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## *Balthasar Hubmaier's Doctrine of Justification by Faith<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

The question concerning the relationship between Anabaptist soteriology and the sixteenth-century Protestant understanding of *sola fide* has been asked periodically. Four typical answers to that question have been offered. First, the Bender school of confessional Anabaptist scholars appearing in the first half of the twentieth century contended that there existed no substantial difference on orthodox doctrines, such as soteriology, between the evangelical Anabaptists (represented primarily by the Swiss Brethren and their influence) and the Magisterial Reformers. The evidence offered most often for that position points to the conspicuous absence of emphasis on those orthodox doctrines in Anabaptist writings. Further, the historical evidence indicates that the initial disruption between Zwingli and those that would become Anabaptists had nothing to do with particular foundational doctrines such as soteriology.

Harold Bender noted the rise of this assessment in his foundational essay "The Anabaptist Vision." Bender writes that there was a novel movement in his day that viewed the Anabaptists as "the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus [made] it a consistent evangelical Protestantism."<sup>2</sup> Another essay published in a volume along with Bender's by Fritz Blanke entitled "Anabaptism and the Reformation" indicates that position. In dealing with the Schleithem Confession, Blanke notes that it is "striking that these articles say nothing about God, Jesus Christ, and justification by faith." His explanation follows: "Because the men who adopted this confession were in agreement with Luther and Zwingli concerning all

<sup>1</sup>The information in this article is taken directly from this author's dissertation which contains a more complete assessment of early Anabaptist doctrines of justification, including those of Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, and Hans Denck in addition to that of Balthasar Hubmaier. Michael Wayne Whitlock, "Justification by Faith and Early Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in Guy F. Hershberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 37.

of these central truths. . . . The Schleithem Confession deals only with those points in which Anabaptism and the Reformation differ.”<sup>3</sup>

The other three answers offered to the issue of Anabaptism and justification, however, reflect the more recent prevailing consensus contending that the Anabaptists did not reflect a *sola fide* understanding of justification. Typically, those positions are communicated in three different theses. First, some scholars note that Anabaptist anthropology centered on a freedom of the will in opposition to the Magisterial Reformers' assertion that the human will was bound. In a recent article in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Matthew Eaton argues that for Balthasar Hubmaier anthropology is the key to understanding his soteriology.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately Eaton's argument is that restoration of human freedom allows the believer to participate in the redemptive process by obedience. The argument offers an irreconcilable distinction in the respective anthropologies that preclude the Anabaptists from holding to a Protestant understanding of justification by faith.

The second offered thesis highlights the Anabaptist insistence on a required moral life as indicative of salvation. The argument contends that the Anabaptist position is in conflict with the purely forensic understanding of the Protestants. Hans-Jürgen Goertz advocates this position in his monograph *The Anabaptists*. He argues that Anabaptist soteriology amalgamates justification and sanctification. In his discussion of what he terms “moral improvement” which commingles both “justification and holiness,” he defines faith as “the expression of a better life.” He later notes in his discussion of Denck's soteriology that “salvation was not merely awarded to man. In contrast to the reformers' ideas, it was much more incumbent upon man to follow the path of salvation.”<sup>5</sup>

The third thesis notes the overt emphasis in Anabaptist writings on the changed nature of the believer. The argument points to what appears to be the Anabaptist support for an ontological change in the believer which directly conflicted with a forensic change in status as the basis of justification by faith. This thesis is most clearly argued by Alvin Beachy in his work *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation*. Beachy states, “[G]race is for the Radical Reformers not so much a forensic change in status before God as it is an ontological change within the individual believer. Grace is God's act whereby He renews the divine image in man through the Holy Spirit and makes the believer a participant in the divine nature.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Fritz Blanke, “Anabaptism and the Reformation” in Hershberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, 65.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Eaton, “Toward an Anabaptist Covenantal Soteriology: A Dialogue with Balthasar Hubmaier and Contemporary Pauline Scholarship,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 1 (January 2010): 67-93.

<sup>5</sup>Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans., Trevor Johnson, Christianity and Society in the Modern World (London: Routledge, 1996), 59-61.

<sup>6</sup>Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation*, Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1977), 4, 5.

Assessing the sixteenth-century Anabaptist doctrine or doctrines on formal soteriology has proven difficult. The difficulty lies in the apparent lack of emphasis on soteriology among Anabaptist writings. Robert Friedmann claims that this elemental doctrine “is not and cannot be a major theme in Anabaptist thought.”<sup>7</sup> The troubling aspect in that notion is that while overt systematic statements concerning soteriology are not abundant in Anabaptist writings, the Anabaptist understanding of soteriology forms a foundation for primary Anabaptist emphases. Their teaching concerning believer’s baptism, perhaps the most significant aspect of Anabaptist doctrine, raises the unavoidable question of soteriology. The Anabaptist contention that the church is the gathered congregation of the saved also necessitates an assessment of soteriology. Thus, the question is unavoidable in examining Anabaptist doctrine.

Hubmaier, the most thoroughly trained Anabaptist theologian, presents researchers with more material for consideration than any of the other early Anabaptists. Hubmaier’s close contact with Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren as well as his theological acumen make him indispensable in any survey of Anabaptist theology. Although his number of writings pale in comparison to the voluminous offerings of other Reformers such as Luther or Calvin, Hubmaier nonetheless provides clear thought concerning his doctrine of justification. This article will argue that Hubmaier held to justification by faith in concert with the sixteenth-century Protestant position by indicating Hubmaier’s adherence to the definitive points of the Protestant position. However, Hubmaier’s doctrine provided a corrective to those sixteenth-century evangelicals that might have looked to justification by faith alone as a loophole in their obligation to live a life governed by God’s commands.

### **Four Protestant Tenets of Justification by Faith**

Four fundamental tenets can be stated that adequately represent the core of the sixteenth-century Protestant understanding of justification by faith alone.<sup>8</sup> First, human beings in their fallen state are incapable of effecting their own justification by any meritorious action. Second, justification of the individual is accomplished based on the righteousness of Christ alone, extrinsic to the believer. Third, faith denotes a subjective trust or confidence in Christ alone for justification. Fourth, justification and regeneration or sanctification are distinct aspects of soteriology and the former does not depend on the latter.<sup>9</sup> Each of these four requires brief discussion.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 78.

<sup>8</sup>For a more thorough discussion of these four tenets see Whitlock, “Justification by Faith and Early Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism,” 15-32.

<sup>9</sup>The wording of this fourth tenet does not mean to suggest that regeneration and sanctification are necessarily synonymous terms. Nonetheless they are often viewed closely within the discussion concerning justification. Certainly, regeneration has an instantaneous

The first tenet provides the ground on which to build. Louis Bouyer, the twentieth-century Catholic theologian, began his ministry as a Lutheran before converting to Catholicism in the 1930s. In his book *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, Bouyer identifies what he considers the heart of Protestantism and argues for a commonality with Catholicism. For Bouyer the primary issue is soteriological.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Bouyer correctly identifies the heart of the matter; however, Bouyer mistakenly identifies a one-to-one correspondence between the Catholic and Protestant understandings of grace. Correctly he considers the notion that all of man's activity is a matter of grace; however, soteriologically, Bouyer's understanding leaves the Scholastic notions of cooperative and operative grace on the table. The Protestant understanding of justification denies any ability of the sinner to cooperate actively with God's grace in any sort of meritorious way. That issue provides the *raison d'être* for the Magisterial Protestant rejection of free will.

One might contend that the Magisterial Reformers incorrectly identified free will as antithetical to justification by faith (as indeed this current author has contended<sup>11</sup>), but the Reformers believed it to be so. The point emphasizes that the free will debate was soteriological. The core issue was not whether God was sovereign over human choice but whether human beings were capable of meritorious activity. The Council of Trent addresses that issue within Protestant thought highlighting the import. Canon four of the sixth session on justification states:

If anyone says that man's free will moved and aroused by God, by assenting to God's call and action, in no way cooperates toward disposing and preparing itself to obtain the grace of justification, that it cannot refuse its assent if it wishes, but that, as something inanimate, it does nothing whatever and is merely passive, let him be anathema.<sup>12</sup>

aspect to it and sanctification contains a processional element in soteriology. However, the two terms can be said to be related in the sense that sanctification also has an instantaneous element to it. The believer is sanctified in Christ and is properly called a saint in New Testament terminology. While regeneration refers to the new birth, and sanctification might be said to refer to a conformity to the image of Christ, they share a fundamental common element, namely the notion of producing a new work intrinsic to the believer. The necessary element in this tenet is that whatever righteousness God begins to form within the believer whether be an instantaneous new birth or a developing holiness; neither can form the basis for the declaration of justification.

<sup>10</sup>Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, trans. A. V. Littledale (London: Harvill, 1956), 17.

<sup>11</sup>Whitlock, "Justification by Faith and Early Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism," 192-206.

<sup>12</sup>*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans., Schroeder H. J. (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1978), 42-43. The Council's statement on justification is definitively helpful in discussing these four tenets. The sixteenth-century Catholic response to the Reformation highlights the central distinctions between the Catholic and Protestant views of justification.

The sixteenth-century Catholic statement highlights two important factors. First, the statement relates the issue of cooperation of the will in justification to the free will debate, verifying the heart of the free will issue for sixteenth-century Protestants. Second, the statement notes the real issue in the Protestant doctrine, namely that the will of the human being remains passive, unable to move itself actively in cooperation with the grace of God thereby effecting justification. That remains the true heart of the matter and the substance of the first fundamental tenet, namely that human beings in their fallen state are incapable of effecting their own justification by any meritorious action.

That very condition of the sinner leaves him wanting for a righteousness that provides a right basis for justification. The second tenet of justification by faith addresses that need. Justification of the individual is accomplished based on the righteousness of Christ alone, extrinsic to the believer. The tenet emphasizes two important elements. First, the only justifying righteousness belongs to Christ. The basis for justification is provided only in Christ. His character and work alone make provision. The atoning work of Christ cannot be coupled with any other means in forming the basis for justification. Traditionally the terminology of “the imputation of the righteousness of Christ” communicates the point, meaning that God imputes, counts, or credits the righteousness belonging to Christ to the believer. God accepts the righteousness of Christ instead of the believer’s own righteousness, declaring the believer just on account of Christ.

The Council of Trent clarifies the distinction, thereby aiding definition. Trent states, “Hence, to those who work well *unto the end* and trust in God, eternal life is to be offered, both as a grace promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and as a reward promised by God himself, to be faithfully given to their good works and merits.”<sup>13</sup> The statement suggests an insufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross alone requiring an added merit. Certainly the promise made is through Christ, and the statement continues to note that Christ merits eternal life, yet justification remains a reward for the individual’s good works which belong to them in Christ. Christ’s work on the cross to save the individual lacks the necessary continuing work of Christ in the individual to do righteous works which leads to the declaration of justification. With the statement the Council of Trent distinguishes its view from the Protestant principle that Christ’s righteousness alone forms the basis for justification.

The other important element in the second tenet is that the righteous basis for justification remains extrinsic to the believer. As noted above in considering the statement from the Council of Trent which suggests that justification occurs according to the promise of God through Christ and as a reward, the Council’s position indicates that Christ must continue to work righteousness in the believer. God infuses the righteousness of Christ

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 41.

in the believer, rendering the righteousness necessary for justification the actual internal possession of the believer. God declares the believer to be just precisely because the believer is just. Justification by faith alone rejects that idea. Justifying righteousness remains extrinsic to the believer. God considers the believer righteous for Christ's sake based on Christ's righteousness rather than imparting righteousness to the believer.

The Council of Trent responded to this core element in the Protestant doctrine by anathematizing those who held to the notion. Canon eleven states:

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and *the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost*, and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema.<sup>14</sup>

The canon points to "the sole imputation of the justice of Christ" as an inadequate basis for justification. The statement requires that "the grace and the charity" remain in the believer. Again, the important distinction here is that the basis for justification resides within the believer and is not found in the righteousness of Christ alone.

The Protestant terminology of "justification by faith alone" references the question as to why God counts that extraneous righteousness of Christ on the believer's behalf. God does so only in response to faith. The third tenet of justification by faith alone seeks to define faith. Faith denotes a subjective confidence in Christ alone for justification. The Protestant understanding of faith refers only to the confident assurance that God has made provision for sins through Christ for the sake of Christ alone. Only in response to the believer's personal confidence in the righteous atoning work of Christ does God justify the sinner.

The Council of Trent targeted the Protestant understanding of faith at a couple of points in its decree on justification. First, in chapter nine the Council stated, "It must not be said that sins are forgiven or have been forgiven to anyone who boasts of his confidence and certainty of the remission of sins, resting on that alone."<sup>15</sup> The sixteenth-century Protestants defined faith in exactly that way, namely that justification results from confidence that God forgives sins in Christ. The second statement targeting the element of faith in Protestant thought by the council appears in Canon twelve. The canon states, "If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema."<sup>16</sup> Here Trent refers to

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 43.

the Protestant equation of justifying faith with “confidence in divine mercy.” The statement proves helpful in defining the meaning of this third tenet of justification by faith alone, namely that faith denotes a subjective confidence in Christ alone for justification.

Closely connected to the second tenet and in some sense flowing from the first three, the fourth fundamental tenet requires distinction between justification and regeneration. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers understood that justification is not a lone event. The new birth accompanies justification, and true faith will produce works that serve the sanctification of the believer. Yet, the Protestant doctrine adamantly maintains that while they are simultaneous, regeneration must remain distinct from justification. Alister McGrath refers to this central idea as “the most reliable *historical* characterisation of Protestant doctrines of justification.”<sup>17</sup> The imperative thought is that if God makes the sinner righteous and then declares him to be just based on the righteousness of God worked in the believer then justification by faith alone is meaningless. The doctrine becomes “justification by making righteous alone.”

The Council of Trent takes aim at that Protestant distinction between justification and regeneration or sanctification with a direct statement concerning the content of justification in chapter seven of their decree on justification. The council defines justification as “not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of grace.”<sup>18</sup> The terms “sanctification” and “inward renewal” both appear as being aspects of justification itself. No sense of one event containing both justification and renewal is present in the statement. The council draws no distinction between justification and sanctification or renewal.

These definitive tenets form the essential core of the sixteenth-century Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone. If these elements can be shown to be present in sixteenth-century Anabaptist thought as well, then one can conclude that the Anabaptists also held to justification by faith alone. Balthasar Hubmaier provides an exemplar of Anabaptist thought that adheres clearly to those four tenets.

### **Balthasar Hubmaier’s Doctrine of Justification**

Hardly any general history of the Reformation exists without some reference to Hubmaier; however, Torsten Bergsten’s 1962 biography, which appeared in English in 1978, remains the definitive treatment of Hubmaier’s life.<sup>19</sup> The more substantial treatments of Hubmaier’s soteriology include Alvin Beachy’s 1977 monograph *The Concept of Grace in the Radical*

<sup>17</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 210.

<sup>18</sup>*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 33.

<sup>19</sup>Torsten Bergsten, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Anabaptist Theologian and Martyr* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978).



*Reformation*, in which he dedicates a substantial amount of space considering Hubmaier's soteriology.<sup>20</sup> Beachy concludes that the Anabaptist view of grace requires an ontological change as opposed to mere change of status as in a forensic understanding of justification. A 1978 article by William Estep entitled "The Anabaptist View of Salvation" focuses on Hubmaier as well.<sup>21</sup> While the title indicates a general consideration of Anabaptist soteriology, Estep primarily confines his examination to Hubmaier, and concludes that Hubmaier emphasizes the new birth over faith alone, although Estep does not dismiss Hubmaier's understanding of justification as being by faith alone. Estep does, however, leave the question concerning the necessity of works in Hubmaier's thought unanswered. Eddie Mabry's 1998 monograph entitled *Balthasar Hubmaier's Understanding of Faith* dedicates a chapter to saving faith.<sup>22</sup> He notes that saving faith for Hubmaier consists in knowledge of justification, yet faith arises out of an initial turning toward God facilitated in human self capacity. Emir Caner wrote an article entitled "Balthasar Hubmaier and his Theological Participation in the Reformation: Ecclesiology and Soteriology" in 2003.<sup>23</sup> Uniquely, Caner overtly advocates the commonality between Hubmaier and the prevailing Protestant view of salvation in the Reformation. Although, Caner focuses on Hubmaier's view of the new birth over and above a view of forensic justification. Matthew Eaton contributes a more recent consideration in a 2010 article entitled "Toward an Anabaptist Covenantal Soteriology: A Dialogue with Balthasar Hubmaier and Contemporary Pauline Scholarship."<sup>24</sup> He concludes that Hubmaier's soteriology conflates grace and cooperation facilitated by human freedom. Each of these considerations of Hubmaier's soteriology adopts a different method of examination and intends a different purpose than the survey contained here. Most of them arrive at a different conclusion. None of them exhaust the topic.<sup>25</sup> The survey that follows does not exhaust the topic either; however, the attempt is offered as a fresh look at Hubmaier's understanding of justification specifically.

Hubmaier's doctrine of justification should be understood in terms of three words that repeat in his writings.<sup>26</sup> The three terms appear together

<sup>20</sup>Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation*.

<sup>21</sup>William Roscoe Estep, "The Anabaptist View of Salvation," *SWJT* 20, no. 2 (1978): 32-49.

<sup>22</sup>Eddie Mabry, *Balthasar Hubmaier's Understanding of Faith* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup>Emir Caner, "Balthasar Hubmaier and His Theological Participation in the Reformation: Ecclesiology and Soteriology," *Faith and Mission* 21, no. 1 (2003): 32-66.

<sup>24</sup>Eaton, "Toward an Anabaptist Covenantal Soteriology: A Dialogue with Balthasar Hubmaier and Contemporary Pauline Scholarship," 67-93.

<sup>25</sup>A more recent consideration has been offered by Changkyu Kim, *Balthasar Hubmaier's Doctrine of Salvation in Dynamic and Relational Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013). Kim's work appeared too late to be included in this current survey.

<sup>26</sup>The core of the information included here on Balthasar Hubmaier was originally presented in an unpublished paper by this author to Dr. Paige Patterson and a PhD research seminar on the Radical Reformation at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in

in *On the Christian Baptism of Believers* forming a summary statement of his doctrine of justification. Hubmaier writes, “Accordingly, when he [the believer] recognizes [*erkenet*] this grace and kindness, he surrenders [*ergibt*] himself to God and commits [*verpflicht*] himself internally in his heart to live a new life according to the rule of Christ.”<sup>27</sup> These three terms convey the essence of Hubmaier’s doctrine of justification while also communicating the substance of the four fundamental tenets of justification by faith traced throughout this survey. Explicating Hubmaier’s meaning in each of the three terms provides adequate data to highlight his commitment to justification by faith alone.

Pipkin and Yoder translate *erkenet* as “recognizes.” This word provides the first essential aspect of Hubmaier’s understanding. Here Hubmaier focuses on the sinner’s recognition of his depravity before God. Hubmaier conveys the idea in *Summa of the Entire Christian Life*, his first published thoughts as an Anabaptist.<sup>28</sup> Hubmaier writes:

Now it belongs to a change of life that we look into our hearts, and that we remember our deeds and our omissions. . . . Yes there is no health in us but rather poison, wounds, and all impurity, which cling to us from the beginning because we are conceived and born in sin. . . . Furthermore, a person finds himself neither help, comfort, nor medicine with which he could help himself. Therefore he must despair of himself and lose heart like the man who had fallen among killers, such a miserable little thing is the person who ponders and recognizes [*erkenet*] himself.<sup>29</sup>

This thought provides the epicenter of justification in Hubmaier’s writing. The individual sinner’s right standing before God must begin with recognition. Eddie Mabry notes that this knowledge is an intimate or even “supernatural knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> The remaining aspects of justification grow from the soil of the sinner’s recognition of his own utter corruption and inability before God. This aspect is foundational for Hubmaier, because at this very point the curse of the Fall begins to diminish. As Hubmaier explains in his first treatise on *Freedom of the Will*, man suffers his lost condition in his ignorance, because “the soul, through eating of the forbidden tree lost the recognition of good and evil in the sight of God.”<sup>31</sup> Without regaining this recognition the sinner remains ignorant of his standing before God and what He requires, continuing in a lost condition incapacitated before God.

November 2008, and as noted above, more recently in this author’s dissertation.

<sup>27</sup>H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 117.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>30</sup>Mabry, *Balthasar Hubmaier’s Understanding of Faith*, 38.

<sup>31</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 443.

The ignorance of the human condition devastates the sinner and constitutes an arch-sinfulness, namely self-righteousness. Here the wisdom of God collides with the wisdom of the world. The world rejects this recognition because it “does not like this, because it does not want to be a fool or an evil-doer, but to be wise, clever, righteous, just, and spiritual in its own works . . . and consequently despises the unattractive, plain, and simple rule of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Hubmaier further comments on this attitude before God in noting, “There is nothing that God’s grace cannot tolerate or observe less than presumptuous merits of our own.”<sup>33</sup> Here the reader might note the parallel in Luther’s thought concerning the justification of God. According to Luther, faith properly glorifies God because faith acknowledges God as truthful and in the sinner’s justification of God as true, the sinner himself is justified.<sup>34</sup> Hubmaier’s language bends toward that thought as well. The sinner’s corrupted nature leads to an ignorance that invokes the sinner to dependency on his own merit. God abhors the sinner’s self dependency. Man’s incapacity goes beyond an inability to do what is required; indeed even the attempt at merit is sin.

That ignorance of his own condition from God’s perspective ensures man’s complete inability to effect his own justification. In his catechism, Hubmaier responds to a comment concerning Scripture’s affirmation of human ability for doing good by contending that Scripture pictures man’s ability before the Fall and after regeneration, and he makes it clear that man forfeited his free ability as a creature in the *imago dei* to be righteous. In the Fall the image “has been dimmed, captured, and bound by Adam’s disobedience,” leaving the sinner “mired” in helplessness. The forfeiture was so devastating “that all our righteousness can be likened to the garment of a defiled woman.”<sup>35</sup> The only help comes from Christ who can awaken the sinner from slumber. The awakening comes in the sinner’s recognition of his own condition “through the Word of God.”<sup>36</sup>

The sinner’s recognition of his own corruption and inability to overcome his condition brings despair. The recognition of the sinner, however, is two-fold. Not only does he recognize his own desperation, he also recognizes that help must come from outside himself. He needs another righteousness:

From this it follows that the water baptism of John is nothing but a public testimony which the person receives and gives because he confesses and *recognizes* that he is a miserable sinner, who cannot help himself nor give himself counsel, who does nothing good but that all his righteousness is corrupt and reproachable. For that reason he despairs of himself. He must also be damned

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 361.

<sup>34</sup>Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 284–85.

<sup>35</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 360.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 117.

eternally, *were not a foreign righteousness to come to his help*. [emphasis added].<sup>37</sup>

Satisfactory righteousness is not within the sinner's ability. The recognition leads to despair at the reality of condemnation; however, the despairing sinner finds the necessary righteousness in another. Hubmaier continues his illustration from John's baptism to note that the required righteousness belongs to Christ. "Now John is there and points him [the sinner] to Christ, that in him he will find discharge of his sins, rest, peace, and security so that he not remain in despair."<sup>38</sup> Help for the despairing sinner must come from outside of himself. The only hope the believer finds available is external to himself in Christ.

Toward the end of *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, Hubmaier describes this turning to Christ as a critically wounded man turning to the physician for healing. Christ, the physician, offers healing to the man who has entrusted himself to the physician's care. Because the wounded man confesses his malady before God, he hopes by faith "that God will not hold him to account for such weakness and sickness to eternal damnation because he surrendered himself to the physician Jesus and has committed his sickness to him to be healed." God responds in mercy for the sake of Christ and "grants him his request and thus forgives [his] sin through Jesus Christ our Lord."<sup>39</sup> For Christ's sake God does not impute the corruption of the believer as sin. God's favor rests on Christ, and his mediatorial work secures the favor of God toward the sinner submitting for healing as well. The wounded man offers nothing acceptable to God; however, the believer submitted to Christ finds acceptance because of Christ alone.

The healing offered to the believer by Christ issues from Christ's death on the sinner's behalf. The justification of the sinner depends upon the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. In commenting on the Lord's Supper Hubmaier emphasizes that the Supper is in memoriam of Christ's suffering reminding the believer "that he shed his blood and distributed it on the cross to all believers for the washing away of our sins."<sup>40</sup> Hubmaier contends that the gospel heals because "the Law is now fulfilled in Christ, who has paid the debt of sin for us and has already vanquished death, devil, and hell."<sup>41</sup> Christ was delivered by God "to death for our sake, that sin might be paid for."<sup>42</sup> Hubmaier's terminology notes the satisfaction of righteous demands in Christ as well as the substitutionary nature of Christ's act for the believer. The sinner finds forgiveness in Christ alone, possessing no self merit before God. As noted above any attempt to offer merit before God is itself sinful.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 347.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 348.

The believer discovers in his *Erkennung* the absolute impossibility of self-righteousness, and recognizes that he must submit in his miserable condition to Christ in whom alone righteousness can be found. Man's saving response to his recognition is described in Hubmaier's second of the definitive terms.

After the sinner recognizes his desperation and where he might find healing, he must surrender himself to the physician. Pipkin and Yoder translate *ergeben* as "surrender." When the critically wounded man realizes that his self-made infirmary is undermined by his own poisoned nature, he has only one hope, namely to surrender to Christ for healing. That surrender or *Ergebung* carries the substance of the third tenet of justification by faith, namely faith as a confident trust.

For Hubmaier, faith believes what the Word has demonstrated. The Word of God confronts the sinner with his own condition and points him to Christ. Before the sinner responds in faith "all these teachings which reveal the sickness and point to the physician, are letter and they kill," yet, when believed they usher in life. "But by faith the Spirit makes them alive."<sup>43</sup> This is the point of justification for the believer. Hubmaier states the matter directly in what might be termed a core statement of justification by faith alone:

If now a person who has been brought through the Word of God to recognition of his sin confesses himself to be a sinner, and is further taught by the Word of God that he should call upon God the Father for the forgiveness of his sin for the sake of Christ, and if he does that in *faith and does not doubt anything, then God has cleansed his heart in this faith and trust and has remitted all his sin* [emphasis added].<sup>44</sup>

Hubmaier's thought is straightforward. The remission of sins and consequently right standing before God occur at the moment of faith. One might find it difficult to imagine a more direct statement describing justification occurring by faith alone.

Hubmaier indicates his clear understanding of faith's essence in his parallel associations of faith with the absence of doubt and with trust. In his catechism he offers further a direct definition of faith that seems finally to bar the door of possibility against any reading of Hubmaier which might contend that faith consists in anything other than confident trust:

Faith is 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, whom he did not spare and delivered him to death for our sakes that sin might be paid for, and we might be reconciled to him with the assurance of our hearts cry

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 117.

to him: Abba, Father, our Father who art in heaven.<sup>45</sup>

Associating faith with “realization” and “assurance of heart” precludes an understanding of faith as something endemic to the believer preexisting before encountering the Word. Further, Hubmaier’s definition disallows a view of faith consisting in creedal content. Faith embraces the warmth of illumination from God’s Word; an embracing which consists in one’s entrusting oneself to God which manifests in complete surrender. Less than surrender belies complete trust or faith in Christ.

Hubmaier associates surrender to Christ with faith in his illustration of the wounded man. “All his sickness he commits, submits, and entrusts to him [the physician].”<sup>46</sup> Believing then, the sick man abandons himself to the physician, Christ. The ideas of belief and surrender are linked together. In describing the believer’s surrender to Christ, Hubmaier notes that the believer has “firm faith that God will not hold him to account . . . because he has surrendered himself to the physician Jesus and has committed his sickness to be healed.”<sup>47</sup> Faith consists as trusted assurance that God will deal mercifully with the sinner, because he is submitted under the care of the physician. The believer’s submission does not constitute the basis or the reason God forgives the sinner; rather, submission (or surrender) is an attribute of faith. Christ’s righteous work on the cross and his favor with the Father provide the only basis of forgiveness.

The believer’s surrender to Christ transitions into Hubmaier’s third definitive term, *verpflichten*, which Pipkin and Yoder translate “commit;” however, the word would seem more nuanced toward obligation. The nuance seems to be appropriate to Hubmaier’s usage of the term. The believer’s surrender to Christ also includes surrender “inwardly in his heart unto a new life according to the Rule of Christ, of this physician who has healed him, pleaded for him, and from whom he received life.”<sup>48</sup> The new life comes as a direct and immediate result of justification. The sick sinner surrenders to the will of the physician and immediately is reborn. As Estep notes, “It [the new birth] takes place in response to man’s faith commitment to Jesus Christ which is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word.”<sup>49</sup> Justification of the sinner is distinct from the new birth, but it can never be extracted from it.

Reminiscent of Paul in Romans 4:25, on at least two occasions Hubmaier directly connects justification to the resurrection of Christ. Hubmaier writes in his *Summa*, “But at the same time he [the believer] fully believes that Christ through his death has forgiven him his sins and through his [Christ’s] resurrection has made him righteous before God.”<sup>50</sup> Again, in *On*

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 144.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Estep, “The Anabaptist View of Salvation,” 41.

<sup>50</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 87.

*the Christian Baptism of Believers* he writes, "He died on account of our sins and rose again for the sake of our justification."<sup>51</sup> The connection for Hubmaier between the resurrection of Christ and the justification of the believer is a new life. Christ rose again to a life after death and that resurrection of Christ corresponds to the new life of the believer. J. Denny Weaver writes, "Resurrection as a part of the work of Christ served Hubmaier as a primary foundation for his stress on the fact that a reborn person must necessarily live a new, changed and righteous life."<sup>52</sup> In Christ's resurrection from the dead he can legitimately provide eternal life for all who trust in him. The death and resurrection of Christ counteract the terminal illness of the debilitated sinner who trusts wholly in Christ alone.

The believer commits in surrender to an obligation or duty to the new life. In his surrender the believer is obligated to follow the will of the physician in his healing. Here is Hubmaier's corrective to those finding a loophole for holy living in justification by faith alone. The sinner believing that he is hopelessly ill and wholly incapable of effecting his own healing resigns himself to the physician's orders in treating his sickness. The sinner believes the physician's diagnosis, understands the severity of the prognosis, and dutifully follows the prescribed treatment. However, in following the prescribed treatment, the believer is not left to struggle in his own impotent weakness. Rather, "he calls upon him [the physician] for healing so that what the wounded is not able to do out of his own capacity, the physician counsels, helps, and promotes him so that he can follow his Word and commandment."<sup>53</sup> Christ accomplishes the new life in the believer so that the believer identifies with "Paul who confesses publicly that he does not live but Christ lives in him, is life for him, and outside of Christ he knows that he is empty, worthless, dead, and a lost sinner."<sup>54</sup> Justification of the sinner is distinct from the new birth, but it can never be extracted from it.

The new birth is immediate, but it is not the basis of justification. Three points of thought in Hubmaier's writings affirm that clearly. First, Hubmaier's understanding of baptism testifies to a distinction between justification and the new life. The core value in believers-only baptism is just that: only believers should be baptized. In *On Christian Baptism*, Hubmaier contends that "faith must precede baptism." He furthers the thought noting, "That nobody can be so blind and helpless, but that he must see and grasp that no one should be baptized with water unless beforehand he confesses faith and knows how he stands with God," because "baptism signifies . . . the certain knowledge of a good conscience toward God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."<sup>55</sup> The proper candidate for baptism testifies in the

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>52</sup>J. Denny Weaver, "Hubmaier Versus Hut on the Work of Christ: The Fifth Nicolsburg Article," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 82, (1991): 176.

<sup>53</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 85.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 117.

baptismal waters to his sure confidence in God's favor bestowed upon him for Christ's sake. The believer ought not to submit to baptism without sure knowledge of forgiveness in Christ. Yet, Hubmaier nowhere advocates that the believer wait until he certainly knows that he has merited a declaration of justification before God. At the core of the distinction between Catholic and Protestant justification lies the difference between a merited declaration of justice which can only be made when the believer finally perseveres and the immediate declaration of justification based on an alien righteousness belonging to Christ alone. The believer who must persevere in order to merit justification could never be certain of his honesty in the baptismal pool. Consequently, justification must be a sure event which does not depend upon the righteousness of the believer.

Second, Hubmaier contends that the believer has not achieved sinless perfection in his submission to Christ:

He [the believer] calls upon him [Christ] daily for healing and purification, so that what the wounded is not able to do out of his own capacity—as in fact he can do nothing—the physician counsels and helps him or does not blame him for his sickness or take it for evil, since he would gladly walk according to the word and will of the physician. But that he does not act accordingly is the fault of his sickness.<sup>56</sup>

The sinner, at the point of his recognition, may choose either submission to the physician or obstinate refusal to the contrary. If the sinner believes and submits to the healing of the physician then the physician's promise of health to the believer becomes his healing, yet the physician sets about the healing prescription in order that the promise might be fulfilled. Here Hubmaier's thought is reminiscent of Luther's thought in his Romans lectures. Luther's first usage of *simul justus et peccator* appears in the same context which Hubmaier uses in his discussion of justification, namely the Good Samaritan.<sup>57</sup> Luther's and Hubmaier's terminology communicate similar ideas. Hubmaier also indicates that the sick person does not experience immediate healing; rather, God does not impute his illness as sin.

Any indication of the believer being both just and sinful precludes an understanding of justification occurring upon the basis of regeneration. The Council of Trent made the Catholic opinion abundantly clear in noting that security could not be had in faith alone and that sin forfeits justification and can be recovered only in penance.<sup>58</sup> In Hubmaier's thought one cannot find any sense of the individual forfeiting justification and then later reacquiring it. Consequently, one would be hard pressed to indicate how Hubmaier might be said to view the new birth as forming the basis for justification. If

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>57</sup>Hilton C. Oswald ed. *Luther's Works*, vol. 25 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 260.

<sup>58</sup>*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 37, 39.



Hubmaier understands an instantaneous justification in which the believer can express confidence in his standing before God, then how could it be said that righteousness formed in the new birth can be the basis for the declaration? If Hubmaier expressed such an idea then he could not very well have any basis for confidence in reference to justification. Justification and regeneration must be kept distinct while inseparable if the believer does not experience sinful perfection in the flesh and yet maintains a justified status.

Third, Hubmaier adamantly insists that the new birth must manifest in good works. He also notes in his catechism that God rewards the good works of the believer. Nonetheless, Hubmaier cautiously warns that no merit exists in the believer's works. He writes:

That [God's promise of reward] is due to his gracious kindness. He ascribes these [works] to us as if we had done him a great favor out of ourselves and our own (strength), whereas he, of course, has no need whatever of us and does not wish our service except for our own benefit. Then let God call it a reward, but woe to you if you should consider it a payment. Consider all God's dealing with you as pure grace.<sup>59</sup>

The believer must humbly attribute any goodness in his works to the grace of God in the new birth. God desires good works for the believer's benefit and in grace God provides for the believer to accomplish good works in order that the believer might benefit. However, the believer that wrongly attributes any meritorious value to his own good works assaults the grace of God and mocks God with self-righteous presumption. Matthew Eaton characterizes this quote as "ambiguous." He contends that Hubmaier could well have the reward of salvation in mind, and that correctly understanding Hubmaier's meaning depends upon contextual examination of good works in the *Catechism* in which the above passage appears. Eaton's examination of Hubmaier's context and words concerning final judgment leads to the conclusion that good works "lead plainly to eternal life."<sup>60</sup> Eaton's argument can be called into question at two points. First, Hubmaier does not leave his meaning in the above quotation ambiguous. After warning believers to avoid considering good works as payment he further explains himself in noting that servants work for payment, but sons work from love and do not consider wages. Hubmaier considers the believer's works as the works of a son motivated from love, not the works of a servant receiving what he earns. The second point to make concerns Eaton's assessment of Hubmaier's words about final judgment. While Hubmaier connects final judgment with good works, the discussion is set in the context of belief and unbelief. Those who

<sup>59</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 361.

<sup>60</sup>Eaton, "Toward an Anabaptist Covenantal Soteriology: A Dialogue with Balthasar Hubmaier and Contemporary Pauline Scholarship," 75-76.

believe obey and those who do not believe obstinately refuse to obey.<sup>61</sup> Here, Hubmaier remains consistent in his insistence that the true believer will do good works.

### Conclusion

Hubmaier's writings evidence the four tenets of justification by faith presented in the introduction. His usage of "recognition," "surrender," and "obligation" contain the four fundamental elements. The sinner must recognize his own inability to be right before God. The sinner realizes that he possesses only sickness and death before God and cannot rely upon his own merit for healing. When that recognition comes, the sinner also recognizes that another must come to his aid. Here the sinner becomes the believer looking to Christ, in whom he finds the physician for healing. Trusting the healing of Christ, the believer surrenders himself to the physician and the prescription for healing. The believer finds in Christ the promise of healing and knows that while he heals God does not count his illness against him. The first three tenets of justification by faith are evident here. The sinner's inability to effect justification, the necessity of the righteousness of Christ which remains external to the believer for justification, and the understanding of faith as a confident trust in God's promise are all overtly present.

The justified sinner is born again according to Hubmaier. The new birth accompanies the sinner's surrender in faith. That new birth means that the sick person submits to the prescription of the physician; however, Hubmaier does not view the new birth as causal for forgiveness. Hubmaier emphasizes that the believer is under obligation to obedience, yet the believer is not completely healed. Instead, his surrender comes in trusting the promise of healing in Christ. The sense of finding the promise of healing in Christ without being completely healed, in other words justified and not perfect, precludes a cause and effect relationship between the new birth and justification. The believer cannot be declared just based on an intrinsic righteousness if the believer remains imperfect. That thought, which is similar to Luther's *simul justus et peccator*, highlights a necessary distinction between justification and regeneration or sanctification, which is the fourth tenet of justification by faith.

The argument in this article indicates real adherence on Hubmaier's part to a sixteenth-century evangelical understanding of justification by faith alone. That conclusion is important for twenty-first-century Baptist theology. Baptists holding to a believer's-only baptism and the same soteriological emphases concerning free will and good works as Hubmaier and other early Anabaptists, yet who are careful to maintain an emphasis on justification by faith alone, can look with confidence to sixteenth-century Anabaptists as theological predecessors. And, Baptists should consider sixteenth-century Anabaptist theology in formulating and articulating their own theology.

<sup>61</sup>Pipkin and Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, 363.

This survey of Hubmaier's thought also illustrates that while the traditional Reformation terminology concerning justification by faith alone has been helpful, the true test of the evangelical doctrine is found in the core concerns expressed by the terminology. The Magisterial Reformers use certain terminology that is absent in Anabaptist writings; however, the core thought in those essential common elements are found in the Anabaptist thought as well. To speak of justification in terms of a "forensic declaration" or an "imputation of righteousness" expresses particular truths about justification by faith alone. However, the foregoing discussion indicates that an absence of such language does not indicate an absence of such truths. Justification terminology is important because it represents meaningful concepts. Those concepts, however, contain the true essential elements to be expressed.

Doctrines of justification have eternal consequences and do not represent mere academic exercises. Because they are eternally consequential they are important to understand. Even in the face of scant references to justification, Anabaptist scholars are compelled to assess Anabaptist soteriology continually and this brief survey seeks only to have a small part in that necessary conversation.