

Anabaptist Theology

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This is a series of excerpts from "Anabaptist Theology" by Thomas Finger.

"Anabaptists did and today can interconnect themes stressed by Protestants (justification), by Catholics (sanctification) and by Orthodoxy (divinization)."

"Werner Packull argued that South German-Austrian Anabaptism derived not from Zurich "but from a popularized medieval mystical tradition."²⁵ This tradition flowed from Meister Eckhart (I260?-I328?), for whom God and the soul formed a kind of unity. Humans, then, could cooperate with God."

"Martin Luther declared that a justified person is "righteous and a sinner at the same time" (simul peccator). Many understood this to mean that a faith decision by itself guarantees salvation regardless of how the person lives. This attitude sometimes reappeared much later in evangelicalism."

"Anabaptists underscored changed conduct so strongly that Protestants accused them making it salvation's cause.¹² Felix Mantz insisted that baptism was only for those who reformed, forsook evil deeds and did "righteous works from a changed heart."¹¹ Similarly, "the heaven of eternal joys" was purchased "whenever a person brings forth genuine fruits of repentance."¹⁰

"Hubmaier outlined the personal salvation process comprehensively. It arose from the missional impetus of the new creation's coming, usually through preaching. It commenced with deep despair over sin. The biblical law, heard according to its letter, revealed that "there is no health in us but rather poison, wounds and all impurity."¹³ But then Christ, the living Physician, leads us to repentance. We surrender as much as a wounded person can, and his healing grad-

ually enables us to follow his teaching. Hubmaier stressed that we could not do this of ourselves but only in God's grace and power. Christ now lives in us and is our life."

For Hubmaier, then, like Protestants, justifying righteousness was apparently granted through the response of faith. Salvation began, again as for Protestants, with conviction of sin, usually induced by preaching. Yet its main content was neither forgiveness nor imputed righteousness. Hubmaier was more concerned to stress, like Catholics, that any genuine faith "must break forth in ... all sorts of works of brotherly love," and also the importance of living by Jesus' commands.

"As for other South GermanAustrians, salvation was essentially divinization, vividly expressed in Marpeck's more mystical writings. ¹⁰⁵ For example: the divine Word issues forth from the Father's mouth and "kisses the hearts of the faithful," so that "the divine nature of the children of God is conceived and born from this love of the Word, the imperishable seed," Such experiences, however, were not individualistic, for God's Spirit brings those so conceived to the church, through which they are born. for only as we "pattern ourselves after" Jesus do we "more fully partake of the divine nature,"¹⁰⁷ On this path, with its persecution, "revenge is no longer permitted ... for, through patience the Spirit can now more powerfully overcome enemies." ¹⁰⁸ This process was not merely ethical, for it drew people directly into the trinitarian dynamic. ¹⁰⁹ Yet Marpeck cautioned, more clearly than his predecessors, we remain fully human and are never absorbed into"

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*(<https://anabaptist.ca> <https://1being.org> <https://lyis.ca> <https://distributist.org>)

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”For Menno and Dirk, like all Anabaptists, also underlined the Supper’s communal functions. For them also the bread symbolized that communicants (grains) must be kneaded to gether. This, as for nearly all Anabaptists, involved willingness to share goods. In such ways, the unity of the community of the new creation was expressed through concrete, outer forms. But what theological rationale did the later Dutch provide for the sacramental linking of spiritual and material, individual and community? Mostly, as we noted with baptism, they simply insisted that God commanded these rites. Whether they make intrinsic sense or not, they must be performed ”to exercise our faith and to show our obedience.” We ”dare not depart one hair’s breadth from ... all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded., 193”

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”Like Protestants, all Anabaptists affirmed that salvation originates from God’s initiative and is basically apprehended through faith. Many Anabaptists granted further that God accepts imperfect persons when they begin their faith walk. Like Catholics, however, Anabaptists were most concerned about salvation’s goal (righteous character) and the process leading to it. They sought to conceive faith as an activity that intrinsically produced works. To this end, many stressed that faith unites people directly with the risen Christ. Yet such a union involved ontological transformation. At this point the faith-works question, raised within the justification framework, led beyond it to Anabaptism’s primary soteriological notion: divinization.¹⁴⁹” Among salvation was not considered quite so thoroughgoing as divinization implies and is best called simply ”ontological transformation.” These terms, however, can suggest that people actually become God (or a divine being) rather than remaining human and being deeply transformed by God. They can foster unreal-

istic expectations by minimizing or ignoring human limitations. Some Anabaptists succumbed to this, especially in the Netherlands up to Munster. Most Anabaptists, however, avoided it because their ontological transformation was intrinsically patterned. It reflected Jesus’ life, death and resurrection-christomorphically. Divinization was shaped by—even as it reshaped—the finite world, including suffering and death. Anabaptists traveled this journey inwardly, through spiritual participation in Christ, and simultaneously outwardly along the path through the material world opened by his life and death. They traversed it not separately but communally and missionally.”

Divinization, further, was not only an inner process. For ”whoever has become a partaker of the divine character, the being of Jesus Christ and the power and character of the Holy Spirit, conforms himself to the image of Jesus Christ in all submission, obedience and righteousness.”¹⁴⁷ Paradoxically, we attain divinization by seeking to ”follow and emulate” Christ, not ”according to his divine nature ... but according to his life and conversation here on earth, shown forth among men in works and deeds as an example set forth before us to follow so that we thereby might become partakers of His nature in the Spirit.”

”Biblically, the triumph of God’s long-term faithfulness is central to righteousness. This, however, was actualized through ”the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.” Jesus’ entire path of obedience (Rom 5:19; cf. Phil 2:8, Heb 5:8) then must be included in his righteousness. Consequently, participation in Christ’s righteousness must include living in accord with his life and teachings, inwardly in intention and outwardly in action. Though the ”faithfulness of Jesus” can turn theology’s attention toward human activity, it hardly diminishes the divine initiative. Rather, it magnifies it. The traditional translation of this phrase (*pistis Iesou*) as ”faith in Jesus” draws attention to the human response and away from the events that elicit it. The strategy of reiterating faith alone to highlight God’s priority can instead lead to a subjectivism devoid of external referent. The divine initiative is greatly magnified if Jesus’ justifying faithfulness is our faith’s object and is also intrinsic to God’s self-manifestation and self-vindication.”

"Biblical considerations. Is something like this historic Anabaptist notion, now sharpened by Orthodoxy, found in Scripture? Precise theological language of divinization appears only in 2 Peter 1:4, which Anabaptists often cited: we are becoming "participants of the divine nature." But something quite similar is conveyed by the Anabaptists' foremost biblical image, the new birth: we are born from the Word of truth (Jas 1:18), from imperishable seed through the living Word (I Pet 1:23), through Jesus' resurrection (I Pet 1:3-4), "from above ... of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:3, 5). Birth seems to indicate impartation of something of divine reality itself. The Bible also attributes such a direct transformation to the Holy Spirit's work in and among us. This can operate below conscious levels (Rom 8:26-27; cf. Gal 4:6; 1 Cor 2:9-11). God's Spirit makes our bodies, personal and corporate, God's own temple (I Cor 3:16-17; 6:17, 19; cf. I Cor 12:13; Eph 2:18, 22). transforms us into the divine glory (2 Cor 3:17-18; Rom 8:13-22, I Per 4:13-14). Paul often spoke of Christ in a similar way: as being in us (Col 1:27; Gal 2:20; 4:19) and of our being in Christ. 206 This "in" was no static position but dynamic inward participation in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, expressed outwardly in a life like his.207 Paul could beautifully express this indwelling as trinitarian (Eph 1:7-14, 17-23; 3:14-21). It involved "a mystical sense of the divine presence of Christ"; yet not only within individuals, for being in or with Christ "cannot be fully enacted except as a 'with others' and 'with creation,'"208

"In Orthodox and most historic Anabaptist theologies, humans will never become or know God's essence, yet they are transformed by the energies' direct oration on For example, the divine righteousness that renews us (Rom 5-6) is not some force created by God, however sublime. It is God's very own action on, in and through us. This righteousness is not simply judicial, ethical or social; it also draws us into direct communion with God, with its unimaginable closeness and transformative potential. Divine energies are not impersonal forces but God's own direct, personal action. Though Orthodoxy has sometimes inclined toward spiritualism, it has often stressed christomorphism: "participation in Christ's death and resur-

rection ... extends dynamically to cover all the phases and forms of human existence. The crucified body of Christ ... teaches [us] how to share in the virtues and sufferings of him who was crucified; it shows [us] the way of love, humility, obedience, mortification of the passions, and, in general, of life according to God's The first passion to be crucified is avarice, or grasping after earthly possessions, much as among South German-Austrian Anabaptists. The emerging "deified humanity ... does not in any way lose its human characteristics.... [T]hese characteristics become even more real and authentic by contact with the divine model [Christ] according to which they were created."208 In sum, Orthodoxy's concept of divine energies can help Anabaptist theology characterize divinization and ontological transformation as not becoming a different, divine being, but as renewal of our thoroughly human being by the divine Being's direct action or touch. Christomorphism can help Anabaptists insist that this occurs through earthly following of and increasing conformity to Jesus and his way."

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"Historic Anabaptists, indeed, were mostly concerned with the new reality's vivid inbreaking and immediate, concrete re-

sponses. The great majority were peasants or artisans. Most educated leaders had been eliminated early on. Few had training or time to address issues commonly considered more theological. Nonetheless, their practices clashed sharply enough with those of their era to endanger and often cost them their lives. Anabaptists would scarcely have lasted a few decades, let alone centuries, had they not been nourished and motivated by what Robert Friedmann calls an implicit theology, and James McClendon, indispensable convictions. I Part two showed that historic Anabaptists indeed explicated these somewhat." From "Anabaptist Theology" by Thomas Finger "Above all Jesus played a crucial role. Anabaptists experienced personal salvation as participation in his life, death and resurrection. They structured church life around his commands. Their mission message focused on him; and their interaction with others, like their personal and communal lives, was patterned after his way. Clearly, convictions about who Jesus is and what he did and does-which often led Anabaptists to their own crosses-were essential to this movement."

"a contemporary theology in Anabaptist perspective, Christus Victor can provide the chief model for Jesus' saving work. Its Jesus is relevant for marginalized people especially and indeed for everyone who often feels overwhelmed by gigantic, uncontrollable forces. Through his earthly mission this Jesus provides a challenge and pattern for engaging these forces, and as risen, he provides great strength, assurance and comfort amidst the

conflict, through God's Spirit. Christus Victor's conflictive and transformative dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Each is weakened and distorted if separated from the other. Jesus the Victor locates struggle against evil at the heart of the Christian life and the joyful assurance that evil will never prevail because it has already been decisively defeated.

Christus Victor is not a precise theory but a broad motif or framework. Anabaptist theologians can incorporate a variety of images and concepts, including some from moral influence and substitution. I find, however, that Christus Victor's narrative structure clashes with the overarching historicist and legal conceptualities that usually shape the former and latter respectively. In appropriating Christus Victor, Anabaptist theology again finds itself surprisingly close to Eastern Orthodoxy. Many marginalized groups also appreciate Christus Victor, or they will when they hear of it. In this instance Anabaptists find themselves further from those who favor substitution (conservative Protestants and Catholics, including many evangelicals) and from those favoring moral influence (liberal Protestants and many ecumenicals)."

"Polish Anabaptists would say. 320 The earthly Jesus provided a model, He betrothed himself to the Father at baptism, followed the Spirit into the wilderness and trod the path leading to God's kingdom. He was "detached from his own will, and ... absorbed into the will of his exalted Father."321" John 14:10-11