

Walter Klaassen and William Klassen. *Marpeck: A Life of Dissent and Conformity*. Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008. Reviewed by Robert Martens.

Sixteenth century Europe was in such a state of crisis that it often seemed the world itself was about to end. The Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of quarrelling powers, was deeply in debt, largely due to ongoing war. The immensely profitable Fugger family banking chain was only too glad to prolong that debt and heighten its influence over European society by lending to the Empire. Meanwhile, the miners' guilds were threatening to strike, women were acquiring power through emergent group Bible readings, and technology, in the form of the printing press and millions of tracts and books, was radically transforming modes of thought. Finally, the peasant revolt of 1525 and the subsequent violent Anabaptist seizure of Münster was sending shock waves of anxiety throughout the continent. The emperor, Charles V, and his brother Ferdinand of Austria, took advantage of the prevailing uncertainty to stamp out the opposition.

This should all sound familiar to observers of twenty-first century society. Walter Klaassen and William Klassen, in their comprehensive biography of Pilgram Marpeck, do a masterful job of relating early Anabaptist ideas to contemporary issues and their ethical and spiritual challenges. What, they ask, does Marpeck have to say to us that is still relevant after all these years? According to the authors, he remains a living and vital voice.

In fact, not a great deal is known about Marpeck – his writings have only recently been rediscovered – and Klaassen and Klassen make up for that lack with a wealth of historical detail and some passionate storytelling. Marpeck was likely born about 1495 in the south German town of Rattenberg. He was unusual for an Anabaptist leader in that he managed to die in bed while so many of the others suffered torture and early death. Marpeck's engineering skills in waterworks and in the transportation of wood, the fuel of the day that was rapidly being depleted, made him indispensable to the towns in which he worked, and thus he lived in relative tranquillity. He was born into a prosperous family, and served as councillor and mayor before his Anabaptist leanings got him into trouble. Marpeck was also appointed mining superintendent in Rattenberg, consequently learning to hear all sides of political issues and developing invaluable mediatory skills. When he was ordered to indulge the names of reformist and Anabaptist dissidents among the miners, Marpeck, caught between his service to "two kingdoms," that of God and that of secular authority, initially acquiesced. Somehow and sometime, however, he had been so attracted to Anabaptist ideals, that he secretly converted, resigned his position and left town for Strasbourg. He was subsequently exposed as an Anabaptist and his property confiscated.

In the relatively tolerant atmosphere of the free town of Strasbourg, Marpeck engaged in public debate both with the authorities, and with Anabaptist "Spiritualists," who argued, in the context of fierce persecution, that a secret inner spiritual life was adequate: Marpeck always insisted upon the visible, the sharing, the acting church community. In particular, he advocated a theology of "two covenants": "The coming of Jesus had abrogated the Old Testament law. The old had passed away and everything had become new" (175). The Lutheran reformers maintained a "one covenant" theory, in which the Old Testament, with its union of church and state, was of equal value to the

New. Although Marpeck consistently maintained, perhaps due to his experience in government, that civil authority be respected, he urged ardently that the church community should have absolutely nothing to do with power: Jesus' resurrection "was the beginning of a king and a kingdom in which all violence, all vengeance, and all forceful coercion are forbidden" (176). The sword, he said, is equivalent to a preoccupation with property. And so the issue of adult baptism, as a sign of voluntary renunciation of a brutal world, became paramount to Marpeck." As soon as infant baptism were to be abolished," he wrote, "the disruption of the realm of the Antichrist would immediately follow" (207).

Eventually, Marpeck was expelled from Strasbourg for his dissident views, but the parting seems to have been on reasonably amicable terms. Throughout his lifetime, Marpeck was a negotiator, a conciliator, and in Appenzell, Switzerland, where he lived for the next few years, he attempted to resolve the legalistic, rule-bound strife that was already occurring among Anabaptists. His writing was "a ringing manifesto of Christian freedom from legalism and from what he calls *Eigentum* [literally, "property"], that is, everything that is outside of Christ. The meaning of this term included actual things owned, but also social status, profession, reputation, and the fearful clinging to them" (222). Marpeck also in fact believed in a strong community, and this implied warnings to those who were perceived as wandering too far from the faith. All in moderation, however, and provision was "to be made for growth and development" (223), as Klaassen and Klassen express it.

Marpeck moved on to Augsburg in 1542 and lived there until his death in 1556, working once again as an engineer (with both impressive successes and some spectacular blunders), organizing the few Anabaptist believers there, and writing voluminously. He must have been unspeakably busy. Women were some of his greatest supporters, and the authors of this book devote a fascinating "interlude" to some powerful female personalities. It was a time of war or threatened war, and of great peril to dissidents. Marpeck never again engaged in public debate after he left Strasbourg – he knew when to keep his mouth shut – but must have spent huge amounts of time writing and publishing. Religious and state wars, he proclaimed, will ultimately simply lengthen the chain of violence. "Tirelessly throughout his writing, he called on his followers to identify courageousness with their Lord in his humble renunciation over every use of power to dominate and control" (326). And once again, in language that seems to resonate with the issues of today, financiers, "wrote Marpeck, have sold the Lord through envy and hate. 'Whole lands, armies, and peoples ... are betrayed, sold, and bought by their loans, finance, and usury'" (298).

Klaassen and Klassen rarely quote Marpeck directly. His writing was frequently repetitious and polemical, directed to a lay and sometimes illiterate Anabaptist community. But Marpeck was, besides a shrewd organizer and keen thinker, a mystic at heart, and in that vein could express himself poetically. Of the Song of Solomon, and of the bride described there so erotically, interpreted by Marpeck as divine love, he wrote: "I ... have had only a glimpse of her form. This glimpse has created great longing in our hearts to see her again, fully and as she really is" (282).

Pilgram Marpeck was a man of quiet tolerance and unity, one of those special individuals who seem to grow kinder with age. "Unlike Martin Luther or Menno Simons, Marpeck appears to have become less rigid and more accepting of those with whom he differed toward the end of his life" (334). He defined quarrelsome and legalistic

opponents not as enemies, but as God's blind servants, and implored them to become instead God's beloved children. He advocated accommodation with the authorities, but on the other hand cannot, say the authors of this volume, be accused of an inner pietism of evasion or avoidance. "Marpeck lived on the edge, carefully navigating his fervent commitment to witnessing to an Anabaptist vision of the gospel alongside his more public persona as a highly skilled professional living in relative political and financial security" (308).

"The system of the one covenant," write Klaassen and Klassen, "was very alluring in 1540 because it relieved people from having to make a personal decision" (204). Adult baptism was a conscious and dangerous stepping out from the confines of mainstream conformity. Although Marpeck favoured a quiet lifestyle over an overt challenge to authority, he made that enormously risky personal decision. His legacy, even while Anabaptism disappeared from southern Germany and Austria, was long felt among the Swiss Brethren. And so, argue Walter Klaassen and William Klassen, it should be for us even today, as Christians continue to struggle with disunity, intolerance, and the call to war.