

Medicine for Christ's Body?: Pilgram Marpeck, 1531

Background: Before his days as an Anabaptist, Pilgram Marpeck was a wealthy and highly respected citizen of Rattenberg. He was a mining engineer and even served on Rattenberg's inner and outer councils. It is believed that he lost his mining position in 1528 because he refused to aid authorities in capturing the Anabaptists. Then Marpeck lived in Strasbourg and worked as a timber supervisor until he , was expelled from the city two years later because of his Anabaptist activities. For the next 12 years, he established Anabaptist congregations in Switzerland, Tyrol, Moravia, South Germany and Alsace.

Requirements: Three persons

* * * * *

Narrator: In 1530 being an Anabaptist was dangerous and could get one killed. Groups emerged who held that a more spiritual and a less physical approach could save one's integrity while at the same time saving one's skin. So they emphasized not using outward ceremonies such as baptism, the Lord's Supper and the ban (church discipline), but rather practicing these inwardly, spiritually. They did not attend meetings of illegal Anabaptist groups but instead attended the local state church services despite their mental reservations about what went on there. In this way, they could stay on the right side of the law. These groups have come to be called "Spiritualists." This reading is based on a document written by Anabaptist engineer-theologian Pilgram Marpeck who was in dialogue with a Spiritualist, probably Christian Entfelder.

Spiritualist: We're sympathetic to you, Pilgram Marpeck, and to the other Anabaptists. But we have serious reservations. We think that at this point nobody, including you, has the right to employ the ceremonies of Christ. You should not practice baptism, the Lord's Supper, teaching, the ban, and the laying on of hands. Instead you should be in a state of stillness, praying and waiting for a new commission from Christ. When Christ gives a new command, accompanied by power and signs as in the time of the apostles, then you can practice these ceremonies. But until then, you should only pray.

Marpeck: You're so high-minded and rational! By your sophisticated arguments you're causing confusion to believers who are pupils of Christ. You're shortening God's gracious arm. Is prayer the only way Christ's disciples receive grace and power? Christ has commanded us to practice the work of faith—for example, instruction, baptism, the Lord's Supper, laying on of hands, and discipline—as well as prayer. How can believers do wrong if they practice these things? These are gifts of God, which graciously build up the members of Christ's body

Spiritualist: But the members of Christ's body are weak and deficient. These are dangerous times, and we know that some people have stopped attending your meetings with your ceremonies.

Marpeck: Of course, we are weak and deficient; and we know that, because of persecution, some people are leaving us. But the Spirit of God is in our midst. The Spirit would have remained an eternal secret were it not for the humanity of Christ and his physical voice. The Spirit of Christ possesses all power and authority, even to the end of the world. That's why we, who are deficient servants, act in accordance with the gift and the measure of faith which is given to each. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:29, not all are apostles, not all are prophets, not all perform miracles, not all are teachers; but no gift will be lacking to the believers in their need.

Spiritualist: But the voice of Christ is most clearly heard through the properly trained preachers.

Marpeck: Yes, I thought you'd say that. You don't believe that God's truth can come through any of the ordinary believers. You don't believe that Christ can be incarnated in people the world considers filth and rubbish (1 Corinthians 4:9-13). If the faith and teaching of Christ truly moved you, you would never try to get people to stand still or to discontinue in the teaching of Christ. I'm concerned that you emphasize the inward condition of the heart more than the outward confession of the mouth. Without the outward testimony, no inward revelation can be made known to us humans.

The way to recognize an inward testimony is by its outward expression—by teaching, deeds, commands, and ceremonies of Christ. We must receive these things in a physical manner before we can recognize them inwardly. Think of Peter. He wanted to be wiser than the other disciples, and so he wouldn't permit the Lord Christ to wash his feet. Peter assumed that he was being humble, but he was thinking with sheer pride according to human reason. Christ wished to break Peter's pride so he harnessed Peter's salvation to the outward act of washing his feet.

Spiritualist: So you're saying that for Peter the outward ceremony had to go before the inward understanding. But why? Why didn't Christ permit the inward to precede the outward?

Marpeck: You are impatient with ceremonies, aren't you?! You dismiss water in baptism and you dismiss the Lord's Supper. You ask, "What good to me is water, bread or wine? It's enough if I inwardly believe." Your argument is so rational. You seem to despise the humanity of Christ, to discount the physical and the material realities. We humans are glorious, immortal creatures, but we find it hard through our reason to see the incarnation of Christ changing humans so we can accept his teaching and manner of life. Christ frees us from sin and human reason by means of physical ceremonies such as water baptism and the flesh and blood of Christ. In order for Christ to make us alive and set us right, we must first submit ourselves to his physical works.

Spiritualist: Oh, this annoys me. I get irritated when you say that the Son of Man is present on earth in a physical way in people who are humble, insignificant, simple and foolish. When you call these people the very members of Christ's body, even his flesh and bone, I get very uncomfortable.

Marpeck: I recognize this. And I get uncomfortable when you claim to discover the secrets of God without the outward, the exterior or visible. Because then you disregard the very means by which God teaches us the divine secrets. It is the incarnation, the humanity of Christ, which is our mediator before God. We throw ourselves at Christ's feet and testify through the witness of baptism that, as Christ died, we also die in Him and are buried by baptism into his death. That's how we are made alive in faith and trust in Christ.

Spiritualist: But how about communion? Don't your simple and humble people make it less significant?

Marpeck: Not at all. To eat and drink the flesh and blood of Christ means that my spirit is freed in the pure flesh and blood of Christ. In communion, a transfer from matter to spirit occurs through faith; then the spirit of Christ, clothed in flesh, reaches my spirit through matter and faith. Then Christ lives and not I.

Spiritualist: You take the outward things too seriously. But the Spirit matters more than these. I think you're too committed to Christ's humanity, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the church.

Marpeck: You're right. We do take these things seriously. The entire physical life of Christ is a servant to the true believers, and his Spirit is their Lord. As to taking the physical ceremonies seriously, we don't regard them as God, as we did in past. But we also avoid the opposite extreme—the extreme that we see in you. You completely cast the ceremonies aside and regard them as unnecessary. We know that even today the physical Christ serves us in his members, and he will serve us until the end of the world so that we may be able, by his Spirit, to pray, "Abba, Father." You see, the ceremonies of baptism and the Lord's Supper are not duties for us. They are medicine—medicine for Christ's body. We recognize weaknesses and deficiencies in our members, and we know that the ceremonies are healing remedies for us.

Spiritualist: Well, I disagree. I think that you make baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ban too physical. You take them too seriously!

Marpeck: But we know how much we need them. Look, we know that we're weak and ill, and we employ the Great Physician's medicine. We extend it to one another, to those who are hungry. We know that by this medicine we have life and become healthy.

Spiritualist: But your physical approach to ceremonies and the church is unwise. If you allow yourselves to be baptized in illegal groups, you're taking a risk—an unnecessary risk. Associating with groups that are outlawed can cost you your lives. It's more sensible to have a spiritual approach—to be spiritually baptized, and to belong to a mystical communion while attending services in the local state church and appearing like everyone else.

Marpeck: I know, I know. My answer is partly one of obedience: I have been baptized partly because it is written that one should do so. And also, I have been baptized because, according to the Scriptures, our Lord Christ died for our sakes. Therefore, I allowed myself to be buried, by baptism, into the death of Christ on the foundation of the strong belief and trust in the resurrection. This faith is a living letter in my heart. Similarly, we also employ the other ceremonies by the authority of faith according to the Scriptures. And this is why we meet together: as disciples of Jesus we are immature. We're like children learning to walk, holding on to a bench. And we won't learn to walk as Christians without the support of the humanity of Christ. It is in the body of Christ that our defects and infirmities are revealed and recognized. It is in the body of Christ that we learn to pray in Spirit and truth. It is in the body of Christ that we encounter the ceremonies of Christ as a medicine and a means to our salvation. Thanks be to the Lord Christ who consoles us by his Word when he says, "Whoever is willing, let them drink freely and without cost."

Sources: Pilgram Marpeck, "A Clear and Useful Instruction" (1531), in William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, Classics of the Radical Reformation 2 (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1978), 69-106; Neal Blough, *Christ in Our Midst: Incarnation, Church and Discipleship in the Theology of Pilgram Marpeck*, Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies 8 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 33-46; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgram_Marpeck

© Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, 2011