978, 255-256). At this point, the reader would hope to find

is seen in his work throughout history as a whole.²² Thus the old covenant must remain a covenant of promise; it points forward to completion but does not itself attain completion.

...[T]here is no basis in divine Scriptures to aver that the ancients [i.e. those under the Old Covenant] received the same Holy Spirit and renewal of regeneration as believers in Christ experience now, for the true circumcision of the heart is quite a different matter. God's order must be maintained (Marpeck, 1978, 224-225).

Thus, in both the relation of and the firm distinction between the communities of the old and new covenants, God's order is seen, his Word upheld.

But God's order is also operative in his work at the level of individual human lives. In baptism, the order of God and man, as seen in Scripture, is as follows. First, one hears the teaching of the gospel (through the body of Christ, of course). Second, the Holy Spirit's work grants the response of faith which is occasioned by the teaching. Only then does the body of Christ join with the Spirit in witnessing to that faith in baptism. Teaching and growth again follow baptism.²³

some explanation of God's order and love being one, but Marpeck makes no such statement. This understanding, however, would not be out of sync with his theology as a whole.

22 Of course, the relation between God's invariant eternal counsel and the varying ethical and religious norms God decrees for different temporal epochs was central to Augustine's account of divine providence. Marpeck's lack of theological erudition at this point prevented him from drawing on relevant riches in the tradition.

23 This is first articulated by Marpeck in an appendix to his Confession of 1532 which he presented to the Strasbourg City Council as his parting words upon being exiled. He had already completed the writing, but before he presented it, Martin Bucer delivered several articles to him in a letter. One of Bucer's articles evidently asserted the "primacy of teaching" over baptism. For Bucer, the primacy was purely qualitative and thus served to relativize (infant) baptism in relation to later teaching. Presumably, the erenic Bucer intended this as a final compromise to Marpeck's insistence on proper order in baptism. In an interesting turn, Marpeck agrees to the premise but temporalizes the assertion. The primacy must have some life in space and time:

"Through faith in Christ...baptism is a witness to the inner conviction that one's sins are forgiven. And for this reason, the Lord Christ gave precedence to teaching, not solely because teaching is more important than baptism; such precedence was given because of the order of God and man, which is first to learn what can be learned. Of what value is it that teaching is more than baptizing? ...If the teaching is primary, it must be so in the deed; otherwise, it is dead... If teaching, therefore, has precedence to the deed, for the spirit bears witness to the teaching, in the inner man, which is believing the teaching. If the teaching is believed, reason and human presumption are taken captive... Under this condition, sin is forgiven, and the advice of Peter applies: Let everyone be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Those who gladly accepted his word were baptized. There the order of God and man was observed: first teaching, then faith, and only then baptism" (Marpeck, 1978, 153-154). The "primacy of teaching" is valid

Marpeck, of course, stands upon this ground in rejecting infant baptism. Among other problems, the baptizing of infants involves putting human affirmation of faith before divine activity produces it. Thus it breaks the simultaneity and coinherence of human and divine action which is the essence of a sacrament. The possible costs and consequences of Christian discipleship and the uncertainty of who the infant will become make witnessing to the faith of an infant a rather precarious venture.

All of what I have said is applicable to the baptism of infants. It is too grave a matter for children, they cannot consent to it. Thus, no one should be born of this water birth unless he has himself consented to it. Flesh and blood cannot give this consent, only the birth of the Spirit, who is the power and who rightfully has precedence. Nor may any one promise such matters on behalf of someone else.

For Marpeck, to precede the Spirit is to exercise pure presumption and violate “the proper order of God and man.”²⁴

Fruitfulness of a Free Church Sacramental Theology

Marpeck’s free-church sacramental theology makes advances in at least three areas. First, his account of the sacraments is thoroughly biblical. Marpeck deliberately returns to the scriptures to rethink the meaning of the church’s life. There are always a number of resources available when one is searching for a theological language, and it is significant that Marpeck decided to draw his from a fresh reading of the Bible. By using the language of “witness and co-witness” instead of the philosophical categories of “sign and thing signified”, he achieved a holism more suitable to biblical thought. The philosophical language then available misses the fundamentally personal, relational dimension found in biblical understandings of God and sacrament. The language of witness, however, immediately draws one into a relational mode of thinking in which one encounters and interacts with a reality which cannot be conceptually reduced to a spiritual “thing.” The One who is encountered in sacrament is fundamentally a person, one who speaks and acts and calls us to be his flesh in the world.

In a similar vein, Marpeck found conceptual clarity in an imaginative fusing

only because teaching elicits the confession of faith which is the work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit must always be prior to the witness born to it by the church. This is the order of God and man: God’s work precedes, humans respond by joining in.

24 “Since the Spirit of God, to whom the elements and all creatures are witnesses, and since the greater rightfully takes precedence, it follows that the Spirit is the first witness, as recognized, received, and believed in Christ. To suggest that the Spirit should witness only after the pouring of water is a blasphemy against God” (Marpeck, 1978, 138).

of Johannine and Pauline understandings of God and church. John's sense of the Son speaking and doing the Father's word and the Spirit doing the same for the Son is, for Marpeck, entwined with the reality of Paul's understanding of the church as the body of Christ. Though less often articulated, the Matthean conviction of the community's life as the locus of Christ's continued presence seems to float in the background as a presupposition for Marpeck's thought (Marpeck, 1978, 230). Each of these emphases is fundamentally scriptural. Marpeck's theology is deliberately biblical and thus ought to be considered by those who profess a word-centered faith.

Philosophical - Theological Advancements

Second, in philosophic terms, Marpeck's sacramentality avoids the extremes of deism on the one hand, and superstition or fatalism on the other. Where deism denies any possibility, or at least reality, of divine action in the world, sacramentality affirms God's active presence within the creation. The world we call home is not the abortive product of a detached watchmaker; rather it is the theater within which God dramatizes his self-revelation. On the other hand, where superstition and fatalism (or its secularized version, determinism) deny any ontological reality to secondary causes within the creation, sacramental theology ontologically affirms human agency. God's sovereignty is not such that it denies agency and causality to the creation, for God has bestowed upon it this dignity.²⁵

Thus sacramental theology affirms the fundamental goodness of the created order, not only at the hypothetical level of "matter" but at the level of embodied human agency and community. God has so fashioned humanity that human and divine are not mutually exclusive categories. Though it may be difficult to articulate how this can be, the fundamental affirmation is central to both incarnation and sacrament. Just as full humanity was not exclusive of full divinity in Jesus, so full human agency is not exclusive of full divine agency in the church's sacramental life. Indeed, God has ordained that the church's ritual life be an appropriate window into transcendent, divine reality.

Another significant accomplishment of Marpeck's dynamic account of sacrament is that it brings social and ontological realities together. A growing contingency of exegetes and theologians have turned to the social sciences for an interpretive grid and emphasized the social aspects of church life. Typically, these people bracket the question of ontological legitimacy and view the sacraments primarily in terms of their function in the social construction of reality. Baptism guards the boundary between insider and outsider, while the Lord's Supper

25 For a similar sentiment, cf. Pascal, B. (1966). *Pensées*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books., section 7, no. 513.

recapitulates and solidifies the liminality that is first experienced in baptism. Ecclesiology is understood as a distinctive social ethic in itself and the moral life of the community is made central.²⁶

Several important insights have emerged from this approach, and the community lens has been a welcome corrective to an individualistic milieu. Nonetheless, the benefit of greater self-understanding offered by the social sciences has proved to be superficial and ultimately incomplete. While it is provisionally helpful to understand “how the church works” in socio-functional terms, as the church we must eventually ask if there is any transcendent, ontological reality to our claims and self-understandings. We need to know more than how the church, as an institution or social group functioned. More fundamentally, the theologian must ask if the claims upon which the church’s life is built are true and God honoring. If an approach loses nerve before this question, then its insights will prove ultimately barren for the church.

Here Marpeck offers a way forward. Since human and divine agency can coincide and coinhere, the sociological and ontological can as well. Thus, the socio-functional reality of baptizing “in such a manner that the one who is baptized dies to his sins in a sincere way” (Marpeck, 1978, 171) is simultaneously the reality of participating in the trinitarian divine life as the external witness of the body of Christ. The theological basis, then, of connecting sociological and ontological realities is a strong doctrine of the incarnation and its extension through space and time in the church.

Fruitfulness for Spirituality

Third – and perhaps the most important advance for the free-church tradition – Marpeck’s account of the sacraments offers a depth of spirituality generally lacking in word-centered traditions. Beyond moralism or emotionalism, Marpeck’s sacramentality offers a theologically coherent, ecclesio- and Christo-centric spirituality appropriate to the free-church tradition. Its biblical and theological undergirding is the twin reality of the Trinity and the church as the body of Christ. At the center of this spirituality would be the wonder of divine action in and through the very human movements of common worship, especially in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But the dynamic emphasis would extend sacrament to

26 The works of Wayne Meeks witness to this. These seminal writings provide a winsome and well known example of the project, Meeks, W. A. (1983). *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press. and Meeks, W. A. (1993). *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press. The ongoing influence of, and correctives evoked by, are indicated by Still, T. D., & Horrell, D. G. (2010). *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later*. London: Continuum.

include the everyday elements of the community's moral and productive life. For Christ is present not only in specific elements, but also in the very persons of his disciples as they actively participate in God's life by acting in submissive synergy with God in this world. Thus one might find everyday activities of work, production, rest, conversation, giving and receiving to be moments of sacramental presence as one co-works with God. As such, Marpeck's sacramental spirituality is not a matter of unfettered imagination or human contrivance, but is a sustained reflection upon who we are as the church in the world.

Marpeck's spirituality also speaks to some specific needs of this age. The spiritual tenor of the times is clearly marked by a sense of alienation, both between human and divine and within the self. From within the solipistic universe we have inherited, this age cries out for a bridge to transcendent reality. Within the staggering proliferation of current religious and spiritual options, nothing publically on offer clearly stands out as markedly transcendent.²⁷ Over a decade ago, comparative religionist, Huston Smith, saw the situation and articulated it well:

Amid the bewilderment that almost everyone feels today, theology has the answer people are waiting to hear...[T]he mainline churches ... continue to use the word "God," but what is the cash value of that word when it is injected into a world that is basically vectored by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and the Big Bang? That world is too small for the human spirit (Smith, 1997, 15).

One of the chief values of sacramental spirituality is that it overcomes this alienation between human and divine reality by integrating them within the church's life.

Participation in the sacraments transforms human consciousness by bringing awareness of the transcendent reality that lies both within and beyond human action. They train our eyes to see the world anew; no longer as Godforsaken, but as the gift and theater of God's action. In the language of Luke 24, once we have seen Jesus in the breaking of bread, all of life is set in a new light. Our eyes are now opened to see that he has been with us in the way, despondent and blind though we were. Moreover, we are freed to run forward and face the future with the proclamation that "the Lord really is risen." In other words, sacrament transcends the alienation between human and divine by gracing us with eyes to see God's presence and involvement in the whole of the created order.

27 For a comprehensive genealogy of the secular situation of the West, cf. Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. For a philosophical prognosis of what will follow the 'end of the Axial Age', cf. Erickson, S. A. (1999). *The Coming Age of Thresholding*. Springer Verlag.

Thus Marpeck's sacramental theology is spiritually empowering, endowing people with a sense of participation in the divine life. In an age where many people experience life as something that "happens to them," this sacramental spirituality invites humans to exercise their agency not as a willful, Promethean creation of reality, but as graced participation in God's redemptive work in the world.

A Modest Suggestion

Though his thought has been presented in the most favorable light possible, Marpeck does indeed have significant weaknesses in speaking of the sacraments. Perhaps chief among these is that the church does require some language for the significance of the specific elements within the total action of the sacraments. Even accepting his emphasis on the total action as the primary locus of meaning, one must still ask the question: why water, bread and wine? What is the significance of these specific elements within the context of the total action of the sacrament? Marpeck rightly recognized that focusing solely upon the elements was fruitlessly myopic, but it is equally reductive to speak only of the action and communal performance while ignoring the elements. Here Marpeck is not being completely true to his own approach and ought to be supplemented from elsewhere. A sympathetic and patient reengagement of the free-church tradition with the medieval Augustinian traditions would provide significant aid in meeting this need.

Thus Marpeck, in the final analysis, does not provide a completely new way, but rather a fresh, distinctively free-church emphasis, and with it the distance to read again the significance of the elements without forcing them to bear the load of the whole meaning. From a contemporary position, Marpeck's understanding of sacramental event can be supplemented with a reading of scripture and tradition as it invests meaning in the elements within the context of the event.

Nonetheless, Marpeck does offer a few seminal insights which could have become a viable way beyond the impasse of the sacramentarian controversy. That he went largely unnoticed in his day is in part a testimony to the extent to which he was ahead of his time. But where he was out of step with his own day, his voice resonates all the more with our own.

If, in the midst of the spiritual longing of our day, the free-churches are to bear the voice of God and live into their calling as the people of God in the world, then a strong sacramental identity is imperative. In the search for such an identity, Pilgrim Marpeck blazes a trail the direction of which we should follow well.

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Daniel Napier

**Sakramentalna duhovnost za slobodne crkve?
Primjer Pilgrama Marpecka**

Sažetak

U svjetlu aktualno obnovljenog traganja za duhovnom mudrošću, kako u crkvenim tako i u svjetovnim društvima, predlažem promišljanje o često marginalnoj ulozi sakramentalne teologije u suvremenim tradicijama slobodnih crkava. Jedan poseban primjer iz daleke prošlosti tradicije slobodnih crkava, primjer Pilgrama Marpecka, anabaptista iz šesnaestoga stoljeća, zavređuje da ga kritički razmotre evanđeoski kršćani našega vremena. Prebacujući naglasak teološkog osvrta sa specifičnih sakramentalnih ciljeva na sveukupnu dinamiku djelovanja kršćanskih zajednica u podložnoj sinergiji s božanskim djelovanjem, Marpeck nudi korisne uvide za razvoj autohtone sakramentalne duhovnosti slobodnih crkava za naše vrijeme.