BALTHASAR HUBMAIER: BAPTISM, THE SWORD, AND THE WORD

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HIS5120 Church History II
April 15, 2010
**Introduction**

The Baptist historian William R. Estep extols some high praise regarding Balthasar Hubmaier's intellectual contribution to Anabaptism, boldly claiming, "He was the Simon Peter of the early Anabaptist disciples."\(^1\) Although nearly nowhere as positive, we see his prominence reflected in the opposite approach taken by the Catholic Church when in 1619, nearly 100 years after Hubmaier's death, the church placed his works on the Index of Prohibited Books.\(^2\) Vedder acknowledges, "His name stands forth among the hereticorum capita aut duces, preceded only by those of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin."\(^3\) Although hardly a badge of honor, such efforts to extinguish his contributions only highlight the seriousness of his work. Diverse opinions and reactions to such an intellectually rigorous character as Hubmaier drive a search to explore what would cause such polarized opinions. This biographical essay will survey the life of the esteemed Anabaptist theologian Balthasar Hubmaier, placing an emphasis on his contributions on believer’s baptism, Church and State, the authority of the Word, and church history.

**Early Life and Education**

There is little known in regards to Hubmaier's birth and family. Scholars estimate Hubmaier to have been born around 1480-81 to peasant parents in his native town of Friedberg. As for his education, Hubmaier studied at the Latin school in Augsburg. He later graduated and enrolled within the University of Freiburg on May 1st 1503.\(^4\) Due to a lack of finances, Hubmaier was forced to leave the University before the completion of his studies, and earned

\(^{2}\) *Ibid* 63.
pay as a teacher at a school in Schaffhausen. Hubmaier collected the funds needed to return to Freiburg, and completed his Bachelor and Master's degrees. An oddity of history, Hubmaier pursued his higher education under the mentorship of John Eck, the infamous rival to Martin Luther. In describing his mentor, Hubmaier claims him to be "my Eck... is surely the bright ornament of this German land. A rare theologian, skilled in law and wisdom, he often sows the good seed among the people."\(^5\) Shortly after this, Hubmaier received his Doctorate in Theology on September 29, 1512. Following this academic achievement, Hubmaier was ordained and appointed as the chaplain for the university’s church, the Church of the Virgin. After an unimpressive administrative career, Hubmaier’s “fame as a pulpiteer had grown to the extent that less than a year later he received a call to become chief preacher at the new cathedral of Regensburg."\(^6\) With this, Hubmaier left to Regensburg in January 1516.

After dealing with an expulsion of Jews from the city, and attempting to mediate between the city council and Dominican monks over the issue of pilgrimages to the shrine of zur Schonen Maria, Hubmaier left Regensburg for the small town of Waldshut. During these early years in Waldshut, Hubmaier continued to perform the functions of a parish priest, and was respected throughout the town for his Roman Catholic piety. It was not until visiting Erasmus and various reformed Swiss cities, that Hubmaier approached the New Testament and the Pauline Epistles with renewed vigor.


\(^6\) Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 49.
Hubmaier the Reformer

From this point in history Hubmaier became reform-minded, as made evident by a short-lived clerical career in Regensburg. After coming into contact with Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren in the form of a debate in Zurich on March 1st 1523, Hubmaier sought to enact reform within Waldshut. Shortly after pushing his reform, he proposed Eighteen Articles of reform, which were met with success. Images were removed from churches, and Hubmaier even met and married his devoted wife, Elizabeth Hugline. Although Hubmaier had achieved notable improvement within Waldshut, his luck would soon turn. The Austrian government, in conjunction with the Bishop of Constance, joined together to ask the city to oust the preacher. The city council stood firm in opposition, which led Hubmaier to leave to Schaffhausen for fear of an armed invasion against Waldshut. Here his reform-minded attitude continued to solidify, even being bold enough to propose a debate against his old mentor Eck. By October, Hubmaier returned to Waldshut to a heroes welcome, and quickly enacted additional reforms to protect the city from invasion. Estep explains the succession of Hubmaier’s Anabaptist inclination as follows: "While the party of Conrad Grebel was in the process of crystallizing its convictions, Hubmaier was moving in the same direction. The principles set forth in his Eighteen Articles and especially in “Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them” indicated that his thinking was

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7 Vedder, Balthasar Hubmaier The Leader of the Anabaptists, 69. Hubmaier's newfound protestant thinking may be found in his pamphlet addressed to various Waldshut clergy. He opens his eighteen articles with the following: “1. Faith alone makes us just before God.” We also see Swiss Brethren Anabaptist influence in Articles 5, 8, and 13, which address the issues of a memorial mass, believers baptism, and having church members directly support their minister.

8 Estep, The Anabaptist Story, 52. "Within two years has Christ for the first time come into my heart to thrive..." Hubmaier achieved these various reforms within two years.
rapidly moving in the direction of Anabaptism.\textsuperscript{9} By the end of 1523, Hubmaier was "solidly 'evangelical'."\textsuperscript{10}

**Hubmaier the Anabaptist**

Having browsed through Hubmaier's educational history, emphasizing in particular his Catholic background, we continued to follow him as his reform minded views gained momentum. Around this time Anabaptists Reublin and Grebel made several trips to visit Hubmaier in Walshut.\textsuperscript{11} Then, on Easter Sunday 1525, Hubmaier's conversion to Anabaptism was complete: "Reublin baptized Hubmaier, who in turn baptized around three hundred Waldshut citizens during the Easter season alone."\textsuperscript{12} Hubmaier followed the baptisms with a simple apostolic Lord's Supper, additional baptisms, and foot washing. In his approach, Hubmaier sought to replicate the New Testament and apostolic approach as much as possible.\textsuperscript{13}

Hubmaier's rise to leadership in the Anabaptist world is further highlighted by a visit from one of the Swiss Anabaptist leaders, Conrad Grebel. Those outside of Anabaptist circles additionally noted Hubmaier's prominence. Although Hubmaier is not mentioned by name, on May 28th 1525, Zwingli publishes "On Baptism, Anabaptism, and Infant Baptism,"\textsuperscript{14} which

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\textsuperscript{9} *Ibid* 54


\textsuperscript{11} *Ibid* 56

\textsuperscript{12} *Ibid* 56

\textsuperscript{13} Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 55

\textsuperscript{14} Zwingli's tract carried forth the following arguments: (1) Baptism can remit no sins, and thus is a sign of the allegiance of God's people, (2) Christian children, being God's children in full, shall participate in the sign of this new covenant in the form of baptism, relating a comparison between the Old Testament's circumcision of children, and (3) Anabaptism is grounded not in God's word.
appeared to target the arguments of Hubmaier on the subject. It is to Hubmaier's response and major contribution on this subject in which this essay turns.

**Hubmaier on Baptism**

Of the many contributions to Anabaptist thought provided by Hubmaier, it is the issue of Believers Baptism that stands most bold. As hinted earlier in *The Open Appeal of Balthazar of Friedberg to All Christian Believers*, Hubmaier "pledges himself...to prove that the baptism of infants is a work without any ground in the divine word."\(^{15}\) It is of no surprise that when Zwingli publishes his attack on Anabaptism, Hubmaier is quick to respond in July of that year with *The Baptism of Believers*. In it, Hubmaier clarifies his Anabaptist position, arguing against Zwingli's accusation that they held a view of baptism that washed away sin.

Having worked out this conviction in various other works, it is of no surprise that we find sharp wit and reason in his response to Zwingli's argument on the subject.\(^{16}\) With Zwingli's claim that nowhere in scripture was infant baptism prohibited, Hubmaier responds with humor.

It is clear enough for him who has eyes to see it, but it is not expressed in so many words, literally: 'do not baptize infants'. May one then baptize them? To that I answer: 'if so I may baptize my dog or my donkey, or I may circumcise girls... bring infants to the Lord's Supper... sell the Mass for an offering. For it is nowhere said in express words that we must not do these things.'\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology An Introduction*, 54. Zwingli argued "the New Testament neither commanded nor forbade infant baptism; therefore, the testimony of the Old Testament had to be considered decisive. Zwingli argued that baptism had to be seen as the equivalent of Old Testament circumcision: infants who were to be educated into the faith were baptized as the symbol of their incorporation into the faith community."

After such a robust and well-refuted treatment of Zwingli's "On Baptism, Anabaptism, and Infant Baptism," it is of no surprise that Zwingli later scrambles to respond with the aptly titled reply, "A True, Thorough Reply to Dr. Balthasar's Little Book of Baptism." In short, his arguments were simply recycled, and nothing new was added to the subject.18

Hubmaier's treatment on the subject of baptism became widely popular. His arguments dispelling the notion that baptism washed away sin, as well as his arguments against infant baptism and towards the centrality of baptism as a sign of dedication to the Church and discipleship, became quite prominent among his circles. It is also worth finally noting the emphasis Hubmaier placed on believer’s baptism. The issue of responding in faith was central, as seen in his following explanation:

Baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is when a man first confesses his sins, and pleads guilty; then believes in the forgiveness of his sins through Jesus Christ, and turns to live according to the rule of Christ, by the grace and strength given him from God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The he professes this publicly, in the eyes of men, by the outward baptism of water. He is then truly baptized, even if the baptizer did not speak these words over him.19

**Hubmaier on the Sword**

Following Hubmaier's exchanges with Zwingli, the Austrian government entered the city of Waldshut by December 5th, only to find that Hubmaier had fled to Zurich. Thus begins the next major chapter of Hubmaier's life. His entrance into Zurich was hardly positive, and after a few days of residing in the city officials arrested him. After appealing, Hubmaier and Zwingli entered into a debate on the subject of infant baptism, in which Hubmaier made a fool of Zwingli

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18 Hubmaier responded to Zwingli's later article with "A Dialogue Between Balthasar Hubmaier of Friedberg and Master Ulrich Zwingli, of Zurich, on Infant Baptism." However the response found late publishing, and their dialogue on the subject fell flat.

by quoting Zwingli's own statements on the lack of scriptural evidence for such baptisms.²⁰ Hubmaier was later made to recant, which he then recanted of his recantation, and thus was imprisoned. After being submitted to the merciless torture rack, Hubmaier provided a written recantation, and was let go. Broken and bruised, Hubmaier snuck out of Zurich and left for the Moravian city of Nikolsburg in 1526.²¹ It was during this stay that Hubmaier found tremendous success, baptizing an estimated six thousand in a single year.²² Hubmaier also explodes with his pen, leading Estep to conclude:

He was a Christian scholar whose knowledge of the Scriptures was surpassed by none of his contemporaries and an able theologian excelled only by Calvin. As a Christian spirit he would have been unusual in any age and was unique in his. On all three counts he excelled Luther... neither Luther, Zwingli, no Calvin matched Hubmaier’s spirit on Christian love.²³

With this backdrop, and the voluminous amount of writing hinted to, we approach Hubmaier's second major contribution of religious thought regarding his views on the Sword.²⁴ After the arrival of Hans Denck and Jacob Wiedemann, and their opposition to Hubmaier on the grounds of extreme nonresistance, Hubmaier responds with a treatment on the separation of Church and State. Hubmaier argues that "the state alone...[has] the right to bear the sword, and to the church alone... [has] authority in spiritual matters."²⁵ Hubmaier parts with Wiedemann on the second subject of communal goods as well, where he concludes alongside the Swiss brethren that

²⁰ Hubmaier's reported doubts of Zwingli's on infant baptism is recorded in Pipkin and Yoder's Balthasar Hubmaier, 257-58.
²² Ibid 59.
²³ Ibid 60.
²⁴ Hubmaier, “Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them (1525).” In Balthasar Hubmaier The Leader of the Anabaptists, by Henry C. Vedder, New York: AMS Press, 1971: 86. Article 22, "The secular power rightly and properly puts to death criminals who inure the bodies of the defenseless (Rom. xiii., 3, 4)."
²⁵ Estep, The Anabaptist Story, 61.
"he rejected the community of goods but held to the principle that the brethren our to share what they have with those in need."26 Although his middle-of-the-road policies on the legitimate use of force by the government never gained popularity amongst the Nikolsburg Anabaptists, his work *On the Sword* was one of his most important contributions.27 In it Hubmaier held expectations of the "members of the Anabaptist church participating fully in all social and governmental functions, including civil police actions and war."28 The Church and the State are then to work side-by-side, "the church with its ban and the authorities with their sword...without either infringing on the office of the other."29

Hubmaier's earlier work is hardly lacking on the subject of separating State and Church functions. In *Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them*, Hubmaier provides the first treatise of the 16th century on the subject, which argues for complete freedom of religion.30 In it he argued,

22. The secular power rightly and properly puts to death the criminals who injure the bodies of the defenseless (Rom. Xiii., 3, 4)...It is a small thing to burn innocent paper, but to point out an error and to disprove it by Scripture, that is art... Now it is clear to every one, even the blind, that a law to burn heretics is an invention of the devil. 'Truth is immortal'.31


27 Balthasar Hubmaier “On The Sword (1527).” In *The Radical Reformation*, Edited by Michael G. Baylor, 181-209. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. "The authorities are responsible for protecting and liberating all oppressed and coerced people, widows and orphans... without regard to the person, according to the will and earnest commandment of God. Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 21 and 22, Romans 13, and in many other places... For this reason God has hung the sword at their side and ordered them to be his handmaidens (Romans 13:4),"


30 Vedder agrees with this notion, stating it "is the earliest plea that has come down to us for complete toleration," *Balthasar Hubmaier The Leader of the Anabaptists*, 84.

Hubmaier on the Word

With arguably his greatest work, *On the Sword*, established, and his other written works in wide circulation, we enter the final chapters of Hubmaier's story. Upon the death of King Louis of Hungary, Ferdinand I acquired jurisdiction over Moravia. Ferdinand I was quick to call for the enforcement of the decree of the Diet of Worms, which resulted with Hubmaier's imprisonment. After the failure of the torture racks of Vienna to produce another recantation, Hubmaier was arranged for martyrdom on March 10, 1528. The authorities submitted Hubmaier to death by fire, where he maintained firm Christian conviction. His wife, who had exhorted Hubmaier to remain firm, was martyred by being drowned in the Dunabe three days later. It would be expected that a survey on Hubmaier's life would end with his martyrdom, however this would do him a disservice. It would be better still to approach one final major contribution, which speaks monuments to Hubmaier's firm convictions regarding his mantra: "truth is immortal." With this we turn to Hubmaier's contribution on the final authority of scripture.

In summarizing Hubmaier's stance on the absolute authority of the scriptures in his life and his theology, Williston Walker writes about Hubmaier that,

In his view, the Bible was the sole law of the church, and according to the scriptural test the proper order of Christian development was the proclamation of the word, repentance, faith, baptism, and works -- the last indicating a life lived with the Bible as its law.

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33 *Ibid* 63.

34 Vedder, *Balthasar Hubmaier The Leader of the Anabaptists*, 86. In "Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them," Article 28, Hubmaier offers some prophetic words regarding his martyrdom. "Hence to burn heretics is in appearance to profess Christ (Tit. i. 10, 11), but in reality to deny him, and to be more monstrous than Jehoiakim, the king of Judah."

It was in every conflict and trial that Hubmaier sought to exhaust God's word, placing it as the standard in which to judge his theology. In short, it would be of no exaggeration that Hubmaier was a man of the scriptures, and it was upon this 'immortal truth' that he took his stand, on penalty of the stake.

Although Balthasar Hubmaier achieved prominence as one of the highest educated Anabaptist thinkers, his influence upon the later Anabaptist movements were mild. We can accredit this to the issue of nonresistance. With his Schwertler group dying out shortly after his death, his views were overlooked on behalf of more pacifist Anabaptist voices. However, it is of interest to note him as a forerunner to Baptist thought. In *A History of the Baptists*, Robert Torbet concludes the connection Baptists have with Hubmaier in that,

He insisted...that 'in all disputes concerning faith and religion, the Scripture alone, proceeding from the mouth of God, ought to be our level and rule.' Baptists have maintained this consistent stand through all the centuries that have followed Hubmaier's day, even at the expense of their personal safety.  

Given his position on nonviolence, and several other core agreements we find between his teachings and those of the later Baptists (centrality and authority of scripture, believers baptism, government and the sword, etc), it is of no surprise that Baptist look to Hubmaier as a possible forerunner to Baptist thought. Bergsten writes, "Hubmaier can be regarded as a prototype of the Baptist movement." These similar conclusions have even lead Baptists to commemorate his martyrdom in Vienna in 1928, marking a 400th anniversary of his death, and solidifying this heroic status amongst Baptists.

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Works Cited


