

## BAPTISM AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

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by

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December 8, 2008

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In the fashion of Nicodemus, a handful of South Germans slipped into the home of Felix Manz in the dead of winter 1525.<sup>1</sup> This small gathering had their hopes dashed in Emmaus fashion as they thought Ulrich Zwingli, or even Martin Luther had burst down the door of popery to let the true light of Christ shine. However, as they would soon discover, though great courage had been exhibited by the aforementioned reformers, their goal had been revealed to be quite shortsighted. The band of brothers committed themselves to finish the task at hand. Thus, with courage and commitment they committed the deadly sin of rebaptism.

Having found themselves the enemy of not only the Roman Catholic Church, but the Magisterial Reformers as well, they began the process of communicating an *apologia* for this act of treason. Many rose to the occasion, yet of particular note was one Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier. Hubmaier has been considered to be the most scholarly of Anabaptist, while simultaneously being the Simon Peter of public discourse on behalf of the stepchildren of the Reformation.<sup>2</sup> A man who was arrested, tried, recanted, and found faithful again, he demonstrates to the Free Church theologian and pastor that there are hills worth dying on. His is a story of martyrdom, not due to arrogance, but faithfulness to what Scripture teaches. The Baptist heritage is a heritage worthy of perpetuity because

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<sup>1</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 77.

it has Scripture as its source and history as its evidence.<sup>3</sup>

Today, many seek an ecumenical unity that leaves its advocates either awash with romanticized visions of a compromised unity that Christ never desired on the one hand, or bitter thoughts towards those whom they blame for being the cause of disarray within the Kingdom of God. One should take note that unity is not based upon compromised faithfulness; rather it is a by-product of faithfulness itself. In other words, when two are faithful to the works and doctrines of Christ, they will of necessity find themselves in proximity to Christ and therefore, to one another.

With that in mind, this paper will prove that baptism is a church ordinance that is worthy of a reexamination in light of today's popular push towards ecumenical compromise of sound doctrinal principles solely for the sake of a unity that its advocates and their observers know to be false, for compromise has no loyalties. It seems the men of the Magisterial Reformation found a common disdain for the men of the Radical Reformation, and indeed, seemed to be more Catholic in their approach to baptism than biblical. One cannot help but wonder, had the timing and order of the Reformation been different, if Rome, Geneva, and Zurich would have created an ecumenical movement that would have focused her ire towards Waldshut solely because they sought to maintain a biblical view of believer's baptism. Of course, one must be wary, for the unfulfilled possibilities of history could find their fulfillment in the future. If many claiming Baptist roots today were to have their way in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there would be no recovery of believer's baptism, for it would have been compromised away for the sake of an elusive

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<sup>3</sup> I am not advocating an Anabaptist origin to Southern Baptists. Indeed, on that subject I shall remain silent. I am only stating the fact that many theological motifs find commonality within Anabaptist and Southern Baptist theology. Certainly, Southern Baptists would decry any return to effusion as a proper mode of baptismal practice. As will be made clear, the intent of this paper is to argue for one particular aspect of Hubmaier's baptismal doctrine.

unity. Baptism and all that it involves, is important because it is part of God's revelation. The modern day mantra of 'unity for the sake of witness' will never justify disobedience.

### **The Local Church as the Authority of Baptism**

For the Anabaptist<sup>4</sup>, the atrophied doctrine among Rome, Wittenberg, and Geneva was a biblical ecclesiology. Indeed, a proper ecclesiology was the essence of the Anabaptist movement.<sup>5</sup> Foundational to proper ecclesiology is a proper understanding of the ordinances. It is no stretch to say that theologians since the Reformation have stated that a true church can only be recognized by a proper administration of the ordinances, or with a more Catholic nuance, the sacraments. That is to say it has generally been agreed that where there is no proper administration of at least the Supper and baptism, there is no true church.

History is testimony to the validity of making such a statement. John Calvin held to primarily two marks of a true church: the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.<sup>6</sup> Though Luther at times has differing numbers of marks, baptism is always included as one of the evidences of a true church.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is well founded theology to say that a true church reveals herself at least partially in a proper understanding of the ordinances. This statement has been agreed upon by many theologians of the past and present. While Calvin, Luther, and most other theologians have issued the ordinances as one of the true tests for a church, one must note that their

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<sup>4</sup> It will be assumed that the reader understands the differences between true Anabaptists and the Rationalists and Spiritualists who were often referred to by the same label. For further clarification, see Littell's "The Anabaptist View of the Church."

<sup>5</sup> Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, The Dissent and Nonconformity Series, no. 11 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1958), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 4.1.9.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Concordia House, 1955-1972), 37, 367.

practice in and of itself was not scripturally sound.

For Hubmaier, ecclesiology was the victim of the Roman Catholic Church, received no proper attention from the Protestant Reformation, and was now in need of specific attention if she is to survive the years of neglect. More specifically, improper baptism was a major culprit of crimes perpetrated against the church. “To Hubmaier, incorrect baptism had injured the church for the past thousand years.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, where there was a false practice of baptism, it could be said there was a false church.<sup>9</sup>

For Hubmaier, understanding baptism was a matter of Scriptural revelation over and against tradition or a philosophically driven theology. Accusing the paedobaptists of trying to create “a new Christ out of a pumpkin,” Hubmaier states “we want to present the text in the simplest way of all.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the failure to maintain a true doctrine of baptism is not only to disobey the word of God, but is also to establish a false church and create a false Christ.

It is not an uncommon concept to link the definition of a church with the practice of the ordinances. Beyond the marks of a church, as discussed above, the overwhelming weight of evidence tips the scales at a common understanding between systems of theology that lays the groundwork for ecclesiology in the realm of the ordinances. The New Hampshire Confession states in part, “We believe that a visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers.”<sup>11</sup> Holding a strong view of believer’s baptism, Strong would lay the destruction of the local congregation at the feet

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<sup>8</sup> Emir Caner, “Balthasar Hubmaier and His Theological Participation in the Reformation: Ecclesiology and Soteriology,” *Faith and Mission* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Hubmaier, Balthasar, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*, trans. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 112.

<sup>11</sup> Article XIII.

of an improper practice of baptism. “The admission of unbaptized persons to the communion tends always to, and has frequently resulted in, the disuse of baptism itself, the obscuring of the truth which it symbolizes.”<sup>12</sup> The result of such apathetic theology was the destruction of an otherwise biblically constituted church due to “methods of human invention.”<sup>13</sup>

Given the witness of the theological voice in history, the burden is placed upon the contemporary theologian to offer proof that baptism is unimportant to ecclesiology. Moreover, to propose that one can be a true church apart from a proper practice of baptism is to shout against the winds of an historical theological survey. Though they disagreed on the proper practice, the theologians of old all agreed that the establishment of a proper church was directly related to the administration of baptism. One system relied upon tradition, another upon Scripture. Any attempt to wed the two is an attempt to accord a revelation of tradition with a revelation of Scripture; an impossible task indeed.

### **Drowning the Voice of Doctrinal Distinctives**

One cannot help but ask why recent days have revealed a lack of interest in a practice that was so divisive throughout the history of theology. Though some would applaud and encourage<sup>14</sup> the loss of distinctive doctrines, they should not do so without considering the cost to those whose lives were given for the sole purpose of providing an opportunity for the believer to follow the clear commands of Scripture. The first victim

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<sup>12</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1909), 972.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Grudem states, "One way forward could be for paedobaptists and advocates of believer's baptism both to come to a common admission that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith, and that they are willing to live with each other's views on this matter and not allow differences over baptism to be a cause of division within the body of Christ" (982). This would greatly minimize the contribution of such men as Hubmaier, Manz, Marpek, and others whose lives were threatened and even martyred for something that was "not a major doctrine of the faith."

upon the altar of cultural compromise seems to be those distinctives for which so much blood has been spilled.

Hammett decries the modern practice of devaluing the ordinances and those who are allowing their quite passing from the scene of local church worship. “[Yet] for all of their importance, there seems to be a lack of interest in, and even a sense of embarrassment by, these corporate acts of commitment among Baptists.”<sup>15</sup> This embarrassment stems from a desire that seeks unity at the expense of faithfulness. Orthodoxy has been made the servant of orthopraxy and theology has given way to pragmatics. “Some in Baptist life have expressed regret at the divisions caused by different perspectives on these acts and seem ready to revise traditional Baptist views to be more inclusive of others.”<sup>16</sup> This embarrassment often manifests itself in the time of worship set aside by the local congregation. “The minimizing of these rites is also reflected in the often sloppy, haphazard, dry celebration of them in Baptist churches.”<sup>17</sup> The only rescue for this victim of cultural relativism and spiritual lethargy will be a return to teaching the doctrinal distinctives of Baptist identity.

A continued apathetic approach to such a wonderful picture of the Gospel will find its conclusion in their passing from the scene of worship in favor of a more relevant and unifying practice. However, this will come at the expense of the commands given by Christ to His bride. Ultimately, this will result in the loss of the Gospel altogether. “While the Gospel still thrives in this climate of ecclesiological relativism, an undefined doctrine of the church leaves no guarantee that the next generation will have the opportunity to

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<sup>15</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 257.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

say the same.”<sup>18</sup> This requires a brief examination of those propositional truths that have made for such wonderful expressions of the Gospel in the practice of believer’s baptism.

### **Baptism as Proclamation**

Given the doctrinal lethargy of the day, there are three reasons that Baptists should reexamine their practice of doctrinal distinctives as they relate to baptism. First, baptism is inherent in the proclamation of the Gospel, indeed it is a form of proclamation. “Baptism is a powerful form of proclamation of the truth of what Christ has done; it is a ‘word in water’ testifying to the believer’s participation in the death of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5).”<sup>19</sup> It is therefore incumbent upon the modern theologian and church leader to ensure that the proclamation, as it is related to baptism, is accurate.

One must secure the accuracy of the visualized sermon for the sake of discipling other believers. If this ‘word in water’ effects one’s understanding of the nature of the gospel, it is necessary that the sermon of baptism is accurately portrayed. It teaches a sufficiency in the atoning work of Christ in that it symbolizes the death and resurrection of Christ as being final, a finality in which the believer participates. “Not that through it or by it sins are forgiven, but by virtue of the inward ‘yes’ of the heart, which a man openly witnesses to on submitting to water-baptism, declaring that he believes and feels in his heart that his sins are forgiven through Jesus Christ.”<sup>20</sup>

Given that the ordinance teaches so great a message as the atoning work of Christ, the message taught must be accurate to scriptural revelation. Many churches today use the language, “of like faith and order” in regards to the acceptance of another’s

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<sup>18</sup> Jason Duesing, “The Believer’s Church,” *Baptist Theology*, March, 2006, [www.baptisttheology.org/documents/BelieversChurch.pdf](http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/BelieversChurch.pdf). (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 1110.

<sup>20</sup> Hubmaier, Balthasar, *Anabaptist Beginnings*, ed. William R. Estep Jr. (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1976), 80.

baptism without any definition of the phrase. Such language certainly finds its definition in the work of Christ generally, and its sufficiency specifically. That is, any acceptable practice of baptism must find its definition within the sufficiency of Christ's cross for an eternal salvation over and against a fleeting salvation based on the works of a man. In other words, a proper practice of baptism teaches that the regenerate will persevere until the end based upon the sufficient work of Christ. Anything less removes the spotlight from the atonement and sheds part of its light upon the goodness of the one baptized.

Therefore, the church as the administrator of the ordinance takes on a new importance. Namely, the doctrine undergirding the practice has implication. "Baptism is a symbolic medium for new believers and the entire church to understand both the importance of the redemptive work of Christ and its application in the life of believers."<sup>21</sup>

To proclaim the death of Christ as salvation for the believing through baptism in a church that does not hold to the security of the believer is to proclaim an incomplete gospel that is unbiblical. The proclamation of an inadequate gospel cannot be acceptable. This makes the death of Christ inadequate for salvation, for it finds works as necessary to salvation. If anything, it is given unto churches to weigh in the balance the integrity of the proclaimed message, the Gospel. Failure to do so is outright disobedience unto the commission of Christ. In Hubmaier's understanding, "if baptism was misrepresented and wrongfully performed, it tainted the witness and spread of the gospel into the entire world."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> David S. Dockery, "Baptism in the New Testament," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 14.

<sup>22</sup> Caner, 40.

## Baptism as Identification

Current practices of baptism not only demand a reexamination because of its significance to the proclamation of the Gospel, but also because of Whom the practice identifies the believer with. In the Great Commission, Jesus demanded of His followers the continuing activity of making more disciples. The process of doing such was through the consistent practice of teaching and baptizing. Failure to baptize was to be inadequate in the disciple making process. “Matthew 28:19 clearly joins baptism with teaching as partners in the process of making disciples. ‘Make disciples’ is the mandate of the risen Christ. ‘baptism and teaching’ are the two procedures associated with the accomplishments of that mandate.”<sup>23</sup> This is so because undergirding the practice of baptism was a desire to be identified with the Lord Jesus Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection. The identification that baptism conveys to a believer is followed by a new manner of living (Romans 6:4).

Here Grudem rightly states the propriety of baptism by immersion as a sign of union with Christ. “Now this truth is clearly symbolized in baptism by immersion. When the candidate for baptism goes down into the water it is a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life.”<sup>24</sup>

Baptism is performed for the sake of identification as it is a statement from the believer to the world that their life is now bound up in the drama of the Cross of Christ and all that it entails. It is a life that has been buried with Christ, resurrected to a new way of living, and looking for the ascension culminated in eternity. Which leads to a third meaning that needs to be regained in regards to baptism.

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<sup>23</sup> Dockery, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Grudem, 968.

## Baptism as Incorporation

To be baptized is not only to be identified with Christ in the work of His Cross, but it is to be gathered into a community of believers with eschatological hope. One must ask “what is the most biblical expression of this gathered community?” Catholics have opted for a visible and universal church, Protestants have most often issued a definition of an invisible and universal church, and a third option is a visible and local congregation. “The thrust of Anabaptist ecclesiology was toward the implementation in history of the visible church. Anabaptism was relatively unconcerned with the idea of the universal, invisible church.”<sup>25</sup>

It seems the Anabaptist spoke wisely, and more importantly, biblically in this regard. Citing various scholars, Thomas White states that out of 109 occurrences of *ecclesia* in the New Testament used in regard to believers, 85-95 of those occurrences refer to a local and visible gathering.<sup>26</sup> Dagg further states

If the word *εκκλησια* in the singular number, could denote several distinct assemblies in a large city, no good reason can be assigned why it might not also denote the assemblies of Christians throughout a province or kingdom. But it is admitted that when applied to these, the word is always used in plural form. All this exactly accords with what was before stated – that the word always assures us of an assembly.<sup>27</sup>

The Abstract of Principles states that according to the command of Christ “Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies or churches.”<sup>28</sup> Though one may leave room for a doctrine of the Universal Church, preeminence is given to the local and

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<sup>25</sup> Estep, 239-240. Estep will go on to say, "This does not mean that the idea was foreign to Anabaptist thought, for such was not the case. The almost unanimous use of the Apostle's Creed in Anabaptist circles would attest to at least a tacit admission of the concept." However, the implication is clear, the universal church was secondary to the gathered church in terms of accountability for service and unity.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas White, "The Local Church and the Universal Church," *Upon this Rock I Will Build My Church*, lecture at Southwestern Seminary (Fort Worth: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminar, 2008), online media.

<sup>27</sup> J.L Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 79.

<sup>28</sup> Article XIV.

gathered church, and therefore the right of administration of the ordinances belongs rightly to her. Baptism “is prerequisite to church fellowship, and to participation in the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>29</sup>

Baptism belongs to the local church for at least two reasons. First, it is given to the local church to examine the confession of the individual. In the words of Hubmaier, “There must also exist an outward confession or testimony through which visible brother and sister can know each other, since faith exists only in the heart. But when he receives the baptism of water the one who is baptized testifies publicly that he has pledged himself henceforth to live according to the rule of Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Dever would concur by stating “The congregation was ultimately responsible for ensuring converts were baptized and the Lord’s Supper was duly administered to those giving credible evidence of regeneration.”<sup>31</sup> Without the examination of ones confession, there could be no surety as to the validity of the faith that was being confessed. The act of baptism is an ecclesiastical act, as signified by the confession and ordinance itself. In other words, where the confession is not genuine, the ordinance is not genuine, and is therefore a false proclamation of the Gospel.

This is not to say that it is given unto the church to judge the salvation of a person, but it is to say the local church has the mandate to test the confession of those who seek to join themselves to their membership.<sup>32</sup> In sum, profession and baptism are inseparable. The testing of a person’s confession is seen in their obedience to that which they profess to believe. “As profession is necessary to church-membership, so is baptism,

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<sup>29</sup> Abstract of Principles, Article XV.

<sup>30</sup> Pipken and Yoder, 127.

<sup>31</sup> Dever, Mark, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 795.

<sup>32</sup> Erickson, 1105.

which is the appointed ceremony of profession. Profession is the substance, and baptism is the form; but Christ's command requires the form as well as the substance.”<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, not only is baptism into the local congregation necessary for the purpose of examining one's profession, but also for the purpose of holding one to an accountability to walk in Christ-likeness that finds its culmination in the act of discipline if necessitated. Hubmaeir, in his *Christian Catechism* explains water baptism as being done under the auspices of a local congregation “before which church the person also publicly and orally vows to God and agrees in the strength of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that he will henceforth believe and live, according to His divine Word. And if he should trespass herein he will accept brotherly admonition, according to Christ's order, Matt. 18:15ff.”<sup>34</sup>

The goal of baptism into the congregation was such that when discipline had to be served, there would be a decisive event at which the congregation could point and show the recipient that they had indeed submitted themselves to their fellow members. Of course, the goal was not simply a cleaning of the rolls, but rather was for the restoration of the erring.<sup>35</sup> It is incumbent upon the one who supports a regenerated church membership to subscribe to a proper view of believer's baptism, namely, that baptism is an initiatory rite into the local church. Failure to confess such is to be immersed in a river of confusion.

### **An Appeal to Fellow Workers**

Recent days have introduced discussions for a much needed Great Commission

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<sup>33</sup> Dagg, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Pipken and Yoder, 349.

<sup>35</sup> Caner, 48.

Resurgence and a call back to a regenerate membership. Such calls are noble indeed, and should be acceptable to all Baptists. Any movement forward must be prepared to answer how these monumental tasks can be accomplished.

History has proven that no true unity occurs apart from doctrinal accountability. No amount of compromise in the area of doctrinal distinctives has ever produced a unity without sacrificing some portion of the Gospel. One must be wary that the endeavors that they pursue are done so with a heart for faithfulness to the Gospel and all that it entails. The pursuits of a Great Commission resurgence and a regenerate church membership are needed indeed, however one must not sacrifice one doctrine for the success of another. That is, one should not sacrifice the doctrine of baptism for the sake of a Great Commission resurgence. To do so is to make the Great Commission into something less than what Christ commanded.

Of notable interest in this paper is the maintenance of Baptist identity in regards to the doctrine of baptism. Any view of baptism that separates the ordinance from the local church is at best a reflection of an individualized, existential, postmodern influenced act that takes no account of the local church solely for one's infatuation with their own idolized and privatized religion. So called evangelicalism faces failure if it does not develop an established ecclesiology fully defined in regards to the ordinances.

A church will never move towards a regenerate membership until it rediscovers the biblical doctrine of baptism. Universal churches cannot serve church discipline because many of her members have assumed their place in heaven. The invisible cannot serve discipline because no one would be able to see the effects.

A resurgence of the Great Commission will also only find failure, for the Great

Commission cannot be left intact without a doctrine of baptism, one of the two mandates in making disciples. “We are, now, to be governed by the Commission, and the exposition of that document furnished by the example of the apostles. And, guided by these lights, can we, for a moment, doubt whether baptism is a pre-requisite to church membership; or whether it preceded the supper?”<sup>36</sup>

Though some things may find themselves offensive to 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears, the voice of which the church is to follow is the voice of Christ, as revealed in Scripture, and not the voice of culture revealed in polls. Discerning the cause of the offense is key to discovering whether or not the offense is applicable to the situation at hand.

As Hubmaier understands the implications of water baptism, it involves believers, of necessity, in a closely regulated life of community. Such a demand creates unease in us: we value individual freedom and find it difficult to consider a commitment to fraternal admonition and discipline as a positive good. Thus while we gladly pay homage to ‘free church’ principles of church polity as opposed to ‘state church’ structures, we ‘children of the Enlightenment’ are much more reticent to adopt the personal and communal implications of the Anabaptist emphasis on water baptism. We fear the loss of personal freedom such a communal commitment would imply.<sup>37</sup>

Until the church reclaims her prophetic voice, she will never experience a true Great Commission resurgence nor a regenerate church membership. Indeed, she will find herself continually looking to place on trial those whose voices heed her to return to a distinctive identity. Should Luther and Calvin reign today, would they once again find a common enemy in those who have called for a biblical ecclesiology? “Whence I think, indeed I know, that a return to true Christianity will never be effected unless baptism and the Lord’s Supper are brought back to their nature and genuine purity.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Fuller, *Baptism and the Terms of Communion: An Argument*, The Baptist Distinctives Series, no. 9 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc, 2006 reprint), 231.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Snyder, “Hubmaier’s Catechism of 1526,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 46.

<sup>38</sup> Pipken and Yoder, 70.



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