

Simon Victor Goncharenko. *Wounds That Heal: The Importance of Church Discipline within Balthasar Hubmaier's Theology*.

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The author, Simon V. Goncharenko, an immigrant to the United States, grew up under conditions of religious persecution in the Soviet Union, in a Baptist church that faithfully practiced church discipline. Goncharenko, then, approaches his subject academically from his seminary work, but also he knows from life experience what he is talking about.

Hubmaier, probably the best educated, most sophisticated thinker identified with Anabaptism, stood somewhat outside the mainstream of the movement in his own era and has been viewed by some scholars as marginal to Anabaptism because of his failure to teach their standard doctrine rejecting the sword. Yet scholars recognize that he masterfully expounds their teaching on church discipline and adult baptism, two other foundational doctrines.

Goncharenko effectively begins his book with a central assertion by Hubmaier, “Unless fraternal admonition is again restored, accepted, and used according to the earnest behest of Christ, it is not possible that things might proceed aright . . . among Christians on earth” (1). Although Goncharenko makes no reference to the University of Chicago dissertation on church discipline, he has come to the same conclusion as its author, who says, “unrepentant members were excluded with the Christian ban. . . . Nowhere was such a conviction more fully and clearly stated than in the works of Balthasar Hubmaier” (Ervin Schlabbach, “The Rule of Christ Among the Early Swiss Anabaptists” [1977], 126).

In a manner not attempted before, Goncharenko explores Hubmaier’s integration of church discipline with other aspects of his theology — anthropology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.

Chapter 2, on anthropology, lays out a trichotomous view of man, consisting of spirit, soul, and body, based on Genesis 2:7, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, etc. (41). According to Hubmaier each of the three has its own will. With the fall of man, soul and body (flesh) became corrupted, but the spirit was still free. Through the death of Christ, grace became available so that the will of the soul could join the will of the spirit and respond to the Word of God, although the will of the flesh always remains corrupted. Man’s free will, as explained by Hubmaier’s anthropology, was important to the voluntary nature of church membership and the commitment to discipline by the brotherhood.

Chapter 3 discusses soteriology. Although Hubmaier rejected the sacraments of the medieval church, he held that outside the church there was no salvation. For Hubmaier the instructional and shepherding role of the church was essential. In baptism a person voluntarily came under the discipline of the body of believers where believers are subject to mutual admonition. Unwilling to endorse the sacramental system of the Catholics, and rejecting the Protestant ideas of predestinarian grace and forensic justification, Hubmaier held men responsible for their salvation and guarded against lax living (76, 78).

Chapter 4 deals with ecclesiology and church discipline, a topic closely associated with the previous one of salvation. Although the Lutheran wanted to find God through faith alone and the Reformed to do the sovereign will of God, the Anabaptist’s chief concern centered on the church. When Christ spoke to Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven,” “you” refers to the unity of the church. The key of loosing was the forgiveness of sins given at adult baptism and the pledge the new believer made to the church to live a holy life. The second key was “binding or brotherly admonition exercised through the Communion” (92) where the unity of Christians was celebrated or the erring member was excluded. Thus, the Lord’s Supper was kept in the context of community, and believers were reminded of the commitment made at baptism, including a readiness to give admonition and permission to be disciplined by the church (113). The manner in which Hubmaier’s “doctrine of church discipline replaced the Catholic idea of sacraments in the church as important” to salvation, Goncharenko feels was perhaps the most important discovery of his study (125).

Goncharenko makes one surprising statement when he compares Hubmaier's practice of church discipline with "most of his contemporaries in the Anabaptist movement" when he says their shunning included "such extreme actions as striking, banishing, or executing" (23). This of course is not true. He must mean "contemporaries outside the Anabaptist movement."

Goncharenko has contributed to a deeper understanding of Hubmaier's thought in his analysis of church discipline. Thus his book is of interest to students of Anabaptism, theology of the Renaissance era, church history, and those interested in conservative Anabaptist-descended churches today.

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