A Research Paper on the Life and Ministry of Balthasar Hubmaier

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Introduction

In the early sixteenth century, a great movement within the Christian church began known as the Protestant Reformation. Incensed by the Roman Catholic abuses of power and privilege, particularly regarding the practice of selling indulgences, Catholic priest Martin Luther railed against Rome in an effort to awaken the church to the corruption that was destroying spiritual truth and theological integrity. Inspired to do something about the abuses, Luther penned and delivered his Ninety-Five Theses; nailing it to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.\(^1\) Written in Latin, it was meant only for the clergy to read, however the community received translations and Luther’s issues with Rome went public and the Protestant Reformation had begun.\(^2\)

While the Reformers had biblical issues with Rome, they were far from unified as a group, and controversies arose over specifics of practice and belief. Among the divisions were disagreements over baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, the atonement, Christology, the doctrine of grace, and religious liberty with regard to the church and the state. Within the group known as the Radical Reformers, or the Anabaptists, arose a man who would become the theological voice for the movement’s early years, Balthasar Hubmaier.

Early Life

Balthasar Hubmaier was born in the small Bavarian town of Friedburg, outside of Augsburg in the early to mid-1480s, where he would eventually attend the cathedral school.\(^3\) On May 1, 1503, he was matriculated as a clerical student at the University of Freiburg and enrolled

\(^1\) Ergun Caner. CHHI 694 Lecture #3 Notes, “The Magisterial Waves of the Reformation”. (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2009), 6.
\(^2\) Ibid.
in theology under Johannes Eck (1483-1543), a leading Catholic polemist. Eck would eventually become an opponent of Luther at the Leipzig Disputation in 1519, and would serve as Hubmaier’s closest mentor and friend until they would eventually clash over theological differences. Hubmaier would be awarded the Bachelor of Arts in 1504, and would spend the next several years of his life in Freidburg.

Hubmaier followed Eck to the University of Ingolstadt, where on August 1, 1511 he would receive his degree, baccalaureus biblicus, a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies, and in 1512, he was appointed professor following the awarding of his Doctorate in Theology. Eck taught Hubmaier the art of debating as well as both Hebrew and Greek, all of which the student mastered. Hubmaier became a priest at the largest church in the city and the foremost apologist for the Roman Catholic Church; a successful preacher who was well-known for his messages. In 1515, he assumed the role of the vice-rector of Ingolstadt University.

**Hubmaier’s Public Ministry**

In 1516, Hubmaier left Ingolstadt upon his call to the church in Regensburg, where he was very popular with the parishioners, giving him great influence among the community. Upon his arrival in Regensburg, Hubmaier joined in the longstanding anti-Jewish movement, and within time he had become the leader, as he would advocate the cause from the pulpit. In 1517,

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4 Ergun Caner. *CHHI 694 Lecture #6 Notes, “The Swiss Brethren: Their Leaders and Theology”*. (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2009), 5.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 4.
8 Ergun Caner, *Lecture #6 Notes*, 5.
9 Ibid., 5.
11 Ibid.
12 Ergun Caner, *Lecture #6 Notes*, 5.
Palgrave John, the administrator of the bishopric, threatened to excommunicate anyone who would “compel a Christian to pay usurious interest to a Jew”.

Following this decree, a papal confirmation was obtained, and Hubmaier preached “We have brought a bull from Rome, the effect of which is to put under the bann every one who helps a Jew to his usurious interest.” He had all of the Jewish residents kicked out of Regensburg due to the interest rates that were being charged, which were forty-three percent at that time. With all of the Jews gone, Hubmaier demolished their synagogues and replaced them with the new Chapel of the Beautiful Mary, and the town became a popular pilgrimage site for Roman Catholics. While this practice made Hubmaier more popular with the community and congregation, local monks disapproved of this new attention being focused on Regensburg, and forced Hubmaier to leave town.

In 1521, Hubmaier ended his tenure at the Chapel of the Beautiful Mary to take a preaching position at the Church of St. Mary in the provincial town of Waldshut, in Hapsburg Austria. It was in Waldshut, sometime between 1521 and 1523 that Hubmaier underwent a transformation that Ergun Caner believes may have been a “salvation experience”, and went from being a popular parish priest to an evangelistic reformer. This transformation occurred as a result of intense scriptural study, particularly the Pauling Epistles as well as the writings of Martin Luther. Without resigning his position at Waldshut, Hubmaier returned briefly to Regensburg in the fall of 1522, but his stay would not last. Goncharenko believes that the

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14 Ibid., 41.
15 Ibid.
16 Ergun Caner, Lecture #6 Notes, 5.
17 Goncharenko, 7.
18 Ibid.
19 Ergun Caner, Lecture #6 Notes, 5.
20 Goncharenko, 8.
reason for the brief tenure in Regensburg was “Hubmaier’s capitulation to the Lutheran reformation…a transformation which took place in the winter of 1522”.21

While Luther had a profound impact upon Hubmaier, it was the theology of Ulrich Zwingli which played a more decisive role in his life. Hubmaier returned to Waldshut on March 1, 1523 and began meeting with Swiss Reformers; and in April, he visited Zurich to meet with Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss Confederation.22 It was in October, 1523 that Hubmaier aligned himself with Zwingli’s Zurich reformation at the Second Zurich Disputation. Hubmaier spoke at length during this disputation concerning the debate over the removal of images from the church as well as the celebration of the mass. His viewpoints showed himself to be in strong agreement with the Zurich radical party.23 His relationship with Zwingli’s theology would be short-lived, as he rejected the practice of infant baptism, known as paedobaptism in 1525 and moved towards Anabaptism.

Hubmaier and Ulrich Zwingli engaged in a debate concerning the proper candidacy for baptism. Zwingli, like many of the magisterial reformers, continued the Roman Catholic practice of paedobaptism. After a lengthy study of God’s Word, Hubmaier was convinced that believers’ baptism, the practice of fully immersing in water following a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, was the biblical example given to believers by the Lord. His conclusion was that any form of baptism other than believers’ baptism was contrary to the Word of God.

On Easter Sunday, April 15, 1525, Balthasar Hubmaier was re-baptized by Wilhelm Reublin, who in turn baptized sixty others and, according to Goncharenko “he later baptized

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21 Ibid.
23 Vedder, 65.
more than three hundred of his parishioner in Waldshut using a milk pail”.

This was the start of the First Baptist Church in Waldshut, which pre-dated Separatist English Baptist churches by 84 years.

This move put him at odds with Zwingli’s magisterial reformation, which eventually cost him his position at Waldshut and put him and his wife, Elsbeth Hugeline, whom he had married the previous January, on the run from the authorities. Upon their capture, incarceration and subsequent torture by Protestants, all of which were authorized by Zwingli, Hubmaier recanted his Anabaptist position. Hubmaier agreed to publicly recant at the Fraumunster Church; however, as he begins his recantation, he has a change of heart and withdrawals his recantation. This led to further incarceration and torture, which ended with another forced recantation. This lapse caused Hubmaier tremendous regret, and he and Elsbeth left Zurich.

Balthasar and Elsbeth eventually found themselves called to Nikolsburg in 1526, an area that was perfectly suited for Anabaptism to grow. The Liechtenstein family had ruled the Nickolsburg area of Moravia since 1249, and had bestowed upon their citizens many freedoms, including religious liberty. It was in Nikolsburg that Hubmaier founded a congregation of thousands who agreed with the Anabaptist view of believer’s baptism, the memorial aspect of the Lord’s Supper, and worship which emphasized the centrality of the Word of God. While exact records are not available, it has been established that Humbaier baptized between six and twelve

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24 Goncharenko, 8.
25 Ergun Caner, Lesson #6 Notes, 5.
26 Ibid., 6.
27 Goncharenko, 8.
28 Emir Caner, 47.
29 Ibid., 50.
thousand believers in a single year while at Nikolsburg. The Reformer was also an enthusiastic and prolific writer; producing seventeen books in one year outlining Anabaptist theology.

Unbeknownst to Hubmaier, his life was about to take an unfortunate turn. In August of 1526, the ruler of Hungary and Bohemia, King Ludwig II was killed in battle against the Turks. Without a proper heir, Ludwig’s throne was captured by Ferdinand through marriage to Ludwig’s sister, and in October 1526 Ferdinand, a staunch Catholic became the new king of Bohemia. The following month, he was elected Margrave of Moravia, putting the province that had enjoyed religious tolerance in serious jeopardy.

Immediately, Ferdinand issued a counter-reformation; declaring in August 1527 that all citizens must adhere to the Diet of Worms, particularly with regard to the Mass and baptism. Anabaptists were singled out as seditionist and potential heretics, and the Anabaptists found themselves once again without protection. Emir Caner believes that Ferdinand had a personal vendetta against Hubmaier, who had eluded him in Zurich; as well as being the man who was most responsible for the spread of Anabaptism throughout Moravia and Europe.

As a violator of the Diet of Worms, Hubmaier and his wife were placed in a Viennese prison; charged with sedition and insurrection during his time at Waldshut. Following their transfer to the castle of Gratzenstein on the Danube, an additional charge of heresy led them to suffer more torture. Ferdinand wrote the following concerning Hubmaier:

“Since Dr. Hubmaier a long time ago was pastor in our city of Waldshut, and through his preaching and misleading doctrine mischief, ill-will, disturbance, and rebellion greatly increased among the common people in our borderlands, the city of Waldshut all but fell

30 Ergun Caner, Lesson #6 Notes, 6.
31 Ibid.
32 Emir Caner, 50.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 51.
35 Ibid.
36 Estep, 66.
37 Emir Caner, 52.
away from us and our house. We command you…to give thorough and diligent
examination to the list of questions with reference to the late hearing…that we may
know in future how to perform our whole duty in the uprooting of evil, and by
punishment to make so much the better example for others.”38

Martyrdom of Balthasar Hubmaier

On March 3, 1528, Hubmaier’s trial process began in Vienna; his destiny as a Radical
Reformer seemed inevitably close.39 On March 10, he was stripped of his clothing and placed on
the torture rack; Elsbeth screamed out exhortations, encouraging him to stay strong in the faith.
This time, however, there would be no recantations for Balthasar Hubmaier. As the crowd
followed Hubmaier to the pile of wood that had been prepared for him, Hubmaier refused
confession to the priest as well as last rites. As he was being burned alive at the stake, Hubmaier
shouted in his Swiss dialect:

“O gracious God, forgive my sins in my great torment. O Father, I give thee thanks that
thou wilt today take me out of this vale of tears. With joy I desire to die and come to thee.
O Lamb, O Lamb, that takest away the sins of the world! O God, into thy hands I commit
my spirit.”40

As sulphur and gunpowder were rubbed into his long beard, he shouted “Oh salt me well, salt me
well”, and as the fire was lit and his hair and beard ignited, Hubmaier cried out “O Jesus,
Jesus.”41 His wife Elsbeth, with a great stone tied around her neck was drowned in the Danube
River three days later on March 13, 1528.42

Without question, Balthasar Hubmaier was a man who lived and died for his biblical
convictions. As a leading voice for the Anabaptist Radical Reformation, Hubmaier revealed
himself to be a man of higher thinking and theological abilities. His convictions and beliefs were
based on the solid foundation of God’s Word, and he simply used Scripture as the only authority

38 Vedder, 222-3.
39 Ergun Caner, Lesson #6 Notes, 6.
40 Vedder, 243.
41 Ibid., 244.
42 Ibid., 244.
over the church and the lives of believers. Issues such as the ordinances of baptism and the
Lord’s Supper were areas of intense debate. The traditional Augustinian view of the doctrine of
God’s grace was another area of divergence for Hubmaier, as his anthropology and soteriology
reflected the doctrine of free will. Finally, as the first Anabaptist to write about total religious
freedom, he was indeed a trailblazer that has added greatly to the rich legacy of Anabaptist
history.

**The Baptism Battle**

Hubmaier’s convictions on the ordinance of baptism followed a distinct progression; the
Word of God compels the hearer to repentance, inner baptism “purifies the heart of its evil
conscience” and only come comes “outward baptism”, which”… without the internal
baptism…is only hypocrisy”.\(^{43}\) This conviction was a sharp departure from the traditional
medieval or the Magisterial Reformers theology that viewed the outer baptism as the initiator of
the inward baptism. Hubmaier believed that baptism was merely the public, external and visible
expression of a private, inward and invisible change in one’s life brought about by faith in Jesus
Christ. Baptism, according to Hubmaier’s belief, was a way for the new believer to publicly
testify to the “reality of his faith and the authenticity of his inner regeneration to the church,
which cannot see into his heart.”\(^{44}\)

Hubmaier’s view of baptism required a great deal of preparation, theological awareness
and practical holiness; all of which would be accessed by the bishop prior to the ordinance being
performed. He states in *A Form for Water Baptism* “Whoever desires water baptism should first


\(^{44}\) Goncharenko, 100.
present himself to his bishop, that he may be questioned, whether he is sufficiently instructed in the articles of the law, gospel, faith, and the doctrines which concern anew Christian life.”

Four reasons encapsulate Hubmaier’s baptismal theology and practice. The primary and therefore the most important reason for baptism, according to Hubmaier, was that baptism fulfilled the commandment of the Lord Jesus Christ. He would say “…all those who want to be considered Christians should let themselves be baptized according to the command of Christ and confess Christian faith publicly before the church with mouth and water, or they are looseners of his words.”

Hubmaier’s second reason for water baptism was as a confession of sins; as the act of baptism is an outward symbol of inward repentance. Third, according to Mabry is “…a witness to one’s faith in the fact that following forgiveness, one has been reconciled to God”. Hubmaier says in *Christian Baptism*, “Baptism in the water…is nothing other than a public confession…by which the person…confesses himself guilty…yet at the same time he wholly believes that Christ has forgiven him his sin through his death and has made him righteous through his resurrection before the face of God our Heavenly Father.” Finally, according to Hubmaier’s writings, water baptism is the “sign of a newly regenerated person’s incorporation into the community of the saints”. Hubmaier explains in his Catechism that after the public confession of sins and received forgiveness, the believer “has himself outwardly enrolled, inscribed and by water

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49 Mabry, 140.
baptism incorporated into the fellowship of the church according to the institution of Christ."\(^{50}\)

By following Hubmaier’s pattern, these series of events would involve the baptismal candidate’s conscious decision, as well as their public communication and demonstration to the local church, were the new believer plays not only a cognitive role of baptism, but also an active role as well.

**The Communion Controversy**

Hubmaier’s view, along with the other radical reformers, believed that the Roman Catholic Church had misunderstood the meaning of Christ’s atonement. He believed that the outward expression of this misunderstanding had been given to the Lord’s Supper, which he regarded as the “church’s sickness.”\(^{51}\) The Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of transubstantiation believed that the actual body and blood of Christ were present during the mass, a point which most Anabaptists rejected. In 1524, Hubmaier asserted in the fifth of his *Achtzehn Schlussreden* (“18 Concluding Statements”) that the mass could not be offered up for the living and the dead, nor was it a sacrifice.\(^ {52}\) Hubmaier adopted a Christology which made the Catholic belief of the corporeal presence of Christ in communion impossible, as Christ’s physical presence was in Heaven, and “he could not be offered as a sacrifice on the altar again.”\(^ {53}\) Rempel believes that while Hubmaier never used the dogma of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, it should not be deduced that he denies Christ’s divine nature throughout the course of history.\(^ {54}\)

In *A Form for Christ’s Supper*, Hubmaier says:

“Although the majority of people who stand by the gospel recognize that bread is bread and wine wine in the Lord’s Supper, and not Christ. For the same ascended into heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God his Father, whence he will come again to judge the living and the dead. Precisely that is our foundation, according to which we must deduce

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\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 54.
and expost all of the Scriptures having to do with eating and drinking. Thus Christ cannot be eaten or drunk by us otherwise than spiritually and in faith. So then he cannot be bodily the bread either but rather in the memorial which is held, as he himself and Paul explained these Scriptures.”

Another dimension to Hubmaier’s view of the Lord’s Supper had to do with his view of anthropology; the freedom of the human will and the consequential response to grace. His tripartite anthropology (body, soul and spirit) expressed that while the human flesh is completely fallen, and the soul is held captive by the flesh, the spirit is not totally imprisoned by the sinful and fallen human nature. Rempel believes:

“Hubmaier built his theology on medieval anthropological motifs different from those held by the magisterial reformers. His beliefs about human nature stand in especially sharp contrast to those of Luther and Calvin. From the vantage point of his older anthropology, Hubmaier was convinced that belief in both the bondage of the will and predestination violates the biblical picture of the human will and undermines human responsibility before God. On this foundation, Hubmaier makes his most radical assertion: baptism and the Lord’s Supper are human acts of commitment in response to grace.”

Hubmaier’s view of the Lord’s Supper mirrored that of his view of baptism that the theological significance of the act needed to be properly explained and taught to those partaking of the ordinance. He developed a systematic approach to instructing believers concerning their behavior and participation in Communion. Hubmaier’s outline of Communion began from the initiation of the service; the priest was to sit with the congregation and explain from Scripture about Jesus Christ, his sacrificial death and how it applicably related to their lives, followed by a time of discussion to properly assess the believer’s understanding of the serious nature of Communion and their willingness to partake.

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56 Rempel, 44.
57 Ibid., 45.
58 Goncharenko, 108.
This was concluded by a time of self-examination prior to the actual participation in the Lord’s Supper; which included several dimensions. First, the congregants were to believe unquestioningly and absolutely that Christ died for them. Second, believers were to affirm to themselves that they were not only placing faith in Christ to save them, but that they also had fellowship with Him. Hubmaier addresses this in *A Form of Supper* when he says: “Let a person test himself, whether he has a proper inward and fervent hunger for the bread which comes down from heaven, from which one truly lives, and thirst for the drink which flows into eternal life, to eat and drink both in the spirit, faith and truth, as Christ teaches us in John 4; 6; and 7. If the spiritual eating and drinking does not first take place, then the outward breaking of bread, eating and drinking is a killing letter.”

Third, the believers would test their faith through the willingness to serve the Lord, giving back to Him through acts of service which flowed from a grateful and willing heart. Finally, believers should assess their willingness to offer their own blood and bodies for their fellow brothers and sisters of the faith. According to Rempel, when a believer imitates the sacrificial actions of the Lord Jesus Christ, His sacrifice for mankind becomes “the transforming power of history.”

**Hubmaier’s Doctrine of Grace**

A casual study of the Anabaptist view of grace reveals a divergence from the traditional Magisterial Reformer and Lutheran understanding. While the Apostle Paul’s doctrine of grace is the most discussed in the New Testament, the development of the doctrine within the church would be most attributed to Augustine. It was the rise in interest of both Pauline and Augustinian

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59 Goncharenko, 109.
61 Goncharenko, 109.
62 Rempel, 70.
writings which spurred the doctrine of grace to the primacy of the Lutheran and Reformed theological thought. \(^{63}\) It was this grace-centered theology that Martin Luther embraced and believed was the lynchpin to the Christian gospel.

The Anabaptists, according to the Lutherans and other Reformers, had not only a lacking in understanding of the concept of grace, but many believed that they also had a poor concept of human sin. The theology of faith as God’s gift was developed in Magisterial thought through their understanding of God’s grace, which rejected man’s participation in the act of salvation. This ideology came about through the fear that any initiative on man’s part would constitute grace by works. Hubmaier, while believing that good works were necessary for believers, taught that works were not salvific. He believed that any and all credit given in the soteriological realm belonged to God, and it was the job of the believer to accredit God for their salvation. \(^{64}\)

Goncharenko believes:

“There is for Hubmaier, therefore, both the need of the initial response in salvation on man’s part and the utter rejection of ascribing any credit for salvation to that initial response. To misunderstand either part of this statement, as has been done by both the Magisterial Reformers and many subsequent interpreters of Hubmaier’s thought, is tantamount to charging the Anabaptist’s soteriology with being works-based.” \(^{65}\)

Perhaps the greatest criticism of Hubmaier for the Magisterial Reformers understanding of both the works of man and the grace of God is that there was a fundamental lacking of spiritual fruit. He believed their understanding of grace eliminated mankind’s responsibility in the activity of the world; rendering God responsible for all of man’s blasphemies, a blasphemy in itself that Hubmaier believed was the highest of all. \(^{66}\) Without question, Hubmaier’s view of

\(^{63}\) Goncharenko, 71.
\(^{64}\) Ibid., 72.
\(^{65}\) Ibid.
\(^{66}\) Ibid.
anthropology which was founded upon his belief in mankind’s free will had a great influence upon his soteriological understandings.

“Truth is Unkillable”

Hubmaier’s first published work, *On Heretics and Those Who Burn Them*, was a treatise for religious freedom that would continue to shape Baptists beliefs through history. Hubmaier emphasized complete and total religious liberty, and was the first person to ever do so. He espoused his belief that true religious freedom gives everyone the right to either worship or not, and that genuine faith cannot be coerced. According to Hubmaier, the state had no right to punish either heretics or atheists. He wrote, “We should pray and hope for repentance, as long as man lives in this misery…A Turk or a heretic is not convinced by our act, either with the sword or with fire, but only with patience and prayer; and so we should await with patience the judgment of God.”

These libertarian views migrated from simple tolerance into full-fledged radical religious freedom; an ideology that led to Anabaptists being considered heretics due to their refusal to submit to the government. A continuation of Hubmaier’s ideology concerning total religious freedom can be seen throughout the seventeenth century in the work of Baptists Thomas Helwys in England and Roger Williams in the American colonies.

**Conclusion**

Balthasar Hubmaier began his life as a Roman Catholic, eventually moved into agreement with the Lutheran Protestants and through biblical conviction, and became a leading voice of the Anabaptist Radical Reformers. Hubmaier was called by one author the “Simon Peter

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68 Ibid., 5.
of the early Anabaptist disciples.” He was the only Anabaptist to hold an earned doctorate, a vigorous writer, speaker, and passionate preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While he may not be remembered like the theological giants of the dawn of the Protestant Reformation; Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli, Hubmaier played a major role in the formation of the Free Church. Shortly before his death, Hubmaier penned these words that would encapsulate the fundamental ideas of his life and ministry, the centrality of God’s Word:

“Rejoice, rejoice, ye Christians all,
And break forth into singing!
Since far and wide on every side
The Word of God is ringing.
And well we know, no human foe
Our souls from Christ can sever;
For to the base, and men of grace,
God’s Word stands sure forever…”

James, thanks for your paper. You have done an excellent job presenting a large amount of information in a clear manner. I have made a few notes in the margins, but not many since your paper is so good! Remember, only quote from primary sources; secondary sources should be paraphrased.

Introduction 10/10

Grammar/syntax 20/20

Overall argument 30/30

Body of Paper 28/30

Conclusion 10/10

98/100 is 353/360

71 Estep, 51.
Bibliography


_________. *CHHI 694 Lecture #6 Notes, “The Swiss Brethren: Their Leaders and Theology.”* Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2009.


