

“TRUTH IS IMMORTAL”: BALTHASAR HUBMAIER’S ENCOUNTER WITH THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT

The following article argues that Anabaptist reformer Balthasar Hubmaier’s view of the Bible as an immortal truth – freely accessible to all who in response to God’s grace accepted freely its saving message – entailed an ecclesiology that stressed less the power of the church in controlling Christ’s presence and more the role of the individual’s relationship with God and with the body of believers. In attempting to make this argument I trace the development of Hubmaier’s thought from his early scholastic education, followed by his embrace of the faith of the reformers and finally to a Christocentric and Bible centric Anabaptist theological understanding of the church. The ultimate implications of this would be the expansion of the notion of Christian freedom and the reduction of the powers of the church.

Keywords: Bible. Freedom. Ecclesiology. Anabaptist. Truth.

RESUMO

O presente artigo defende a tese de que a visão do reformador anabatista Balthasar Hubmaier da Bíblia como uma verdade imortal – livremente acessível a todos os que, em resposta à graça de Deus, aceitaram livremente sua mensagem salvadora – implicava uma eclesiologia que enfatizava menos o poder da igreja em controlar a presença de Cristo e mais o papel do relacionamento do indivíduo com Deus e com o corpo de crentes. Ao tentar apresentar este argumento, traço o desenvolvimento do pensamento de Hubmaier desde a sua educação inicial fundamentada no escolasticismo Católico Romano, seguida pela sua aceitação da fé dos reformadores e, finalmente, até uma compreensão teológica anabatista cristocêntrica e bíblica da igreja. As implicações finais disto seriam a expansão da noção de liberdade cristã e a redução dos poderes da Igreja.

Palavras-chave: Bíblia. Liberdade. Eclesiologia. Anabatista. Verdade.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes the thesis that Hubmaier's view of the Bible as an immortal truth¹ – freely accessible to all who in response to God's grace accepted freely its saving message – entailed an ecclesiology that stressed less the power of the church in controlling Christ's presence and more the role of the individual's relationship with God and with the body of believers. The ultimate implications of this would be the expansion of the notion of Christian freedom and the reduction of the powers of the church.

To accomplish this, I pay close attention mostly to the body of literature which Hubmaier has left behind. These come mainly from private letters written in German or Latin as well as his extensive Anabaptist writings which have been published in Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder's *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism* (1989). I will focus on these writings since they give the most accurate depiction of how Hubmaier understood the Bible from his own perspective. A guiding assumption behind this argument will be that Hubmaier was not simply an Anabaptist theologian, but an Anabaptist who incorporated different strands of thought into his understanding of Scripture. The result is that one finds a theologian who engaged with, reacted against, and appropriated from the Catholic Eck, the Protestant Luther, and the Humanist Erasmus. The end result was an understanding of Scripture as the divine truth that was freely accessible to all who responded to God's gift of grace.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part will analyze what Bible and the Bible texts Hubmaier was reading in his interaction with Scholastic, Humanist, and Protestant theologians. The second part will focus on how his interaction with these different schools of thought influenced his reading of the Bible. As I will attempt to show, Hubmaier's eclectic education and experience as Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist preacher led to a unique hermeneutic of the Word, Faith, and the Spirit.

The third section will look at how Hubmaier's understanding of the Bible impacted his ecclesiology and how his ecclesiology impacted his theology as a whole. I will devote specific attention to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two most important themes in his writings.

Understanding how Hubmaier conceptualized these doctrines into his theology of the Word is vital to understanding his theology as a whole, which focused on the Word as the primal tool in liberating the individual from the powers of sin and religious superstition to a personal relationship with Christ and a loving relationship with the body of believers. This conviction compelled him to implement his reformation of the Lord's Supper, Believer's Baptism in both Waldshut and in Nikolsberg.

THE BIBLE HUBMAIER READ

The Bible Hubmaier read was a product of his Catholic education under Eck, his contact with Humanist scholars in central Switzerland, his experience with the writings of the Protestant reformers,

¹ Hubmaier uses the phrase "truth is immortal" as a postscript in all of his writings.

and his own embrace of Anabaptism. The first Bible that Hubmaier read was the Bible of the scholastic theologians and of the nominalists of the *via moderna*. This exposure came as a result of his intense education at Freiburg and Inglostadt². Hubmaier earned the title of *baccalaureus biblicus* in 1511 from the university of Freiburg, hence, becoming an expert in the biblical languages (Pipkin, 2008, p. 39). Despite his excellent academic achievements, his understanding of Scripture between 1507–1520 was mostly limited to that of the nominalists, scholastics and his teacher Eck (Pipkin, 2008, p. 39). During this period as he reflected later in his life, Hubmaier stated that he devoted himself with “care and eagerness” taking up the “philosophical ideas” and carefully listened to “my teachers” (i.e. Eck) and “zealously” took down his lectures like “an industrious reader, and untiring listener, and a busy teacher of other hearers” (Mabry, 1994, p. 13-18). Because of this zeal, Hubmaier was promoted to preceptor in dogmatic philosophy where he was exposed to Eck’s lectures on Aristotle, as well as Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, William of Occam, Robert Holkort, John Major of Hoddington, and most importantly, Gabriel Biel (Mabry, 1994, p. 18).

His encounter with the philosophy of Gabriel Biel exposed him to a moderate form of nominalism also known as the fourth school (Mabry, 1994, p. 13-14). Represented by the writings of Jean Gerson and Gabriel Biel, this strand of nominalism purported to be a moderate approach in relation to its three other counterparts (Mabry, 1994, p. 13-14). Among the views held by this school, was one that God divided his wills into a revealed will and a hidden will. The revealed will derived from his ordinary powers (*potentia ordinata*) and hidden will derived from his absolute power (*potentia absoluta*). While God’s sovereign power was the object of his eternal mystery, by his ordinary powers, God delegated to humanity the use of conscience and the usage of the faculty of their *synderesis*³.

The implication of this for his Biblical theology were that the fall did not extinguish the “basic goodness of creation,” nor the freedom of the will⁴. Consequently, humans could use the innate faculties of reason and free will without divine aid to present to “prepare or dispose of himself for justification” (McDill, 2001, p. 124-125).

Despite receiving arguably the best theological education of his day, Hubmaier’s knowledge of the content of the Bible seems to have been very limited during this period. His autobiographical testimony confirms this when he claims that he became a doctor in the Holy Scriptures without ever reading a “single Gospel or an epistle by Paul, from beginning to end” (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 343)⁵. Whether or not this was an exaggeration on his part, it seems quiet evident that his Biblical knowledge during this period had been filtered through the writings of Dun Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, William Occam, and other church decrees, which he referred to at that time as “my Scriptures” (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 343).

² For an excellent summary of Hubmaier education see Emir F. Caner, *Truth is Unkillable: The Life and Writings of Balthasar Hubmaier Theologian*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Texas, Arlington, 1999), p. 1-56.

³ Synderesis was understood as the faculty that naturally inclined the human person “away from evil and toward good” (McDill, 2001, p. 124-125).

⁴ See McDill (2001, p. 124-125).

⁵ All other citations from Hubmaier’s work unless otherwise mentioned will come from the Pipkin and Yoder edition of his works.

During this period, Hubmaier's Bible reflected the scholastic and nominalist theology of his day. The most notable example was his usage of the language of God's hidden and revealed will. He would continue to use this even at the end of his life to justify the doctrine of human free will and "the provenience of God's grace for salvation" (Mabry, 1994, p. 115). Although attempts have been made to portray Hubmaier as borrowing uncritically Gabriel Biel's notion of human free will, a reading of his texts on this subject reveal that he used these terms instrumentally⁶. This can be seen by his rejection of the idea of human innocence and the overemphasis of the scholastics on the individual's role for salvation. Hubmaier, as it will be shown see later on, eventually framed his notion of human free will in the context of the hearing of the Word and the illumination of reason by the Holy Spirit, as a result of God's grace (Steinmetz, 1971, p. 134)⁷.

Hubmaier's fascination with nominalism and scholasticism came to an abrupt end between 1520 and 1523. Torsten Bergsten (1961, p. 103) attributes this to his negative experiences with the Mary movement, his interaction with a growing circle of Lutheran and humanist authors, and his study of the writings of Luther and the Pauline Epistles (Bergsten, 1961, p. 100). By 1521 Hubmaier rejected scholasticism and embraced the Humanist ideal of returning to the sources (Bergsten, 1961, p. 100). In two letters addressed to the humanist Sapidus, he explained his rejection of scholastic methodology, his admiration for Erasmus, and his new found fascination with Pauline theology⁸.

The second Bible Hubmaier would read was that of the Humanists. This Bible was filtered through the writings of Erasmus. Hubmaier would later make reference to Erasmus' Greek text and would use it extensively in his debates against Zwingli on infant baptism (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 132). For Erasmus, Hubmaier's also developed the idea that the Bible was a book that must be approached with a proper attitude⁹. Rather than attempting to find contradictions within a text, he believed that the reader must approach Scripture like Joshua "with a yearning spirit" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 53; Bergsten, 1961, p. 134).

However, Erasmus would impact Hubmaier on a much wider scale by his view on free will.

⁶ This is the conclusion that Graeme R. Chatfield and Diarmaid MacCulloch have arrived in their treatment [of](#) this topic. See Graeme R. Chatfield and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Balthasar Hubmaier and the Clarity of Scripture: A Critical Reformation Issue* (Cambridge, UK: James Co., 2013), p. 122.

⁷ David C. Steinmetz, "Scholasticism and Radical Reform: Nominalis Motifs in the Theology of Balthasar Hubmaier," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45, n. 2, p. 123-144, Apr. 1961, at 134. In this article, David Steinmetz (p. 134) [argues](#) here that "the invitation to salvation through preaching and the illumination of reason by the Holy Spirit may [be](#) granted to the sinner *sola gratia*. what is important to see, however, is that the sinner is not utterly dependent on [the](#) initiative of God for gaining that knowledge of the gospel which will make salvation possible". Steinmetz seems to neglect the foundational role that the Holy Spirit plays in Hubmaier's doctrine of Scripture. For [an](#) exposition of Hubmaier's views on the impossibility of humans to achieve salvation by their own capacities and [his](#) emphasis on the Holy Spirit. In Hubmaier, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, 97; This choice is the only [active](#) part of the Believer. But even this is owed to the work of God's grace and the Holy Spirit. See also McDill (2001), where the author attempts to [give](#) a more comprehensive understanding of Hubmaier's view on this topic. This author helps to clarify the [relationship](#) between the Holy Spirit and the human agent in the process of illuminating and giving the believer the [ability](#) to comprehend saving knowledge in the process of salvation. The Holy Spirit does not merely act in the [process](#) of illumination, but he allows the reader to see the text plainly and when confronted by the Word to make a [choice](#).

⁸ See also Darren Thomas Williamson, "The Doctor of [Anabaptism](#)" and the Prince of Humanists: Balthasar Hubmaier's Contact with Erasmus. There the author shows how Hubmaier's three extant letters to [Beatus](#) Rhenanus, Johannes Sapidus, and Johannes Adelphi offer conclusive evidence of his shift from scholasticism [to](#) the reforming ideal.

⁹ As Waynes Pipkin (2008, p. 55) has observed, Hubmaier inherited this view previously in his interaction with the [Humanist](#) circle in Waldshut.

Hubmaier derived his understanding of free will from Erasmus' anthropology. According to this view, a human being was comprised of body, soul, and spirit. Although the body was corrupted by the fall, this did not completely extinguish a person's free will¹⁰. Hubmaier's work *Freedom of the Will Part II* exemplifies this, since he borrowed most of the Biblical passages from Erasmus' argument almost verbatim (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 449). The majority of passages that Hubmaier used to justify this position came from the Deuterocanonical book of Ecclesiasticus, the Pauline epistles, the Gospels, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Psalms, and Deuteronomy. This illustrates the Biblical books he was probably reading during his interaction with the humanists (Hubmaier, 1989 p. 442-450). Most likely he was using Erasmus' Bible during this period as he would indicate later in his life (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 112, 132).

Although Hubmaier clearly subscribed to Erasmus' anthropology, he did not subscribe to Erasmus' optimistic view of human reason (Erasmus; Luther, 1961, p. 62). Hubmaier departed from Erasmus on the estimation of human ability to apprehend truth apart from divine revelation. Hubmaier took a more pessimistic approach and unlike Erasmus did not place such a high value on “human learning” (Davis, 1973, p. 177-178). Although free will would have an important role in how Hubmaier apprehended the Bible, he minimized the power of reason insisting that Scriptural norms were all that was required (Estep, 1978, p. 32-49). As it will be shown later in this paper, Hubmaier placed a greater emphasis on faith, divine revelation, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of understanding. This was a result of his contact with the teachings of Luther¹¹.

This occurred between 1521–23 when Hubmaier connected himself with a Lutheran circle in Waldshut (Bergsten, 1961, p. 76). His correspondence indicates that he was engaging with a series of texts and passages that were the subject of discussions among Protestants, the most notable being Paul's epistle to the Romans. In a letter addressed to one of his friends named Adelphi during this period, Hubmaier suggested that he had already studied Paul's letters to the Corinthian churches and was soon to begin studying his epistle to the Romans. In the letter, Hubmaier also requested Melancthon's lectures on Romans and questioned Adelphi's opinion on Luther's work *sub utraque specie* and added that he possessed a copy of Luther's *de Coena* (Bergsten, 1961, p. 101). The picture one forms during this period is that the Hubmaier's Bible was partially influenced by the theology of the reformers. This Bible was influenced by Luther's understanding of *Sola Scriptura* and faith.

Among Anabaptist theologians, none seem to have been so influenced by Martin Luther as Hubmaier (Mabry, 1994, p. 32). The most notable aspect of Luther's influence on Hubmaier was the question of faith. Even after rejecting infant baptism, Hubmaier remained committed to Luther's view on the necessity of prior faith in the reception of the sacraments (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 256; McDill, 2001, p. 16). Although Luther would clarify and define more precisely his concept of faith, Hubmaier

¹⁰ *Erasmus-Luther: Discourse on Free Will*, translated and edited by Ernst F. Winter (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York, NY, 1961), p. 62-63, compare with Hubmaier, *Freedom of the Will I*, p. 432–435.

¹¹ As we will later on see, the agent of this change was the Holy Spirit and Scripture. Estep (1978, p. 35) has [made](#) this clear when he says, that like the Anabaptist “the eye of the humanist was centered on man, the eye of the [Anabaptist](#) was centered on God.” While for the humanist the end of man was “to know himself”, for the Anabaptist [it](#) was “to do the will of God”.

would eventually expand upon some of his earlier ideas drawing them to their logical conclusion¹². This emphasis on faith as a precondition for the reception of the sacraments would have an impact not only on Hubmaier's understanding of the Lord's supper and baptism, but in his whole view of the Christian life including how he approached the Biblical text (Mabry, 1994, p. 32).

As this cursory analysis of early interaction between the Bible and Hubmaier has attempted to show, the Bible Hubmaier read reflected his interaction with nominalist, humanist, and Lutheran theologians. This developed as a result of his personal experience as a ultraquiet student, preacher, and follower of the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist movements. Hubmaier's knowledge of the Bible expanded with his experience with each of these different schools of thought and his emphasis on certain portions of Scripture varied depending on his engagement with each of them. The result of this would be a different approach to reading the Bible which emphasized the Word, Faith, human Will, and the Spirit.

HOW HUBMAIER READ THE BIBLE

The result of Hubmaier's encounter with the Bible both as a Catholic priest and then as a Protestant and Anabaptist reformer was a hermeneutic that stressed the Word of God, human free will and the role of the Holy Spirit. Since Hubmaier read the Bible through this prism, he would come to understand it as living truth accessible to all who through faith illumined by the Spirit and acting in response to God's saving grace could have access to its saving message.

Hubmaier came to this conclusion first through his doctrine of the Word. He believed that the Word of God or what he would consider to be the Bible was God's eternal, clear and authoritative word (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 42). He grounded his belief in the conviction that the text of the Bible was clear, simple, pure, and luminous to all (Klaassen, 1966, p. 143). His definition of what clarity signified required the assumption that everything that was not in the text of Scripture should be ousted. He outlined this most clearly in his maxim that "everything which God had not planted would be uprooted" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 33). This narrow construction of the Biblical text probably led Hubmaier to view the Bible as a "book of law" (Chatfield; MacCulloch, 2013, p. 42). This explains his unwillingness to compromise in matters of faith and the theological conclusions that he would arrive on many issues (Klaassen, 1966, p. 141-143). This view of clarity applied to the entire structure of Scripture, which he viewed as "a complete whole, in which all the parts cohere and to which all parts are necessary" (Klaassen, 1966, p. 143).

The clarity of Scripture did not detract from the benefits that one gained from the study of biblical languages. For Hubmaier, a knowledge of Biblical languages was still useful for the clarification of difficult passages (Estep, 1978, p. 143). Nevertheless, he was aware of the implication that an overemphasis on languages could have in reverting the church to its pre-reformation state under the Medieval Catholic church (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 142)¹³. He particularly accused Zwingli of

¹² See Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ* (1519), in T. F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 253.

¹³ See also Hubmaier, *On Heretics and those who Burn Them*, 63, where Hubmaier argued that the establishment of such a magisterium was the cause of the wrong religious zeal that the church had perpetuated in its persecution of Heretics.

doing this in his overemphasis on the study of language. In his view Zwingli was covertly attempting to twist and turn Scripture with his emphasis on language due to his fear of offending the established authorities in their attempts to maintain the established practice of infant baptism¹⁴.

Hubmaier (1989, p. 142) viewed Biblical languages like the gift of tongues as an auxiliary "insofar as God grants that they be used for the edification of the church, not that Scripture be obscured by them". Otherwise, the end result, would be the exclusion of "those who cannot speak three or four languages" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 142). For this reason, he encouraged the study of the Bible from a multitude of translations including the Old translations of Aldus, the greek text of Erasmus, the Old Latin Translations, the Vulgate, and the new German translation of Zwingli himself (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 112, 132)¹⁵.

In addition to its clarity, the Word was normative and required a human response. The Bible was not a passive text but actively engaged the reader and *vice versa*. The Word actively confronted the believer, bearing its claims on his faith and practice of the Christian life. This Word is the primary source of authority and is unmediated from other sources of authority.

He articulated this notion of authority in the following two ways. The first was in a vertical sense in which Scripture occupied the highest place of authority in the hierarchy of knowledge. Like the reformers, (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 42) believed Scripture was above Papal law, councils, church Fathers, and schoolmen. When it came to question of canonical authority and how Hubmaier articulated this topic, this issue is much more contentious (Rempel, 1993, p. 42). A study of Hubmaier's writings reveals that he not only equated the Word of God with the sixty-six books of the Protestant canon in his Scriptural arguments, but also other deuterocanonical works of the Catholic canon (Chatfield; MacCulloch, 2013, p. 102)¹⁶. His usage of these texts suggest that even if Hubmaier did not consider these books as authoritative as the sixty-six books of what would be the Protestant Bible, he considered them at least to have Scriptural value.

However, Hubmaier's emphasis on the words of Christ, suggests that similar to Luther and other Anabaptist writers, Hubmaier considered certain parts of Scripture as more authoritative than others (Mabry, 1994, p. 35). For him, following Scripture was more than following a book, it was following a person. Since Christ himself justified his authority through Scripture, Hubmaier (xxxx, p. 45) believed that disobeying its clear commands was at its best folly and at its worst equivalent to

For his accusation against Zwingli see Hubmaier, *Dialogue of Balthasar Hubmaier with Zwingli's Book on Infant Baptism*, 181, where criticizing Zwingli for compromising on the question of infant baptism, he states that God is "more interested in obedience in his words than in all our sacrifices and even self-devised church practices, as we have it in all the divine writings of the prophets, the twelve apostles, and the saints" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 181). For Hubmaier, "the greatest honor one could give to God was "to keep His Word and to live according to His Will, not according to our law and good intentions" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 181).

¹⁴ As (Hubmaier, 1989 p. 214) pointed out, Zwingli's original argument had been that infants should not have been baptized, but he seemed to have changed his mind after the Anabaptist movement began to take shape. For a more in-depth discussion of Hubmaier's disputes with Zwingli on this subject and Zwingli's original position on infant baptism see Mabry (1994, p. 41).

¹⁵ Ibid, 112;132. Hubmaier would use Zwingli's version against him on many occasions.

¹⁶ See also the index of Bible passages in Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), for the list of all the books of Scripture that Hubmaier cites and quotes in his theological writings. Among the books that he uses are Judith, Tobias, and Ecclesiasticus.

idolatry. However, this did not undermine his view of the complete authority of Scripture which, for him, was "canonized and sanctified" by God (Mabry, 1994, p. 102).

The second way in which Hubmaier understood the authority of Scripture was in a horizontal sense. Besides functioning as the highest epistemic authority, Scripture served as the judge or standard by which a person's faith and practice were evaluated¹⁷. For him, the Bible functioned as the mold by church tradition, reason, experience, and the church fathers had to conform with (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 45; Hubmaier, 1989, p. 52). According to (Hubmaier (1989, these outside sources of human authority created a wall between the text and the reader from accessing the liberating truth of God's word¹⁸. When a controversy arose, the matter should be decided "according to God's judgements [...] for he has for that purpose given his law and commandments" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 45).

Although Hubmaier granted that Scripture was plain and accessible to all, he differed from both his humanist and Protestant contemporaries on how one understood the text. He viewed the process of understanding neither as solely an act of the Holy Spirit infusing grace and understanding on the believer like Luther did, nor as an act of plain human reason as the humanists¹⁹. Hubmaier viewed the interaction between the reader and the text of the Bible as occurring through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. Understanding the text occurred as an act of the divine will cooperating with the human in the process of understanding Biblical truth. The understanding of the text was made possible only by the Holy Spirit's illumination of the human will. The human will then either responded in faith or rejected the Word's saving message. In order to unpack this process, one must look at Hubmaier's understanding of faith and the role played by the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation.

Unlike Luther who conceived faith as a gift from God to the elect, Hubmaier emphasized the trust which each individual believer must place in God's Word (McDill, 2001, p. 152). Hubmaier conceived faith as a personal relationship of trust between the human and the divine agents which began with justification and culminated in godly living (McDill, 2001, p. 154). He defined this trust as the "realization of the unspeakable mercy of God, his gracious favor and goodwill, which he bears to us through his most beloved Son Jesus Christ" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 349). Unlike Luther, Hubmaier affirmed faith's voluntary nature as an answer to God's offer of salvation (McDill, 2001, p. 73). This was due to his understanding of the freedom of the will, which he derived partially from his interaction with Humanism and the influence of Erasmus, as well as with a series of Biblical texts²⁰.

¹⁷ See Torsten Bergsten, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Anabaptist Theologian and Martyr*, translated by William Roscoe Estep (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978), p. 134.

¹⁸ Hubmaier, *Freedom of the Will I*, p. 444, states this most clearly when he says: "The Greatest deception of the people is the kind of zeal for God which is invested without Scripture in the interest of the salvation of souls, the honor of the church, love for the truth, good intentions, usage of customs, episcopal decrees and the indications of reason, all of which have been begged from the light of nature. These are lethal errors, when they are not led and directed according to Scripture". This idea that no human source of authority could stand in the way between the believer and the Word of God was at the heart not only of Hubmaier's understanding of Scripture, but also in his understanding of Christian freedom, since he believed that God desired men and women to come to him as "uncoerced, willing, and joyous guests and donors" in the same way that the disciples at Emmaus "did not force Christ to remain with them otherwise that by request and good works" (Hubmaier, 1989 p. 444).

¹⁹ See Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by J. Theodore Mueller, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), p. 24; *Erasmus-Luther*, p. 62-63.

²⁰ Compare Hubmaier, *Freedom of the Will II*, 449-491 with Erasmus, *The Free Will in Erasmus-Luther*, 1-32, where

Hubmaier's belief in free will accounts for his different approach to Scripture. While Luther saw the comprehension of Bible truth as only accessible to those whom God had given the gift of faith, Hubmaier viewed it as accessible to all. In Hubmaier's view, every person could exercise his/her will to trust in God. Despite the body's corruption by sin, Hubmaier believed that "the spirit functioning as the conscience in man bearing God's good image despite its futility in its bondage to sin and flesh" could be set free "to actually function and do good *by the grace of God*" (McDill, 2001, p. 188; italics in original). Unlike Gabriel Biel and the other Scholastics this capacity to will to accept the Word's saving message was activated by an external divine factor; This was the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit functioned in Hubmaier's scheme as the divine agent enlightening the human will so that it could properly understand and accept the message of the Word. The Holy Spirit worked through the Word and text of Scripture to persuade the reader of its saving truth²¹. Through the cooperation of the will with the divine agent, the reader could either accept or deny the divine message (Mabry, 1994, p. 136). This occurred through the inner and outer drawing of God (Wiswedel, 1994, p. 53). God worked by external means through the preaching and hearing of the Word (Wiswedel, 1994, p. 53). Through the inward working of the heart, the Holy Spirit persuaded readers to trust and exercise their will to accept the Word's saving message (Wiswedel, 1994, p. 53). The Holy Spirit Wiswedel played a crucial role in Hubmaier's notion of Biblical interpretation since through it, the Word of God becomes "water to all those who thirst for salvation and is made alive in us" (Wiswedel, 1994, p. 53). Without the Spirit, the word was "only a dead letter" (Wiswedel, 1994, p. 53).

Hubmaier, thus, understood the Bible to be this dialectical engagement between Word and Spirit, reader and text, and the divine and human. For him, the Bible was divine truth freely accessible to all who in response to God's grace accepted freely its saving message. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, a person could attain this saving message and either accept or reject it. The final section of this paper will attempt to show how Hubmaier practically envisioned this occurring and what were the results of this understanding of Scripture for his wider project of church reform. As we will attempt to show, this vision of what the Bible is laid at the heart of his preaching on baptism and the Lord's Supper. It was ultimately the truth for which he claimed he died for.

THE BIBLE HUBMAIER PREACHED

The result of Hubmaier's view that the Bible was the voluntary interaction between the human reader and the divine agent ultimately led him to view the Bible as the tool which liberated the individual from the powers of ecclesiastical authority allowing her to freely access the Word of God. Hubmaier's understanding of what Scripture is and what Scripture does can be seen most accurately in his preaching and writings on adult baptism and the Lord's Supper²².

Hubmaier uses almost the same Biblical passages to make his argument for the freedom of the will that Erasmus made in his work.

²¹ In the *Letter to Oecolampad* (p. 71), Hubmaier makes this point where he says, "if ever I should be instructed otherwise by you and those of like mind, who come instructed by the Word of God, May God enlighten us with his Spirit, and may it come to us ever more swiftly".

²² Henceforth this paper uses the term Believer's Baptism when referring to adult baptism, since this was the term that

Hubmaier's doctrine of baptism reflected his understanding of what the Bible was as a whole. Like Scripture, Hubmaier believed that believer's baptism was so clear and self-evident that no human nor heavenly authority could deny it. Hubmaier viewed himself on a mission to remove the cloud of darkness of religious tradition which had enshrouded the pure reading of Scripture²³. In order to achieve this, he appealed to the harmony and concord between Erasmus' greek text, the Aldine Bible, and the german translations on this matter²⁴. Through his excellent knowledge of greek, he challenged and confronted Zwingli's own German version of the New Testament by either questioning his translation or using it against him when it proved his point (HUBMAIER, 1989, p. 98,112).

A clear example of this comes from his criticism of Zwingli's translation of the demonstrative pronoun "such" for "theirs" in Matthew 19:14²⁵. He accused Zwingli of intentionally preferring "to obscure and darken the clear, bright, and plain baptismal Scripture so that one does not see their error and stumbling; rather than to bring forth and demonstrate the true understanding" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 98; Rempel, 1993, p. 58). Adult baptism was, for Hubmaier, biblical because it was stated in the text of Scripture. Attempts to shadow this truth would ultimately be eliminated by the self-evident nature of Scripture independent of whether one used the original Greek and Hebrew or plain German²⁶.

In the same way that he did with the rest of Scripture, Hubmaier framed his discourse of baptism within the context of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the believer. In the same way that the Holy Spirit illumined one's understanding of Scripture, the Holy Spirit moved the reader to accept divine truth and be baptized. Through the life-giving Word, the Holy Spirit activated the will of the believer to accept that Word, be baptized and become part of the community of Christ. As Rollin Armour (1998, p. 30-31) has pointed out "water baptism was an outward and public testimony [...] of the inner baptism of the Spirit". Here one sees again the crucial role Hubmaier's understanding of Scripture played in his understanding of baptism. Through the fire of the Word and the Water of Baptism, the sinner was once again restored and able to have a relationship with God (Mabry, 1994, p. 134).

Despite the working of the Holy Spirit, baptism required prior faith on the part of the individual. Hubmaier attempted to show how prior faith was necessary not only for belief in the Word,

Hubmaier used and that was used in his discussions on this topic.

²³ Hubmaier, *Form of Water Baptism* (p. 390), where he attempts to make a correlation between the believer's Baptism and return to the Bible Truth of the Gospel. He attempts to do this by making a correlation between the women of Revelation 12 with the Anabaptist believers and the dragon with the papal system.

²⁴ See Hubmaier, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, p. 112; Hubmaier, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, p. 98. The author seems to hint that he was using the Old Latin versions in his study of Baptism. He also mentions the "new German version" in his 1525 work on the Christian Baptism of believers. This new version was most likely a reference to Zwingli's translation of the New Testament which appeared between 1525 and 1529.

²⁵ The original text says: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven'". Zwingli attempted to translate "such" for theirs in order to show that infants also had a share in the kingdom of heaven in their natal state. Hubmaier translated the pronoun simply as such in order to demonstrate that participation in the kingdom does not occur at birth, but that one must be like a child to partake of it. For a thorough discussion of the issue between Hubmaier and Zwingli, see Rempel (1993, p. 58).

²⁶ See Hubmaier, *A Public Challenge to all Believers in Christ*, p. 80, where he challenges anyone to use plain and simple German to show him that infant baptism is stated in Scripture.

but also for baptism. Faith for Hubmaier was a prerequisite for baptism, which was the seal of one's acceptance of the Word (Mabry, 1994, p. 167)²⁷. For this reason, before one could be baptized, one "must beforehand have the certain knowledge of a good conscience toward God through the Word of God" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 177). Then the believer needed to change her/his life in recognition of sin and receive the seal of baptism and live a life that produced works of faith (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 129)²⁸.

Hubmaier's belief in the necessity of prior faith before baptism explains his disagreement with the Magisterial reformers on infant baptism. While Zwingli attempted to justify his monergistic understanding of faith and infant baptism by appealing to the continuity between the testaments, Hubmaier saw a radical break between the two Testaments. Using the Old Testament example of circumcision, Zwingli argued that the faith of the infants stood for the faith of the whole community. Baptism represented this same practice in the people of the New Covenant (i.e. the Christian Church)²⁹. Hubmaier, on the other hand, emphasized the role of the individual in responding voluntarily to God's grace (Steinmetz, 1971, p. 130). Such trust could only come from prior faith in the Word and not through the infusion of the Holy Spirit or the corporate body. For Hubmaier, faith could only come from hearing through the Word of God. This hearing came from preaching.

Since infants could not understand this preaching, it followed that they could not receive the pledge of baptism (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 214)³⁰.

Hubmaier's understanding of the necessity of prior faith for the reception of baptism reflected not only the impact his view of the Bible had on his understanding of this subject, but also what he envisioned the Bible as doing. For Hubmaier that was liberating the individual from the structural and spiritual authority of the church. In the case of baptism, rather than focusing on the community's role in having the faith and belief necessary for the infant to receive the ordinance, Hubmaier placed it in the power of the individual's faith relationship with God.

Hubmaier, thus, viewed his mission as bringing the church back to its original purity under the Word. The saving words of the Bible were crucial, in his estimation, for the transformation of the individual and his entrance into newness of life.

This liberating role which Scripture played effected not only his understanding of how an individual entered the body of Christ, but also how an individual remained in the body of Christ and related with other believers. Hubmaier believed that church tradition and dogma had clouded the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. Hubmaier believed that the papal mass was thus the abomination of desolation of Daniel 11:31 and Matthew 24:15 (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 355). He believed this was the case since, in his view, the mass placed the truth of Christ's atoning sacrifice as stated in Scripture into the hands of a priestly hierarchy (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 355). The mass was, thus, not a sacrifice

²⁷ Mabry goes so far as to say that "in all of treatises, when Hubmaier speaks about baptism, he insists upon faith as a prerequisite for baptism" (Mabry, 1994, p. 167).

²⁸ Hubmaier based this on the word order of such passages as Luke 7:29; Mark 1:1; John 1:23; Acts 1:9.

²⁹ For a full treatment of the difference between Hubmaier and Zwingli on Infant baptism and the theological positions that each took in making their case, see Brian Brewer's, *A Pledge of Love: Balthasar Hubmaier and Anabaptist Sacramentalism*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2012), p. 84-141.

³⁰ See also Hubmaier, *A Brief Apologia*, p. 118, where he compares baptizing infants to "hang up a barrel hoop at Easter in hope of future wine which is not to be casked until fall, and of which one does not know whether it will be ruined beforehand by hail, hoar frost, or other kinds of storms".

but a proclamation of the covenant of Christ (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 27).

In the same way the Word of the God was accessible to all through his Word, Hubmaier believed that the bread and blood of Christ were available to all. The bread and wine were not the literal body and blood of Christ that could be monopolized by the institutional church, but a memorial of Christ's universal atoning sacrifice (Rempel, 1993, p. 59). Hubmaier arrived at this conclusion through what he believed to be the correct understanding of the plain meaning of Scripture³¹. As early as the Second Zurich Disputation in 1523, Hubmaier manifested these views on the Lord's Supper.

There he agreed with Zwingli on the conclusion that the mass was a memorial and not a sacrifice but disagreed with his reasoning. Zwingli attempted to translate the Latin *est* (is) in "this is my body" as *significat* (signifies). Hubmaier believed that there was no reason to attempt to violate the simple grammar, since an "is" was always going to be an "is" (Rempel, 1993, p. 58). While Zwingli sought to categorize passages and texts into linguistic tropes, Hubmaier was much more concerned with the text than with literary classifications³². This reflected his assumption that the Bible was so plain that individuals who used the simple rules of grammar and syntax could arrive at its divine message if they approached the text with an attitude of humility and allowed the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts.

Like the word of God, Hubmaier believed that a true understanding concerning the Lord's Supper could only produce a transformation in the life of the believer if accepted in faith. In the same way that without faith it was impossible to properly understand Scripture, Hubmaier believed that it was also impossible without faith to properly participate in the Lord's Supper.

Participation in the Lord's Supper, hence, required the prior exercise of faith in the Word of God since the former was the precondition for the latter.

Hubmaier framed this interaction between the believer and the Lord's Supper in the language of covenant. Hubmaier viewed the Lord's Supper as a covenant which the believer entered upon being baptized (Mabry, 1994, p. 167). In this covenant the believer promised to love God, honor and serve Him alone and subject his carnal and sinful will to His (Mabry, 1994, p. 168).

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper functioned as a sign of love between believers (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 355). Like baptism it consisted in a voluntary commitment to remain in the body of Christ and faithful to His Word. This occurred not by pure human volition, but through the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the community persuading believers to partake in the body of Christ. The taking of bread was done in answer to the Spirit's inner working in the life of the believer and the Supper was, thus, the communal experience in which the faithful participated in the divine banquet of the redeemed (Rempel, 1993, p. 72). The implication of Hubmaier's understanding of the Supper to his ecclesiology were clear. Since the Supper itself was a voluntary act in which the believer received Christ or rejected Christ the living Word, it followed that the church too should function as a voluntary community of the faithful" (Rempel, 1993, p. 44).

³¹ According to Rempel (1993, p. 59), Hubmaier used the same methodology which he employed in his [disputations](#) with Zwingli on the question of believer's baptism. He also used other similar approaches which [emphasized](#) the plain reading of the text. The first was that obscure passages should be interpreted in light of plain [ones](#). The second was that "preceding words should be understood in relation to those that follow them". The last [principle](#) was that passages may be understood by comparing them with similar forms of speech.

³² See Chatfield; MacCulloch (2013, p. 123) e Brewer (2012, p. 93).

This brief summary of Hubmaier's understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper indicate how foundational his understanding of Scripture was for his theology. The Word was a dynamic interaction between the human and divine will. Through the intercessory role of the Holy Spirit, the believer accepted the Word in faith and showed his/her sign of commitment through the pledge of baptism. By being baptized the believer voluntarily entered the body of Christ and through the taking of the bread and wine in good conscience demonstrated his commitment to remain in it.

The result of Hubmaier's encounter with the Bible was a theology that stressed less the power of the church in controlling Christ's presence and more on the role of his absence and presence through the believing body as a whole³³. The end result of this would be the expansion of the notion of Christian freedom and the reduction of the powers of the church. Through his emphasis on the role of prior individual faith, the road was set for a greater emphasis on the individual's relationship with God and on individual liberties. (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 77) would not deny the power of the keys which the church possessed. However, his emphasis on the role of the Spirit in moving a person's heart and in the need of voluntary personal choice in the ordinance of baptism opened the way for broader conceptualizations of Christian Freedom, which would be further refined almost a century later³⁴.

Hubmaier's conviction about what the Bible was and what it did in the life of the individual believer explains his trajectory from a Catholic priest with a prominent future in the Catholic church to his execution as an Anabaptist heretic. It explains not only what Bible he encountered but what Bible he lived. His conviction that Scripture was the plain, simple and authoritative Word of God required him to reject Catholicism over Protestantism. His belief that the saving truth of Scripture could be appropriated through prior faith *via* the exercise of human free will made him reject Protestantism for Anabaptism and be baptized. This branded him a heretic and a blasphemer alienating him from any political support he had left and sealing his fate in a fiery death in March of 1528.

Hubmaier justified these acts by his radical conviction on the assurance that the Word of God would ultimately vindicate itself³⁵. Since Hubmaier believed that the Word of God was truth and truth was ultimately immortal, he believed that it would ultimately win the day (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 42). The wave of persecution coming from both Protestant and Catholics could not stop it from flooding the world (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 308). Hubmaier's experience being tortured under Zwingli had shown him that faith in the divine Word could not be the work of the heretics' tower, but solely a work of God (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 308). This work God accomplished through his Spirit in the hearts and minds of all those who encountered his Word. Even if "imprisoned, scourged, crowned, crucified,

³³ See Hubmaier, *On the Christian Ban*, p. 77.

³⁴ The idea that faith could not be coerced would appear most prominently in Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*, where Locke argued that state coercion of religious dissenters had done more to produce irreligion than religion. In John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 125. Compare this with Hubmaier's own argument in Hubmaier, *On the Freedom of the Will I*, p. 466, where he attempts to show that the reason that the ten commandments of God are written in the subjunctive is because God does not have to "force the righteous person, but only to show him the way, which he then follows freely, joyfully, and without compulsion".

³⁵ This conviction in the Word of God and particularly in the Lord's Supper and Believer's baptism he would maintain even during his imprisonment as he awaited execution in Vienna. See Hubmaier, *Apologia*, p. 556.

and laid into a grave," this Word would "arise again victorious on the third day and reign and triumph forever" (Hubmaier, 1989, p. 42). No one could stop it from liberating the individual from the powers of sin, the coercive authority of the church, superstition and religious bigotry. This was the essence of Hubmaier's understanding of what the Bible was and this is the essence of the Bible he lived and died for.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has concluded that Balthasar Hubmaier understood the Bible as divine truth that was freely accessible to all who in response to God's grace accepted freely its saving message. It has attempted to show that this resulted in an ecclesiology that stressed the role of the individual's relationship with God and the equality of believers.

This understanding of what Bible Hubmaier encountered and how that effected his life as a pastor, preacher, and martyr arose as a result of Hubmaier's interaction with Scholastic, Humanist, and Lutheran scholars. The end product was a Bible that reflected the message that Hubmaier preached during his brief ministry. For Hubmaier, this Bible was the simple and self-evident Word of God written for imperfect humanity. Through the preaching and hearing of the Word, humanity could choose to accept God's offer of salvation. This act of choice derived from Hubmaier's view that faith must be a voluntary act of the will in assent to God's offer of grace through Jesus Christ who "came to invite not to compel men and women to discipleship" (McDill, 2001, p. 73).

In light of this, Hubmaier believed that no human authority could coerce belief, because true faith could only come from the hearth. This act of choice derived not from autonomous human reason like the scholastics, but through the influence of the Holy Spirit liberating the will to choose. Through the power of the Word and the power of the Spirit, individuals could arrive at the truth without coercion because truth was immortal (HUBMAIER, 1989, p. 52).

As a result of this dynamic interaction between the human and divine agent, Hubmaier believed that the Word served not merely as theoretical formation, but was the personal knowledge of Christ, which freed the individual from the powers of sin and human ignorance drawing believers to a life of community with each other and to a personal relationship with Him. The immediate result of this was the liberation of the individual from the power of the church and the growing equality of believers. The long-term consequences of this were the progressive liberation of the individual from the powers of church and state, as well as the rise of individual freedoms of conscience.

Hubmaier's belief and conviction in the truth of Scripture was the hope that he carried throughout his life. This was the hope that he brought to the text in his interpretation of such controversial topics as infant baptism and the Lord's Supper. Through true faith in response to the hearing of the Word, the believer received the water baptism as a pledge of love to God. This pledge of love symbolized her/his entry into the community of the Word. The Lord's Supper symbolized the desire to remain in this community. All things were through the Word and though absent in the Lord's Supper, Christ lived through his church who kept and lived by His Word.

The Bible was the beginning and end of Hubmaier's theology. It was the living truth and would

ultimately vindicate itself. For this truth, Hubmaier paid the ultimate price through a martyr's death. For almost five hundred years, his followers continue to preach the message that though the grass may wither and the flower fade, "the Word of our God endures forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

TRUTH IS IMMORTAL.

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