

On Hasty Judgments: Pilgram Marpeck, 1542

Background: Most leaders in the Anabaptist tradition were concerned about the practice of church discipline, and they took Jesus' words in Matthew 18:15-20 very seriously. Some leaders, reacting to the loose behavior of members in the established churches, went to considerable lengths to foster a pure church "without spot and wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:27). This search for purity at times led to a severe application of "the ban" with frequent excommunications.

Pilgram Marpeck was a civil engineer. He was also an Anabaptist leader and theologian who was deeply troubled by the way some Anabaptist leaders used church discipline. We have taken one of Marpeck's writings on the subject, *Concerning Hasty Judgments and Verdicts* (1542-1543), and have fashioned a conversation between him and a rigorous Anabaptist from Appenzell in Switzerland, whose words we have been invented. The severity that Marpeck protests against has, at times, continued in the Mennonite traditions and has made it difficult for many Mennonites today to practice church discipline.

Requirements: Two persons

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Swiss Brother: The churches that look to you for inspiration are too lax, Pilgram. Their members' behavior is not always beyond criticism, and outsiders look at them and wonder. And what are you doing about it? Your approach is too flexible. We take the Bible's vision of the church seriously—a church "without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish" from Ephesians 5:27. Why don't you? How do you defend your approach?

Marpeck: We have to be patient. True believers are forbidden to condemn all these people before the right time, that is, until their fruit, which is open vice, appears. Christ says: "By their fruits you shall know them." He does not say, "by the blossoms or the foliage you shall know them" in Matthew 7:16. For the day of the Lord will reveal everything.

Swiss Brother: But in the meantime, before the day of the Lord, your members don't agree on doctrine and their behavior is worldly.

Marpeck: That's so, I guess. Even if one is concerned about a lapse or burdened with worry and sees the leaves and blossoms of evil appearance, one ought only to warn and admonish but not judge before the time of the fruit (1 Corinthians 4:5)... For love also covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8) and judges all things in the best light.

Swiss Brother: But is it loving to have churches that are chaotic in their belief and behavior? We practice excommunication which Jesus gave us to protect the community and to draw the erring brother back into fellowship (Matthew 18:18). Why are you so slow to do this? You say you take the body of Christ seriously; you view it as "a prolongation of the incarnation." What will people think of Christ if his body is in a mess?

Marpeck: Well, we try to take the long view; and we count on the grace of Christ. Even though love is concerned about evil appearance and evil fruit, it nevertheless always hopes for the best (1 Corinthians 13:7). In the same way Christ covers our sin and shame in the love and grace which leads to improvement.

Swiss Brother: Well, I can't believe that Christ is pleased with you. You are unfaithful to the plain teaching of Scripture in your caution about excommunicating sinners!

Marpeck: It is my fervent prayer that, for the sake of Christ, you get your judgments from Christ and learn long-suffering, forbearance and meekness from him. May the merciful Father forgive me my failures and shortcomings which I find in myself every day. I also pray for all others who, like me, desire forgiveness in and through Christ.

Swiss Brother: You're too forbearing, Pilgram. You're too soft. Our churches would excommunicate you.

Marpeck: I fear that they would. My greatest contention with you in my conscience is that nowhere do I find such precipitate, superficial judgments and verdicts on every little matter in Christ and his apostolic church as I find with you. All your hasty actions make me feel somewhat distant from you. In my conscience I am not sure that I should have any part or fellowship in such hasty judgments and verdicts.

Source: Pilgram Marpeck, *Concerning Hasty Judgments and Verdicts*, in *Jörg Mäler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Pilgram Marpeck Circle*, ed. John Rempel (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2010), 152-4, 190-1. This is the first of four letters Marpeck wrote to the Swiss Brethren.

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