Simon Victor Goncharenko  

Balthasar Hubmaier has long sat uneasily on the fringes of early Swiss Anabaptism. The only trained theologian among the early leaders of the movement, he wrote some of the most sophisticated explanations of Anabaptist teachings. However, his willingness to work with civic authorities in implementing reform, to countenance the use of the sword in defence of the Reformation and his attempts to convert entire communities put him at odds with a number of assumptions about the nature of Swiss Anabaptism as a sectarian, pacifist movement. As a result, scholars writing from peace church traditions – what some have identified as the normative interpretation of Anabaptism – tended to banish him to the sidelines of the movement. Revisionist scholarship on the subject written from a more secular perspective moved Hubmaier slightly closer to mainstream Anabaptism, but recently self-proclaimed post-revisionist scholars, again working from an explicitly confessional framework, have exiled him back to the margins. In the midst of all this Arnold Snyder, who himself sits awkwardly between the revisionists and post-revisionists, has sought to rehabilitate Hubmaier for Anabaptism and establish his theology as much more central to the movement than previously recognized.

Simon Goncharenko’s study of Hubmaier’s doctrine of church discipline appears on the surface to share in both the post-revisionist enterprise of harnessing ecclesiastical history for the needs of the church and Snyder’s rehabilitation of Hubmaier as an important leader in early Swiss Anabaptism. The author holds a doctorate in systematic theology from Southwestern Theological Baptist Seminary. In the book’s preface, he indicates his hope that it will ‘propel further this doctrine to the forefront of our attention’ and ‘result in its renaissance in the church’ (p. xii) However, as a Southern Baptist, he finds much more palatable a number of Hubmaier’s teachings that have served as stumbling blocks for scholars from peace church traditions.

*Wounds That Heal* argues that Hubmaier’s doctrine of church discipline serves ‘the rest of his theology as one of its unifying factors and a means by which his theology is grounded into praxis’ (p. 23). After an introductory chapter discussing briefly Hubmaier’s life and possible influences on him, the book devotes one chapter each to examining the intersections between Hubmaier’s teaching on church discipline and his anthropology, soteriology and ecclesiology. The discussion in chapter two of Hubmaier’s tripartite anthropology,
according to which after the fall human flesh is ruined and the soul wounded, but the spirit retains its faculties, sets well the stage for the treatment of his soteriology in chapter three. Goncharenko revives Harold Bender’s characterization of Anabaptist soteriology as teaching justification by faith alone, but by a faith evidenced by discipleship, claiming that in Hubmaier’s theology works of obedience ‘are not just the result of saving faith, but belong to the essence of saving faith’ (pp. 64–65). The meaning of this distinction is not really clarified for the reader, although Goncharenko goes on to cast Hubmaier’s soteriology as a via media between the forensic justification of the Protestant Reformers and the works righteousness of the Roman Catholic church.

Goncharenko is convincing in his explanation of the importance of Hubmaier’s anthropology for his teaching on church discipline, although less clear is the corollary claim that the doctrine of church discipline allows Hubmaier ‘to keep his anthropological edifice together’ (p. 53). The connection between that anthropology and church discipline is strengthened further in the discussion of Hubmaier’s soteriology, with its rejection of forensic justification and emphasis on sanctification, in which church discipline played an important role. This led Hubmaier to reformulate the traditional dictum ‘non salus extra ecclesiam’. The church remained for him essential to salvation, but because of its instructional and shepherding role rather than its control of the sacraments as the means of grace.

The starting point for Goncharenko’s discussion of Hubmaier’s ecclesiology is Cornelius Krahn’s claim that Anabaptist theology was ‘ecclesio-centric’ in that the Anabaptists had a corporate or ‘brotherhood-minded’ understanding of salvation. Because salvation is the focus of the group more than the individual, church discipline is central to the doctrine of the church. Hubmaier associated the office of the keys directly with the dominical ordinances: the office of loosing is exercised in baptism and that of binding or brotherly admonition in the Lord’s Supper. As a public commitment to the covenant, water baptism includes the implicit agreement to be disciplined, while celebration of the Lord’s Supper serves as a reaffirmation of that permission. Hubmaier rejected a sacramental role for the ordinances – rather they are how the church exercises its shepherding and instructional role, thereby linking his theology to the practice of discipleship, the theoretical to the practical.

This chapter serves as the crux of Goncharenko’s argument. Hubmaier stood out among early Anabaptists in making explicit this connection between the ban and baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Focus on this point serves Goncharenko’s case well, but he avoids other aspects of Hubmaier’s ecclesiology to his peril. He acknowledges that Hubmaier departed from ‘mainstream Anabaptist ecclesiology’ in his teaching on the sword of government. However,