The rebellious balthasar hubmaier

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by

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This paper will examine the life of Doctor Balthasar Hubmaier with a focus on his choice to rebel against Church and State authority. This review will analyze his actions and his writings to consider how those thoughts affected his actions as he matured. This paper will point out why Balthasar Hubmaier felt justified in his rebellion against the Church and State in his attempt to lead an obedient life for Christ and to lead others as a faithful shepherd of God’s people.

Hubmaier’s Beginnings and Preparation

Balthasar Hubmaier was born in Friedberg, Bavaria in 1480 or possibly 1481. Little is known about his childhood, but he is believed to have been of peasant heritage. He emerges onto the written record in 1503, when he would have been around 23 years old. He enrolled at the University of Freiburg. Hubmaier soon ran short of funds and spent some time serving as a school teacher in Schaffhausen. He reenrolled in 1507 and graduated with his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in 1511 at the age of 31. He proceeded to the University of Ingolstradt, where he studied under the famous Johann Eck. Eck evidently greatly admired Hubmaier, and the admiration appeared to have been mutual. Hubmaier completed his doctorate degree in 1512 and continued to work at the university. In 1515, he was awarded the position of vice-rector at the university. This prestigious position did not satisfy his yearning to preach and to minister. Humbaier accepted the position of pastor in the church of Regensburg in 1516, when he was 36. He was greatly admired for his speaking and ministry in Regensburg. However, his passions and aggressive nature led to strife in Regensburg. Political forces led to Hubmaier to relocate and serve as the pastor in Waldshut. This town and the church of Waldshut became Hubmaier’s home base and he developed and implemented his reformation theology as he served this community. At the age of 41, Hubmaier was recognized as a talented orator, an authoritative pastor, and a brilliant theologian. His writings were more easily distributed in these days as the printing press was available to him. His life experiences as a Catholic priest and university student in Catholic universities gave him a background to critique as he examined Scripture for himself. He reported that he was ignorant of Scripture even though he had a doctorate in Theology. His hunger for God’s Word was evident as his life was transformed from a devout and disciplined catholic priest into an Anabaptist pastor and one of the pre-eminent theologians of Anabaptism. He wrote prolifically and sought out other thinkers to learn from. He corresponded with others who were grappling with Reformation thoughts and presented his thoughts in his writings. His application of this knowledge led him to take actions that labelled him as a heretic in the Catholic Church and a rebel against the secular authorities in the region he lived.

Hubmaier’s Struggle with the Church

Hubmaier began his pastoral ministry as a bright and shining star in terms of his educational and oratory accomplishments. He was appointed to be the cathedral preacher in the town of Regensburg. While he worked in this town, an unusual event occurred and a wooden chapel became widely known as a site where the Virgin Mary conducted miracles for the faithful. Pilgrims flocked to the site and Hubmaier was able to preach to them in a manner that was described as “spellbinding.”[[1]](#footnote-1) His assessment of this cult of the Virgin as degenerate and unhealthy negatively impacted Hubmaier. He left Regensburg, and was given the opportunity to serve as the priest of the upper parish of Waldshut. This village of approximately 1000 people had a slower pace of life than Hubmaier had experienced in Regensburg. Hubmaier used his time to read current theological writings and he appears to have embraced the thoughts proposed by Martin Luther and other Reformers. He corresponded with reformers, and was visited at times by men such as Beatus Rhenanus and Wolfgang Rychard. These men and others explained the humanist positions to Hubmaier, and his writings reflect that he adopted those views. As he continued to examine the New Testament for himself, he apparently embraced the evangelical theology which Erasmus was proposing.[[2]](#footnote-2) This change in his theological beliefs began to set him at odds with the established Catholic Church. He was not alone in this struggle, as other reformers certainly were persecuted by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Strangely enough, Hubmaier found himself again invited to Regensburg to encourage a renewal of enthusiasm for the chapel where the “miracles of the Virgin” had occurred. He wrote to his friend Rychard that he did not care much for leading processions to the chapel, but valued preaching from Luke’s gospel. He left Regensburg and returned to Waldshut.

Hubmaier specifically began to challenge Catholic theology as he compared the activities of Catholicism with what he read in Scripture. He began to use his gifting in preaching to attack his previous theology. A report from the Bishop of Constance explained how Hubmaier had preached that Catholic priests were “murderers of men’s souls and priests of Satan who preached falsehoods, the dreams of monks and fathers of the Church, withholding the gospel from men.”[[3]](#footnote-3) His once mentor and friend Eck presented a memorandum to the Pope which placed Hubmaier under suspicion of heresy, along with Zwingli and others who proposed reformation. The formidable forces of the established Church had begun to align against Hubmaier.

Hubmaier is believed to have been very interested in the sixty-seven articles which Huldrych Zwingli wrote and published in 1522. Zwingli is regarded as a key Swiss reformer who was based in the influential city of Zurich. Zwingli and Hubmaier had informal discussions and shared their views on pedobaptsim, the missionary and baptismal commands of Jesus in Mark 16, and the question of the relation of repentance to the forgiveness of sins seen in Luke 24:27.[[4]](#footnote-4) They appeared to have respect for each other’s opinions and were in agreement on many items.

Zwingli hosted disputations in 1523 where scholars and theologians were invited to share their views on key beliefs.[[5]](#footnote-5) Hubmaier was invited to the second disputation and he spoke five times during the proceedings. He presented positions which reflected the majority opinion of those involved in the disputations. He spoke against images and the mass in their present form, that the Lord’s Supper was a memorial rather than a sacrifice, and that the Lord’s Supper should be conducted in the local vernacular rather than in Latin.

Hubmaier issued his first published work, *The Eighteen Articles,[[6]](#footnote-6)* in 1524 and it appears he was influenced by the writings of Zwingli. He began to work to reform the religious life in Waldshut in an open manner. It was reported that he shared meat with the Mayor during the New Year’s Fast as he demonstrated his opposition to the Catholic fasts. He led his congregation to remove the “images” from inside the church building. His articles spoke against celibacy for priests and that each Christian had the duty to search Scripture themselves. They condemned current practices such as deeds of penance, candles, and holy water. They also proposed that priests should preach the Word of God and that this should be done in the vernacular of the local congregation.

Political events required Hubmaier to leave Waldshut during 1524 and spend time in exile in Schaffhausen. He used that time to issue more writings, *An Earnest Christian Petition,[[7]](#footnote-7) Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them,[[8]](#footnote-8)* and *Axiomata.[[9]](#footnote-9)* He proposed that men should be granted the liberty to choose their religious beliefs and that God was the correct authority to discipline each man for his beliefs. These writings raised Hubmaier to the forefront of supporters of the concept of religious freedom. In *Axiomata,* Hubmaier joined into an argument which was raging between Eck and Zwingli. Eck felt that papal authority should judge religious disputes while Zwingli and Hubmaier asserted that God’s Word should be the only guiding principle in deciding between diverging viewpoints in faith and practices.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In late 1524, Hubmaier again returned to Waldshut. It seems that he and Zwingli had come to a disagreement over infant baptism. Hubmaier attempted to reach out to Zwingli so that they could reason together but it appears that this matter and the words they used created a divide between them. In January of 1525, Hubmaier preached that no child should be baptized but should be blessed instead, thus beginning his reforms against pedobaptsim. On January 13, 1525, Hubmaier married Elsbeth Hügline; a bold move for a Catholic priest. In March of 1525, Hubmaier was baptized by Wilhelm Reublin and became part of the Anabaptist movement. Soon after, he began baptizing the congregation in Waldshut and “put out” those of the congregation who would not allow themselves to be baptized. These bold steps indicate that Hubmaier had arrived at conclusions about how church life was supposed to be conducted and was moving forcefully forward.

At the end of 1525, Hubmaier had to flee the town as the civil authorities sent in soldiers to bring the town back under their control. Hubmaier attempted to secretly enter Zurich and was immediately arrested, charged with heresy and tortured. He recanted his beliefs regarding infant baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He was compelled to speak after Zwingli preached and express his remorse on December 22, 1525. Instead, he boldly affirmed his prior beliefs. He was again arrested and tortured, and he again recanted. He was released in March, 1526 and he moved to Augsburg and then Nikolsburg. He renewed his work of sharing Anabaptist ideals and writing articles which explained those thoughts to the theologians of the day. Nikolsburg saw tremendous adoption of Anabaptist ideas during Hubmaier’s time in the town. He continued to advocate his belief that infant baptism was improper and that many of the catholic ordinances and practices had no basis in Scripture.

Hubmaier was quite bold as he worked to speak out against the Catholic Church that he had been trained within. As he read Scripture, he changed the way he lead worship, the rituals which were used and the definitions that had been in place for centuries. His proactive efforts were one of his unique traits. He was pursued and tortured by that same Church. He tried to reason with the ecclesiastical leaders and argued that men should have the right to choose to accept God or reject him. He felt that men who had other religions should not be punished for their beliefs but should be allowed to consider their folly and let the Holy Spirit work to convince them of their need for God.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Hubmaier’s Struggle with the State

Hubmaier first experienced political trials as he attempted to push the Jewish community out of Regensburg in 1518. He actively spoke against the Jews and worked to inspire others to push the Jews out of Regensburg. He proclaimed the fees charged by the Jews to be usurious and against the Law of Moses. He was also offended that the Jews did not properly venerate Mary. The city of Regensburg was under the control of the ruling family of Austria, the Habsburgs. It had been the tradition that the Jews were under the protection of the Emperor. The Austrian Emperor Maximillian directed to the City Council of Regensburg to expel Hubmaier from his position, accusing him of insurrection. Hubmaier showed his political savvy and personal influence as the local leaders were reluctant to take action against him but instead advocated for him with the imperial government. Fortunately for Hubmaier, the Emperor died and the people of Regensburg took matters into their own hands, and destroyed the synagogue in town, forcing the Jews to flee the city.

In 1522, Hubmaier helped lead an effort to oppose the Austrian emperor and his Archduke Ferdinand. By 1523, the leaders of Waldshut were acting in defiance of Austrian officials and aligning themselves with the Swiss Confederation. Hubmaier was accused by the Austrian government of inciting the people to disobedience, defying the authority of the government, preaching that the people of Waldshut should withhold paying taxes, tithes, and rents to the government by the Austrian government. Between 1523 and 1525, the authorities repeatedly demanded that Waldshut officials turn Hubmaier over to them, but the local authorities refused to do so. In 1524, Archduke Ferdinand ordered his military to Waldshut to force the town into obedience. However, the peasants in the territory of Landgrave of Stühlingen, located near Waldshut, rebelled against Austria. The peasants gathered in large numbers and their presence protected Waldshut from the Austrian military forces.

At one point, the Swabian Union, one of the Germanic city-states, offered to mediate between Waldshut and the Austrians. The city leaders again refused, emboldened by the peasant army that had established itself around Waldshut. The peasants in the region actively rebelled and the Peasant War broke out in March of 1525. The Austrian accused Hubmaier of authoring the Peasants declarations. These documents[[12]](#footnote-12) outlined an attempt to restructure authority and remove the traditional rights of the aristocracy and empower the peasants. This rebellion was short-lived. The peasants defending Waldshut were defeated in November of 1525, and the civil authorities submitted to Austria in December of 1525. Hubmaier fled, never to return.

In March of 1526, the Austrian Habsburgs issued decrees that following Anabaptist ideals would be punishable by death. Ferdinand became King of Bavaria and he acted to have Hubmaier extradited and imprisoned in the summer of 1527. Ferdinand finally closed his case against Hubmaier when he was executed by being burned at the stake in March of 1528.

Even though Hubmaier perished at the hands of the secular authorities, he had asserted that it is proper for governments to exercise their authorities.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hubmaier helped us understand his thoughts as he wrote articles such as *On the Sword,* where he explained that secular authority was supposed to wield its sword of authority according to the office it was given by the Lord.[[14]](#footnote-14) His actions demonstrate that he was willing to resist oppressive authorities as he sought to further liberties for those to whom he ministered.

Conclusion

Hubmaier was a uniquely created man who relentlessly endeavored to understand what God’s Word said and how it applied to the Church and God’s people. He agreed that the Church and the State were established by God’s hand, but worked to confront injustice and religious error where he saw it, without regard to the personal cost he would pay for that resistance. It appears that he was active in assisting and encouraging people to rebel against civil authorities. He continually studied and attempted to hear others speak about their interpretations of Scripture, and he asserted his understandings without regard for tradition. He lived out his belief that Truth is Immortal, which he used as a tagline to his writings.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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1. Torsten Bergsten, and William Roscoe Estep. *Balthasar Hubmaier: Anabaptist theologian and martyr.* Valley Forge, PA.: Judson Press, 1978, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew P. Klager, *“Balthasar Hubmaier's Use of the Church Fathers: Availability, Access and Interaction."* Mennonite Quarterly Review 84, no. 1: 5. Supplemental Index, EBSCOhost (accessed July 2, 2015), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Leland Harder and Konrad Grebel. *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*. Herald Press, 1985, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Balthasar Hubmaier, John Howard Yoder, and H. Wayne Pipkin. *Balthasar Hubmaier: theologian of Anabaptism*: Scottdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1989, 30-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 35-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 58-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 49-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Torsten Bergsten, and William Roscoe Estep. *Balthasar Hubmaier: Anabaptist theologian and martyr*, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Balthasar Hubmaier, John Howard Yoder, and H. Wayne Pipkin. *Balthasar Hubmaier: theologian of Anabaptism*, 58-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The Letter of Articles,* and the *Outline Constitution* are referred to by Vicar-General Fabri as having been authored or edited by Hubmaier. Fabri reported that copies of these documents were found in Hubmaier’s records that were seized in Waldshut, written in his own hand. The documents are not available for review but would have indicated a deep involvement by Hubmaier in the rebellion. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kirk R. MacGregor, *"Hubmaier's Death and the Threat of a Free State Church."* Church History & Religious Culture 91, no. 3/4: 321-348. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed July 2, 2015), 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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