

Withholding Water? The Reformation Legacy of Balthasar Hubmaier

Acts 10: 34-48

Introduction

Hermeneutics! I don't doubt that for many of you this is one of those big theological words that gets thrown around here at Clearcreek Chapel that you tolerate but don't really have any interest. But I know that there are many that come to the Chapel week after week because you think that the Bible is highly regarded here and taught with conviction and authority. In this teaching, not only is there intent to teach what the Bible says, but to also equip those under the Word to read and interpret it themselves. Sometimes in doing so, new vocabulary is introduced that helps to clarify ideas, and prepare you to read and grow from other teachers as well. Hermeneutics is one such "vocabulary" word.

When used in the plural, hermeneutics usually refers to the principles and rules used to read and interpret a document. In our case, *how* do we come to conclusions about what the Bible says and means. An entire bookshelf can be filled with books written to aid the Bible reader with concepts in this regard. For the most part, hermeneutics is common sense reading with the particulars spelled out, because as we have said before when it comes to reading the Bible, often all sensibility gets thrown out, and all many of fanciful readings and applications come to the forefront.

Sometimes the word is seen in the singular as hermeneutic. When used this way it usually refers to a general method or approach or philosophy of reading and interpreting a document. How one involves rhetoric, the use of the Old Testament, or the value of tradition all will be based somewhat on one's "hermeneutic."

Another related word to mention is exegesis. This word refers to the process of "drawing out" the meaning of a particular text. It is the work of discovering what the author means in this particular passage or book (many of you will notice that I gave away a bit of my own "hermeneutic" in that sentence). Exposition then refers to the delivery of this information to an audience and will often utilize a bit of explanation to allow the text to make its point clearly to a different audience than to which it was originally delivered.

The pulpit ministry at Clearcreek Chapel is zealous for a Christ-centered, Scripture-governed hermeneutic, that is careful in its reading of the Scriptures to consistently and properly understand their meaning and then to proclaim them as accurately and understandably as possible to impact the lives of the hearers not only at the moment of their hearing but in their living out the gospel each moment of each day.

Exposition of Acts 10:34-48

Let us open our Bibles to Acts 10 and read an account beginning in verse 34 and concluding for our purposes this evening in verse 48.

Here we find the conclusion of a very interesting event in the life of the apostle Peter. A Roman centurion named Cornelius was stationed at Caesaria, the Roman coastal town and military garrison. For our purposes think of it symbolically, as the seat of the Gentiles and their suppression. Cornelius is described as a “god-fearer,” a term used to indicate a Gentile who was open to the Hebrew Scriptures description of God and attempted to live ethically in its light. He had a vision to send for Peter who just “happened” to be in nearby Joppa. Peter also had just had a vision regarding “clean and unclean” foods, one of his Old Covenant identity markers. When they finally indeed get together, Cornelius proclaims in verse 33 “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Peter has been divinely set up. Will he be able to apply what he was somewhat obtusely shown in his vision? Indeed Peter speaks correctly and confidently. He declares that the gospel is for everyman. In verse 43 he concludes, “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Great and comprehensive is the gospel. Follow through this grand passage. Peace is needed (because of sin and rebellion). God sent Jesus the Christ from Nazareth and is empowered by the Holy Spirit to declare both in word and deed the fulfillment of Scripture. He is sacrificed and raised again to be declared a judge over all the earth and brings peace and forgiveness to those who believe. The gospel’s great power is upon those who believe.

But the story doesn’t end there. In verses 44 and 45 we see they indeed believe because the Holy Spirit had come upon them in the same manner that it had come upon the disciples earlier (see Acts 2). They indeed are identified as His because of the reception of the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is requisite in a New Covenant believer. Paul says the same in Romans chapter 8. Let us turn there and read beginning at verse 9. “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.”

What an event! Gentiles who believe and have miraculously identified as belong to Christ in the same way as the disciples. This is one of the glorious events in the book of Acts, don’t miss its significance. But for this morning we want to read on where we see an additional concept unfold.

In verse 47 we read, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people?” In other words, is there any reason then why these Gentiles should not be accepted by us as believers publically recognizing their belief and confession? Baptism appears intended for those who have been forgiven, who have embraced the gospel and have evidence of the power of the gospel in their lives. We do not intend to provide a full scale defense of believer’s or confessor baptism at this point, but do not fail to see the power of this event and the import of Peter’s question, can we withhold water? From here though, we move forward in history fifteen hundred years.

Biography of Hubmaier

Balthasar Hubmaier was German. He was born in Bavaria, a German-speaking kingdom/region in South-central Europe around 1480. Information on his parentage is lacking. He entered the University of Freiburg and received both a bachelor's and a master's degree in 1511. In 1512, he received a doctor's degree from the University of Ingolstadt, and became the university's vice-rector by 1515. Hubmaier's fame as a pulpiteer and scholar was widespread.

Because he was pasturing a parish near the Swiss border, In March of 1523, Hubmaier met with Huldrych Zwingli in Zürich, and even participated in a public disputation there in October of that same year against the Catholics. Zurich, under the leadership of Zwingli was in the throes of their own version of the Reformation in parallel to Martin Luther further to the north. This debate established Zurich as a Reformation city and attracted many refugees. While in Zurich, Hubmaier set forth the principle of obedience to the Scriptures. It was evidently here that Hubmaier committed to abandoning infant baptism, a practice he could not support with Scripture. Hubmaier wrote at least seven treatises on the subject of baptism. But in so doing he caused problems with many of his colleagues, including Zwingli. Hubmaier’s thinking on baptism also gives us access to his convictions about biblical interpretation, salvation and the church.

In contrast to Zwingli’s approach to biblical interpretation (which allowed that which is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture), Hubmaier rejected any practices which were not commanded in those matters which concerned God and souls. Hubmaier said this in 1525 in his *Dialogue with Zwingli*, “For Christ does not say, ‘All plants which my heavenly Father has forbidden should be uprooted.’ Rather he says, ‘All plants which my heavenly Father has not planted should be uprooted.’” Zwingli’s approach justified infant baptism and so was not radical enough for Hubmaier.

Hubmaier related baptism to the church in this way: in order for converts to interact and participate with the church as Christians, they must first give public testimony to their

faith through baptism. This church is therefore a visible church, where baptism in the entry point and church discipline is practiced according to Matthew 18. Hubmaier's order of salvation was: confess sin; believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins; resolve to live a new life and to order it according to the will of Christ, in the power of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and receive admonishment according to the rule of Christ in order to grow in faith. Christians, through baptism and by virtue of the rule of Christ, have given authority to their brothers and sisters to admonish, punish, ban and re-accept them. "Where does this authority come from if not from the pledge of baptism?"

So, for Hubmaier, believers' baptism was the foundation of the church and the public testimony of discipleship according to the rule of Christ. Believers' baptism defined a new kind of church – the believers' church: "no baptism, no church; no baptism, no discipleship". In his last writing on baptism (*A Form for Water Baptism* in autumn 1526) he redefined the meaning of "sacrament" as referring to the commitment to follow Christ, rather than anything that happens in the rite: "The baptismal commitment or the pledge of love is really and truly 'sacrament' in the Latin; i.e. a commitment by oath and a pledge given by the hand which the one baptized makes to Christ." This is a good summary of Hubmaier's thinking on baptism – this sacrament of obedience both creates the church and is the basis of the church as a new prophetic community.

Hubmaier's teaching caused him to be hunted in the Holy Roman Empire, not unlike Hus and Luther and in December 1525, Hubmaier fled to Zürich. Instead of finding refuge in this "Reformation city", Zwingli instead had him arrested. While a prisoner, Hubmaier had a disputation in which he quoted statements by Zwingli in which he asserted that children should not be baptized until they had been instructed. Zwingli responded that he had been misunderstood. The bewildered Hubmaier agreed to recant. The next day however he claimed his anguish brought about a rash decision and is quoted as saying "I can and I will not recant." But when he was back in prison and under the torture of the rack, he did offer the required recantation. With this, he was allowed to leave Switzerland and journeyed to Moravia where a hundred years previously Hus's followers had settled. Hubmaier was greatly distressed by his weakness and published his *Short Apology* in 1526. In it he states, "I may err—I am a man—but a heretic I cannot be... O God, pardon me my weakness".

In 1527 Hubmaier and his wife were seized by Austrian authorities and taken to Vienna where was held until March 1528. He suffered torture on the rack, and was tried for heresy and convicted. On March 10, 1528, he was taken to the public square and executed by burning. His wife exhorted him to remain steadfast. Three days after his execution, his wife, with a stone tied around her neck, was drowned in the River Danube.

Hubmaier's major work, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, was published in June 1525. In this treatise Hubmaier provided a critical response to Zwingli's recent attack on the Anabaptist movement (*On Baptism, Rebaptism and Infant Baptism*) and a manifesto for Anabaptism. Those who repudiated infant baptism submitted themselves for baptism as confessors and were called ana-baptizers or rebaptizers by their detractors. For Hubmaier and his followers their infant baptism was not valid in that it did not align with the teaching of Scripture and therefore was not a re-baptism, but a first baptism. It has been described as Hubmaier's best and most significant writing, and it enjoyed rapid and wide distribution. Many Anabaptists were not as careful in their reading and interpreting of Scripture as Hubmaier and many more radical teachings evolved from this movement and many dismiss it altogether as extreme. It was not until the 1600's that more consistent thinkers were able to weld Hubmaier's teaching on the church with more Reformational exegesis.

Conclusion

What lessons are learned from these events?

1. We must give diligence to our commitment to the Scriptures alone as our rule of life.

This concept not only requires the obvious reading and studying the Bible but also the reflection upon our motivations. We need to not merely say we observe the Scriptures as our rule of life but ensure that we live by them.

2. We must attempt to interpret Scripture consistently and carefully.

We can facilitate this in at least two ways. One is to be in attendance at most if not all of the teaching ministries here at Clearcreek Chapel to observe how consistent interpretation is accomplished. That is not to say that every sermon or lesson is without fault, but for the most part every aspect of teaching here is intended to fit within a uniform model. The second way is to read about the interpretation of Scripture and engage your elders in how what you have read can be applied to your study and reading.

3. We must be aware of our own weaknesses and inconsistencies.

None of us have any of these though, do we? By observing the failures and repentance of those before us we can be humble as we live out the truth of the Scriptures.

4. We must work hard to make sure that our church, its ministries, teaching, and worship, conforms to the Scriptures.

Frequent evaluation and restructuring will keep any particular habit or project from wandering from God's design. We recognize the great freedom offered in the New Covenant with respect to much of church life, and yet there is much to be rigorous and uncompromising in obedience.