

An Advocate of Toleration¹

Balthasar Hubmaier (?1485-1528) was not a man of steel, but the gentleness which made him abhor violence adds to the attraction of this former professor at the University of Ingoldstadt, who later became preacher at Regensburg Cathedral, and in 1521 parish priest at Waldshut on the northern border of Switzerland. He had embraced the teaching of Zwingli but by 1525 he had become convinced that personal faith was a necessary precondition of baptism and in consequence that it should not be administered to infants. He himself was baptized by William Reublin and some 360 of his parishioners followed his example. During the Peasants' War his sympathies were with the rebels and he had to leave Waldshut for Zürich. After a public debate with Zwingli and others he agreed to recant his views on baptism but when the time came to do so in the Fraumünster, his conscience forbade him to comply. He was imprisoned and tortured and once again agreed to withdraw his views, which he did to his lasting regret, as he showed in his *Short Apology*.

He now left Zürich and found peace in Moravia. He settled down at Nikolsburg under the patronage of the two counts of Liechtenstein, Leonard and John, in 1526. Here, over the space of a few months, he published a series of seventeen pamphlets expounding his views with learning, graciousness and occasional brilliance. His peace was soon disturbed by the advent of Hans Hut and his fiery gospel. Dissension followed and Ferdinand of Austria, the overlord of the territory, demanded his extradition. Although sorely tempted to recant his views, he stood his ground and was burned at the stake at Vienna on 10 March 1528 with words of forgiveness and the name of Jesus on his lips. Three days later his wife was executed by drowning in the waters of the Danube. Although Hubmaier was not a typical Anabaptist, the movement produced no finer spirit and his arguments for religious toleration make him a notable pioneer of liberty of conscience.

Hubmaier's Life and Work²

'Balthasar Hubmaier: Truth is Unkillable!'

Balthasar Hubmaier was born in Friedberg, Germany around 1484. He enrolled at the University of Freiburg in May of 1503 where he studied under Johann Eck. Eck would soon become the leading defender of the Catholic faith against the Protestant reformers. In 1519, Eck debated Luther and Karlstadt at the Leipzig Disputation. He wrote *Chrysopassus* in 1514, a work that may have influenced Hubmaier's theology, in which he argued that persons possess free will. Hubmaier received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Freiberg a year after his studies began and continued there until financial problems led him to withdraw

¹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), pp. 88-89.

² From <http://www.reformationhappens.com/people/h%FCbmaier/> Accessed 5 April 2013.

from the university in 1507. After a brief period as a schoolteacher, he returned to Freiberg where he received a bachelor's degree in Bible and became rector when Johann Eck left to teach at the University of Ingolstadt. Hubmaier was one of Eck's favorite students and at his urging, he followed Eck to Ingolstadt in 1512. He received his doctorate soon after arriving in Ingolstadt. He then was made professor of theology and began preaching at the city's largest church.

In 1516, Hubmaier left Ingolstadt to become the cathedral preacher in nearby Regensburg where he would reside for the next five years. As the city's most prominent preacher, he enthusiastically joined in the crusade against the Jewish community in Regensburg. He primarily opposed their practice of usury because he believed it to be prohibited in the Bible and their interpretation of Isaiah 7:14. They believed that the verse should be interpreted as 'a young woman' whereas the Catholics believed it should be interpreted as 'a virgin' and thus a reference to Mary. Friction between Christians and Jews in Germany and throughout Germany was not new. However, because the economy in Regensburg was in decline and the Jewish community was prospering due to their money-lending and commercial practices, resentment among Christians was intense. In fact, they had been under attack by the city council since the 1470s. Fortunately, the Jews had a protector in Maximilian I. He was emperor at the time and had insisted that Jewish money-lenders be paid fair interest due to them and that priests who had unjustly spoken against the Jews should be punished.

In 1518, Hubmaier attended an imperial diet in Augsburg to defend the Regensburg claims against the Jews. Maximilian ordered Hubmaier to honor his demands that the Jews be treated fairly and that he abstain from preaching against them and stirring up the citizens against them. Hubmaier agreed to follow the emperor's orders, but when he returned to Regensburg he continued his attack on the Jewish community. Unfortunately for the Jews in Regensburg, Maximilian died six months after the diet in Augsburg. Thus, in Lent of 1519 the Jews were expelled from town, the Jewish ghetto was plundered, and the synagogue was destroyed.

During the destruction of the Jewish synagogue, a tradesman was injured and died. When he revived a few hours later, the townspeople attributed the miracle to the Virgin Mary. Because the Jews had blasphemed Mary with their interpretation of Isaiah 7:14, this was seen as a sign of retribution and a revelation of the glory of Mary. A chapel in honor of this event was erected on the site of the former synagogue. The chapel, named Beauteous Mary at Hubmaier's suggestion, soon became a popular site for religious pilgrimages. Ironically, this radical reformer was intensely Catholic for most of his life. He demonstrated this commitment by becoming the priest of the Beauteous Mary and preaching about the various miracles that occurred at the chapel. The chapel became a tremendous source of income for the town of Regensburg as word of the miracles and Hubmaier's preaching spread throughout the world. An even greater incentive was provided by a papal bull in 1519 declaring that persons visiting the site would have their time in purgatory reduced by one hundred days!

Hubmaier soon became dissatisfied at Regensburg and sought a call elsewhere. Early in 1521, he was chosen by the city council and people of Waldshut, a small Austrian town on the Rhine, to serve as priest of their parish church. About two years after he became priest in Waldshut, Hubmaier's theology started to change. He found small-town life boring so he began to correspond with and visit with several humanists and reform-minded pastors around Waldshut. Among these were the famous humanist Desiderius Erasmus, Johannes Oecolampadius, who with advice from his friend Ulrich Zwingli, was a leading reformer in Basel, and Wolfgang Rychard, city physician of Ulm, Germany. Hubmaier also read the works of the Wittenberg theologians and engaged in a serious study of the Pauline letters during this time.

He returned to Regensburg from December of 1522 to March of 1523. During his tenure there, he met with a group of Lutherans and had what some refer to as a conversion experience and became an evangelical. Upon his return to Waldshut in the spring of 1523, Hubmaier openly advocated Reformation views and exchanged ideas with Zwingli and Joachim Vadian, the brother-in-law of Conrad Grebel. He later reported that during a conversation with Zwingli in May of 1523, Zwingli had agreed with Hubmaier that the New Testament did not support infant baptism and that children should not be baptized until they were old enough to be 'instructed in the faith'. Zwingli called for a second public disputation to be held in Zurich in October of 1523. Hubmaier not only attended the disputation, but spoke five times in favor of Zwingli's [call] to proceed slowly with reform in Zurich.

Hubmaier's new theology did not go unnoticed by Catholic officials. In December of 1523 government officials from Ensisheim, Austria arrived in Waldshut. They leveled three charges against Hubmaier: joining a Lutheran 'sect', having represented several cities in the region at the second Zurich disputation, and misinterpreting Scripture in his sermons. The city council of Waldshut defended Hubmaier and refused to allow the officials to hand him over to the bishop of Constance to be tried. The delegation gave the city council fourteen days to comply with their demands. The Waldshut city council wrote a letter to the officials in Ensisheim a week later proclaiming that Hubmaier was innocent and that he proclaimed the Scriptures plainly and clearly. Because the Austrian government was engaged in a war against France, it did not have the resources to follow through on its threat against Waldshut.

In April of 1524, Hubmaier, following the example of Zwingli, organized a disputation in Waldshut. The disputation differed from those in Zurich in that the public was not invited, there was no ruling by the city council, and there was no debate among parties present. At the disputation, Hubmaier presented his first work *Achtzehn Schlußreden* or *Eighteen Theses*. Although the *Eighteen Theses* does not display a radical Anabaptist theology, it does seem to point the way toward one. In the eighth article, Hubmaier explained, 'Just as every Christian believes and is baptized for himself, so should each one judge from Scripture whether he is being properly nourished by his pastor'. This article not only appears to support believer's baptism, it also displays a radical commitment to Scripture alone as the source for faith and practice. Hubmaier also declares that

one is justified by faith alone, but adds that 'faith cannot remain dormant but must reach out to God in thanksgiving and to people in all kinds of works of brotherly love'. In regard to the parishioners of the church, he uses an unusual term, *kirchgenossen*. It connotes more than just membership in the church. It also implies that the members possess certain rights and responsibilities.

The articles also possess an intense polemic against the Catholic tradition. Common practices such as the lighting of candles, the use of holy water, and images are 'good for nothing'. The former chaplain of Beauteous Mary condemned pilgrimages and insisted that celibacy for priests was dangerous and impractical. The mass is described as a remembrance of Christ rather than a sacrifice and should be celebrated in the language of the parishioners. The work ends with what would become Hubmaier's motto: *Die warhet ist untödlich*. Some have translated the phrase 'truth is immortal', but the translation closest to Hubmaier's context as a persecuted follower of Christ is 'Truth is Unkillable'.

In July of 1524 the Austrian government at Innsbrook ordered an attack on Waldshut. This was also followed by an order on August the third by Ferdinand. However, the attack is postponed because of limited resources and more importantly the occupation of Waldshut by neighboring peasants armed to defend Waldshut and preparing a revolt against their oppressive princes. Hubmaier played an active role in the Peasants' War. Many scholars believe that he authored and edited several texts related to the conflict in which he sided with the common people.

Sensing immanent trouble and feeling guilty for having put the citizens of Waldshut in danger, Hubmaier fled to Schaffhausen a nearby Swiss city that was also committed to reform. He remained in Schaffhausen for two months. During his stay there he wrote three appeals to the city, a thesis against Johann Eck, and *On Heretics and Those Who Burn Them*.

In these three works he argued for the ability to engage in open debates so as to defend his positions and displayed humility in that he acknowledged his desire to learn from others. This humble appeal for open debate demonstrated Hubmaier's desire for religious tolerance (within the Christian tradition) and his respect for the authority of local governments.

On Heretics and Those Who Burn Them is the most important work written by Hubmaier during the time of his stay in Schaffhausen. It consists of thirty-six articles and is addressed to Brother Anthony, the vicar at Constance, 'the select sentinel without a trumpet'. The work is framed by Hubmaier's motto, 'Truth is Unkillable' and promptly begins his defense by declaring that heretics are those who 'wantonly resist the Holy Scripture'. This claim clearly positions Hubmaier within orthodoxy and charges Anthony with heresy. He quickly attacks the idea of the papacy and of clerics and monks being supported by endowments.

Although Hubmaier conceded that heretics exist, he argued against persecuting them. He insisted that heretics should be gently instructed and even though 'Holy Scripture also includes wrath', persons should not be persecuted. He cited the

parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13 as a paradigm for action against heretics. In fact, those who burn heretics do not follow the teaching of Christ, and are thus heretics themselves, because they attempt to separate the wheat from the tares before it is time to do so. Hubmaier also referred to Ephesians 6:17 as he argued that the 'sword' that Christians have to combat the ungodly is the 'sword of the Word of God'. He also maintained that secular authorities have the right to punish the wicked, but they do not have the right to punish heretics. Hubmaier did however, allow books of 'error or irreverence' to be burned.

By October 27th Hubmaier returned to Waldshut after having stopped in Zürich to speak with Zwingli. In honor of his arrival, the citizens celebrated with a parade and demonstrated their commitment to his efforts to reform Waldshut by destroying images, statues, and chalices from the churches. As a result of this support, Hubmaier began to slowly introduce more reforms in Waldshut.

In January of 1525 he made two dramatic moves. He married Elsbeth Hügline, a faithful and courageous wife who would join him in martyrdom, and he began conducting services where children were given a blessing rather than receiving baptism. In a letter written to Oecolampadius in January, Hubmaier stated that he did continue to baptize children if they were ill and their parents insisted upon it.

Hubmaier's official initiation into the Anabaptist tradition did not occur until April of that year. Wilhelm Reublin, an Anabaptist exiled from Zürich, had come to Waldshut for the second time. He was one of those who had participated in the birth of the Anabaptist movement in Zurich and had been hiding out since his expulsion. Conversations with Reublin further convinced Hubmaier that infant baptism was not supported in Scripture and on April 14th he was baptized by Reublin along with about sixty others. Although by the end of the month most of the city council was also baptized along with about three hundred others, Hubmaier was disappointed in the response of the people of Waldshut to his program of reform.

Hubmaier published two Anabaptist works in 1525. The first work, *Summa of the Entire Christian Life*, published on July 1, was dedicated to the three cities where he had 'represented the Christian faith poorly'. Friedberg was the city of his birth. Ingolstadt and Regensburg were cities where he preached. In the work, Hubmaier primarily addressed infant baptism and the Lord's Supper. After confessing that he taught many useless things during his time as a Catholic priest, a time in which he was deceived by the 'red whore of Babylon', he summarizes the Christian life with five major points. First, the Christian realizes that he or she is helpless to follow Christ's command to repent and believe the Gospel. Next, Hubmaier uses a bit of allegory as he describes the salvation of the sinner in terms of the Good Samaritan story. Jesus, the good Samaritan, comes with wine and oil to heal the wounds of the sinner. The wine leads the person to feel sorry for her or his sin and the oil softens the pain and drives the sin away. The sinner then submits to the will of Christ.

The third point is public confession. After a commitment to a new life of obedience, the Christian must profess this faith to the Christian church and demonstrate outwardly, by baptism, what has occurred inwardly. As a member of the Christian church, the Christian is then held accountable for sins by the community and subject to discipline according to Matthew 18. Hubmaier's fourth point is that persons are able to follow the commands of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and in doing so witness the truth of the Gospel so that others might also be healed. Christians must preach the Gospel so that the kingdom of Christ is increased, but in doing so, they will certainly face persecution because the world hates light and loves the darkness.

The fifth point focuses on the Lord's Supper. Hubmaier describes the meal as a 'reminder and memorial'. The meal is a memorial in that the Christian is reminded of how the shed blood of Jesus provides salvation for the sinner. The meal is also an eschatological celebration. Hubmaier interprets 1 Corinthians 11:26 as refuting the Catholic view (as well as Luther and Calvin's views) of the Eucharist. He argued, 'From this we hear that he is not present but will come only at the hour of the last judgment'. After having expounded upon his view, Hubmaier attacks as a 'bear's mass with mumbling and growling'.

The second work published in 1525, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, has often been described as Hubmaier's most significant writing. It is a response to Zwingli's *Concerning Baptism, Rebaptism, and Infant Baptism* published in May of the same year. The work is fairly substantial in length, about seventeen thousand words, and is divided into seven chapters. In this work, Hubmaier addressed numerous New Testament passages dealing with the subject of baptism. The work was enormously popular and provoked an inflamed response by Zwingli as well as a reply by John Calvin. Although the work is an in-depth look at baptism in the New Testament, the argument is fairly simple. Hubmaier demonstrated that no passage commands the baptism of infants and that only believers are baptized. He demonstrated that a pattern exists in the New Testament passages concerning baptism. Generally, the texts begin by explaining that the word of God is preached, followed by an emphasis on hearing, then a change, repentance, or faith is displayed. Only after faith or repentance is evident does the person receive baptism. Often, external works follow baptism in the New Testament passages.

By the end of 1525, Zwingli had replied to Hubmaier's work with *A True and Thorough Reply to Dr. Balthasar's Book on Baptism* and Hubmaier had prepared a response. The peasants were now losing ground and Austrian officials followed through with their threats against Waldshut and on December 5 the town was overthrown. Hubmaier, who was very ill at the time, was forced to flee Waldshut and sought refuge with an Anabaptist family in Zurich. Zwingli soon heard of Hubmaier's presence in Zürich and in order to avoid Hubmaier from organizing a disturbance, he had him arrested. A council was convened to examine Hubmaier's beliefs. He quickly rejected the charges that he claimed he was without sin, that he taught Christians should not serve as government officials, and that Christians should not hold private property. He then requested a private meeting with three men with whom he felt had similar views on baptism.

However, they advised him to recant on his position on baptism or be faced with being turned over to Austrian officials. Because of his severe illness, Hubmaier agreed and drafted a recantation of his view on baptism. He was then advised that he must read the recantation at the Fraumünster the following Sunday after Zwingli preached the morning sermon.

The humiliated preacher was unable to recant in public. After having taken the pulpit at the Fraumünster, he stated that he was unable to recant and began to explain why he disagreed with infant baptism. Zwingli quickly interrupted him and he was taken to the rack to be tortured. After seven months of torture, both Hubmaier and the Zürich officials were ready for another insincere recantation. He read the recantation in three churches in the area and he was quietly allowed to leave Zürich at the end of April. After a brief stay in Augsburg where he baptized Hans Denck, a future Anabaptist leader, Hubmaier went to Moravia, an Anabaptist refuge.

Hubmaier's time in Nikolsburg was profitable in terms of publications and evangelism. Some have estimated that as many as 12,000 Anabaptists migrated to Nikolsburg and the surrounding areas due to Hubmaier's presence. Leonhard von Liechtenstein, ruler of Moravia, invited Simprecht Sorg of Zurich to relocate his print shop in Nikolsburg and print Hubmaier's works. Hubmaier in turn dedicated about twelve works to the Liechtenstein family.

Two of the works printed in Nikolsburg were written by Hubmaier during his imprisonment in Zurich. *The Twelve Articles of the Christian Faith* consists of an expansion of twelve phrases of the Apostles' Creed into prayers. This work demonstrates that Hubmaier affirmed the basics of the Christian faith. Additionally, the work provides insight into the tremendous impact of persecution on Hubmaier's faith and theology. The second work, *A Brief Our Father*, is also an extended prayer based on the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew's gospel.

The first text printed by Simprecht Sorg in Nikolsburg was probably *The Opinion of the Ancient and New Teachers that One Should Not Baptize Young Children until They Have Been Instructed in the Faith*. In this work, Hubmaier cites such church fathers as Origen, Athanasius, Tertullian, and Jerome in support of his position against infant baptism. He also quotes his contemporaries Martin Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Leo Jud, and Capito. Unfortunately, Hubmaier often takes the 'quotes' out of context and often the citations are incorrect. Although Hubmaier tried to include as many sources as possible to bolster his argument, his work as an exegete is much more impressive than his use of historical sources.

An important defense of Hubmaier's doctrine is presented in *A Brief Apologia* printed in the fall of 1526. One historian has suggested that the von Liechtenstein family may have encouraged Hubmaier to write the work so as to defend himself against the charges leveled against him by Ferdinand and Zwingli. The work is mostly an opportunity for Hubmaier to deny charges that he taught persons to be disobedient to authorities, that he taught 'new teachings', and that

he had 'goat's feet'. He also expanded his teaching with biblical support. An interesting addition was his description of three baptisms. The first is the inward baptism of the Spirit. The second is water baptism that acts as an outward expression of the inward change. The third baptism is the baptism of blood. This occurs when a Christian is martyred for the faith. In *A Christian Catechism* printed in 1527, Hubmaier described the baptism of blood as the 'daily mortification of the flesh'. The catechism is in the form of a dialogue between Leonard and Hans von Liechtenstein and addresses issues such as faith, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the ban.

Hubmaier also wrote two additional works on baptism and the Lord's Supper. He wrote two works on the ban and on freedom of the will as well.

Hubmaier's ministry in Moravia came under grave danger when his old enemy Archduke Ferdinand was crowned as king in Bohemia in February of 1527. Ferdinand soon began to exert pressure on Leonhard von Liechtenstein to turn Hubmaier over to him to be prosecuted. Handing over Hubmaier and his wife to authorities in Vienna probably allowed von Liechtenstein to remain in power over Moravia. Hubmaier was then taken to Kreuzenstein Castle near Vienna where he wrote his final *Apologia*. In the work, he separated himself from John Hut's eschatological views and demonstrated his views on free will and salvation by faith alone were similar to the Catholic interpretation.

The emperor probably never read the work and on March 10, 1528 Hubmaier was burned at the stake for his role in the peasants' uprisings in Waldshut and for heresy. As he was set on fire, he asked his brothers to pray for patience in suffering. Three days later his wife Elsebeth had a large stone tied around her neck and was thrown into the Danube and drowned.

The Martyrdom of Hubmaier³

When Balthasar Hubmaier was being prepared for the flame by having sulphur and gunpowder rubbed into his hair and long beard, he cried out: 'Oh, salt me well, salt me well!' When the fagots were lit, he repeated in Latin the words Jesus had uttered from the cross: '*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*'. Hubmaier and his wife, who was drowned in the Danube with a stone tied around her neck, were both remembered and revered as martyrs.

³ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press and Leicester: Apollos, 1988), p. 299.