

## Reviews of History and Social Sciences

Graeme R. Chatfield, *Balthasar Hubmaier and the Clarity of Scripture: A Critical Reformation Issue*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013. Pp. xii + 410. Softcover.

Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century generally asserted that Scripture was authoritative in matters of Christian doctrine and church practice. They criticized their Roman Catholic opponents for appealing to authorities outside of the Bible, such as the Pope or church councils, insisting that the written Word was clear, accessible, and understandable to all. And yet, Protestants that emerged from the European Reformation were anything but unified in their interpretation and application of the Bible.

Graeme R. Chatfield, Associate Dean of the Australian College of Theology, explores this enigma along with other questions

related to Reformation hermeneutics in his study of the Anabaptist reformer, Balthasar Hubmaier. The author places Hubmaier in the broad context of Reformation developments using the oft-proclaimed notion of “clarity of Scripture” as the interpretative framework for bringing Hubmaier’s hermeneutic into the foreground. The work is a revised and updated publication of Chatfield’s doctoral dissertation initially submitted to Bristol University in 1992.

Hubmaier was a skillful pastor and theologian of Anabaptism from 1525 to 1528, who wrote extensively on a wide range of reformation issues until his career was cut short by imprisonment and martyrdom. His reformation activities brought him in close proximity to Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli and a wide range of radical reformers. Chatfield argues that Hubmaier’s interpretation of Scripture more closely resembled the views of Zwingli and Luther than the views of the Swiss Brethren, or those of the South German and Austrian environs as represented by Hans Denck or Hans Hut.

The work is skilfully constructed, taking into account research and methodological questions and biographical details, and it includes a comprehensive assessment of the way in which Hubmaier has been interpreted by Reformation scholars. The heart of the book examines Hubmaier’s literary corpus in chronological order, focusing on the reformer’s shifting and evolving use of Scripture during the times that Hubmaier resided in Waldshut, Zürich, and Nikolsburg.

Chatfield recognizes that Hubmaier’s interpretative framework had a distinctive quality shaped by theological assumptions about such topics as the nature of grace, the human condition, the role of conscience, and the sovereignty of God. At the same time, his suppositions concerning Scripture were molded and formed in the context of an evolving intellectual environment. They began in close theological and hermeneutical proximity to Zwingli, and then moved closer to the Swiss Brethren as Hubmaier worked out his theology of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which he believed emanated from the gathered community of the local congregation. However, when he was later challenged by divisive forces within his own Nikolsburg congregation, he became convinced that scriptural interpretation was best entrusted in the congregational leader, the preacher of the Word. In this respect Hubmaier’s views had come to approximate the perspectives of Luther and Zwingli, who by this time were likewise insisting that the interpretation of Scripture should be limited to those in leadership.

The title of the book suggests that Chatfield’s study is narrowly focussed on hermeneutics, but the author addresses the full range

of Hubmaier's theological orientation. While somewhat pedantic in style, the volume is well-organized and thoroughly researched. The author's careful attention to historical context and analysis of each of Hubmaier's writings makes this study a valuable contribution toward understanding an Anabaptist reformer's evolving and complex thought.

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