



## *Book review by Dean Taylor*

In the scientific world, mankind has learned ingenious ways to prevent making the same mistakes over and over again. You know what I mean—it's not like scientists are still trying to flap their arms and fly off a cliff or shoot arrows at the moon. They have simply learned through careful and painstaking study that things like that were tried and found to be ridiculous. While employing careful study of the history of trial and error, scientists were able to formulate sensible calculations and make better-informed decisions to determine what works ... and what doesn't. We all know the famous adage, "Those who do not learn their history are doomed to repeat it." The church, however, seems slow to discover that she is not exempt from this simple, inescapable truth.

In his latest book, *The Birth, Life, and Death of the Bohemian Revival*, Mike Atnip traces the roots, growth, and death of a challenging group of Christians that we would benefit knowing a lot more about—the Bohemian Brethren. In these Bohemian churches, we get a glimpse of the inheritors of the great Waldensian tradition. From this movement also sprang forth the seeds that later blossomed into the Hutterite and Moravian movements. But perhaps the factor that should most draw our notice—and demand our attention—is the fact that in this testimony, we see the progress

and demise of a group of radical Christians, not too far removed from our current faith and practice.

If you were to ask the average church history student who started the Protestant reformation, I think most would quickly respond, "Martin Luther!" While I think it would be dishonest to ignore his accomplishments, to think of Luther as originating all Protestant thinking is equally biased. Over a hundred years before Martin Luther ever dreamed about slapping a paper on the Wittenberg door, the church in Bohemia had already successfully broken with Rome and had begun to align their doctrine more closely with the Scriptures and the early church. In his book, Mike Atnip surveys the Bohemian Christians, highlighting such men as John Huss, Peter Chelcicky, Rokycana, John Amos Comenius, and others. But what is most provoking about the book is the historical record it gives us of the familiar ebb and flow of church growth and compromise, and the real-life glimpse at how staggering the consequences can be. The question I kept asking myself throughout the book was this: "Where am I in this picture?

Am I experiencing growth? Am I in the midst of a compromise? Or, am I dying?"

Mike begins the book by discussing a few of the sparks that led to the Bohemian revival. Starting with Peter Waldo,

### The Birth, Life, and Death of the Bohemian Revival



Mike traces the movements that continued to catch fire in these Bohemian hills. Revival came when committed men took the Bible, looked at the words of Jesus, and put them into practice. Unfortunately, in time most of these zealous groups cooled off. However, a remnant always continued. Piercing through the next few centuries with a few burning and shining lights, Mike eventually crescendos to one of the main figures of the Bohemian movement—John Huss.

John Huss, awakened by Lollard evangelists influenced by John Wycliffe, started to preach in the common language of the Bohemian people. Huss spoke out against the immorality of the Roman Catholic clergy and challenged the church with many reforms. Predictably, Huss was eventually burned at the stake. But just like the times of the early church, the blood of the martyr became the seed of the church. Quoting Huss, Mike wrote:

Shortly before the flames were lit, John told them, “Today you roast a live goose”—the name Huss meant goose in Bohemian—“but within 100 years there will arise a swan that you will not be able to catch nor harm.” The flame was lit, and when it had done its duty, John’s ashes were thrown into the nearby river. In the place of his execution, a dead mule was buried: supposedly to convince any passersby that all arch-heretics stink pretty bad after they die.

Unfortunately, after the death of John Huss, his fellow countrymen stirred up a massive uprising. Military leaders like John Zizka, who were zealous with what they believed were important Protestant doctrines (like giving the communion cup to the laity), led armed revolts against Rome. Collectively, they came to be called the “Hussites.” However, just when it would seem that the revival was lost on political agendas, Mike tells us of another notable figure of the time—Peter Chelcicky. Mike, speaking of Chelcicky, writes:

Peter Chelcicky was one of the few South Bohemians who stuck to their earlier resolve to practice the Sermon on the Mount. His sword was a pen, which he used extensively in his later years, authoring over 50 books and tracts. ... As one-eyed, fiery John Zizka and Nicholas of Hussinec declared at Prague that the time had come for the faithful to take up arms in their own defense, Peter Chelcicky was present at the

debate, and contended that for Christians, war was a crime. “What is war?” he asked. “It is a breach of the laws of God! All soldiers are violent men, murderers, a godless mob!”

This revolution challenged all the prevalent political and religious attitudes of the day. Two main groups emerged from this time period. Peter Chelcicky collected one dedicated group of believers, zealous to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice. They eventually became known as the *Unitas Fratrum* (United Brethren). Conversely, the Hussites broke into two violent factions, even going to war against each other. When the one faction basically annihilated the other, the surviving Hussite group became the state church of Bohemia, which is in the modern Czech Republic.

After Peter Chelcicky’s death, a man named Gregory led the small, remaining group of the brethren to an abandoned village named Kunvald. Using the Sermon on the Mount as their creed, a community was birthed that became an oasis of radical Christian living. Mike writes about them, saying:

In their “brotherly agreement,” they decided not to testify in court, swear oaths, do civil service of any kind, manage inns, or get involved in buying or selling anything more than the bare necessities of life. They also decided that no one among them could hold worldly rank or privilege. No one should make dice, attend or work in a theater, paint pictures or play music for a living, go to fairs or celebrations of feast days, take interest on money, or be involved

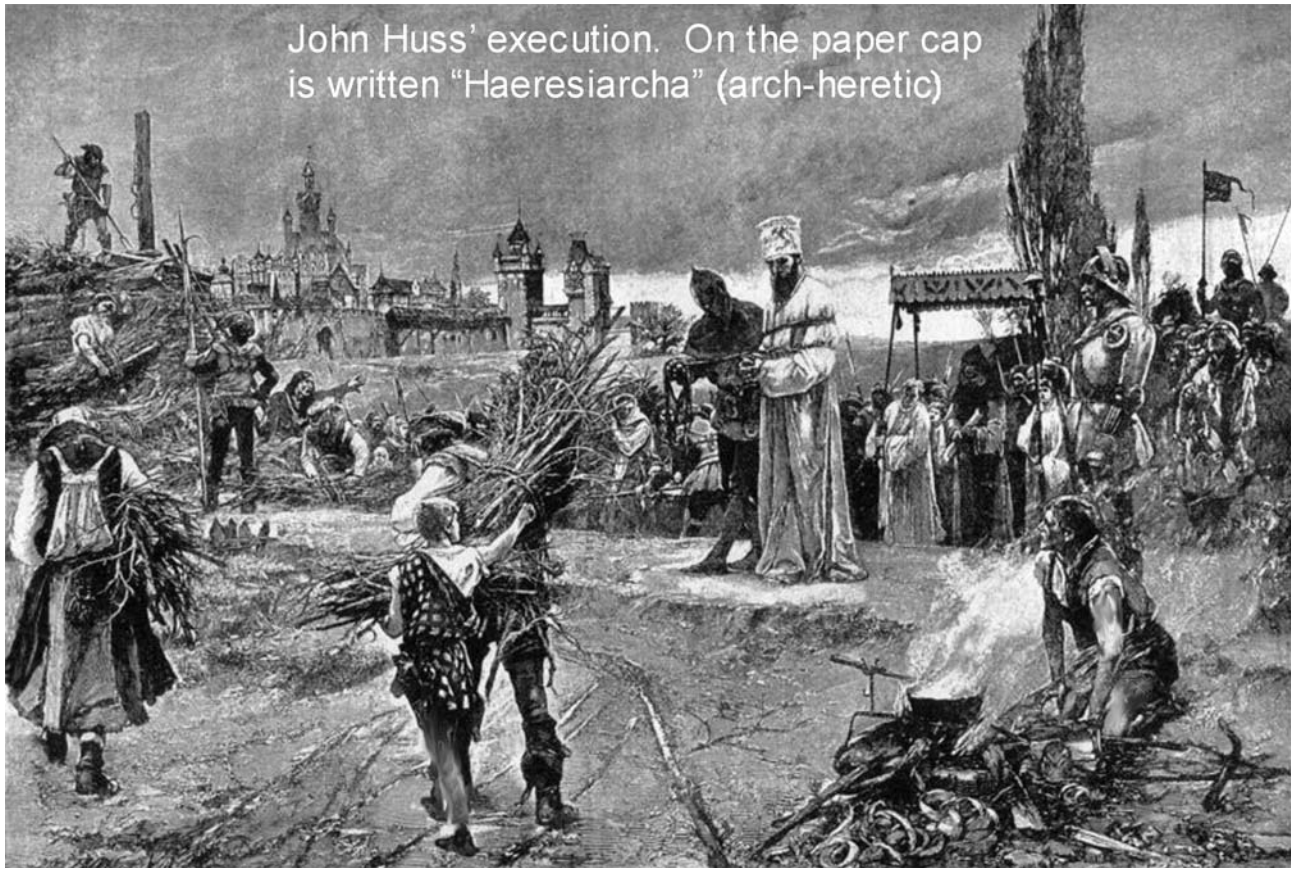
with astrology, witchcraft, or alchemy. A very modest type of gray and white dress was agreed on, and all were expected to take part in daily prayers and the care of the sick. Every member of the Brotherhood was, of course, most strictly forbidden to participate in the Government through the acceptance of any post, either in the general or communal departments, or in military service, as well as by any appeal or complaint to the Government. Complete equality was to prevail in the community; there were to be no poor and no rich. Before being admitted to the community, every wealthy person or member of a privileged class had to relinquish his property and his privileges. No “Brother” was to engage in trading,



**Peter Waldo, pictured above, died in South Bohemia, having been chased there by persecution. For several centuries the Waldensians had held a torch of light in Europe. But it was dying out when the Bohemian revival occurred.**



John Huss' execution. On the paper cap is written "Haeresiarcha" (arch-heretic)



John Huss began church reforms in Bohemia, but was killed before they were totally accomplished. After his death, the Bohemians had to decide whether to fight with the sword or follow Jesus. Sadly, only a small minority chose the latter. But this little faithful group experienced a revival of primitive Christianity.

lend money on interest, or keep an inn. On the other hand, the rules of the fraternity made it obligatory on each member to assist any Brother who might be in want. To live, work, and suffer in silence were the sole duties imposed upon the pious Christian. Although private proprietorship and the separate family were not prohibited, celibacy was regarded as a better state than that of marriage. The unmarried members lived in brother-houses and sister-houses, where they worked and shared their lives.

You will have to read the book to see what an influence this little group of believers had on those around them. However, one of the primary motivations Bro. Mike had in writing the book was to reveal what can happen to these radical groups over time. Because in this case—as in so many other radical movements—as the community grew, so did the challenges. Compromise after compromise, Mike traces how small changes eventually yielded big consequences—starting with issues like whether the local nobility could join the community and keep their estates, or even whether the brethren should participate in the local civil government.

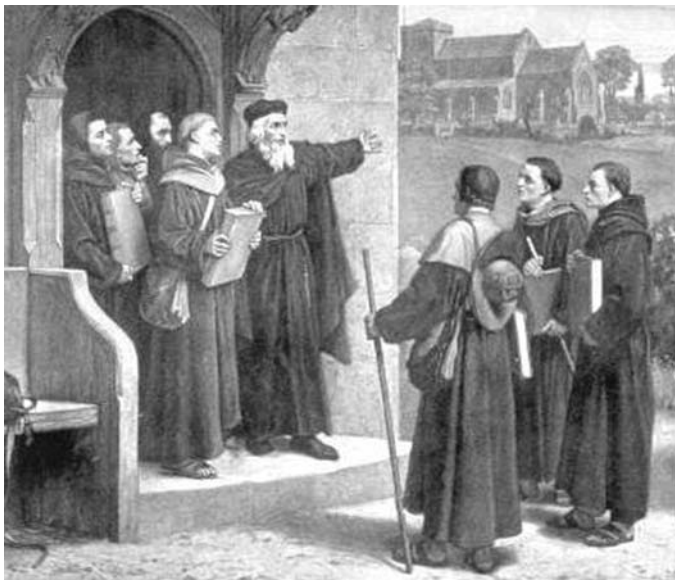
The movement eventually split. The majority sided with the land barons and civil government, desiring to go more into mainstream. A small remnant of the original group remained faithful.

Mike then shows us what eventually happened to the two groups. The compromising “big group” eventually joined with the state, took up the sword, and sought unity with the Hussites. Together with the Hussites, they became similar to the state-church Lutherans of Germany.

The remnant group remained faithful, establishing new communities throughout Bohemia and Moravia, continued to evangelize, and set up a printing press. They printed, among other things, Peter Chelcicky’s writings. Bro. Mike includes an impressive quote taken from a tract written from the “little group” to the “big group” over 500 years ago. Its timeless message is prophetic. Below is a section of that quote:

Throughout the centuries, the true Christian faith has been held by only a small minority of those who say they believe. Whenever the church grew very large, the seed of true faith disappeared among them, but

God preserves it among the faithful few. It is better to be on the right path with the chosen few than on the wrong path with the majority. It was to the small flock that Christ's words of comfort were directed, and when the great church fell away in the time of Constantine, it was only a few—the Waldensians—



Lollard evangelists, like those pictured above preparing to go forth, were one of the sparks of the Bohemian revival. Out of the Bohemian revival came the Moravian Brethren, who sent missionaries to many parts of the globe.

who stayed with the Truth. But now even they have departed from their former teachings. Every movement, even though God begins it, suffers decline and corruption with time, because of the enemy's wickedness. Now that is happening to the Unity of Brothers. Those looking on can see, by comparing the Unity to what it used to be, that what began in the Spirit is ending in the flesh. This is happening because the brothers wanted to avoid persecution and win large numbers of people into the church who were unwilling to make the sacrifices formerly demanded for entry into the brotherhood. Every word of Christ means exactly what it says, and He will in the end accept only those who accept His teaching. Heaven and earth will pass away before the least of His words.

I love history books, but what I liked most about this history book was that the author wrote it in such a way as to leave us with a challenge. At the end of the book, Mike reviews the ups and downs of these movements, and then turns and holds up a mirror to us. He leaves us with four searching questions.

- Lesson 1 - Drift. How do we respond to drift that happens in our movement?
- Lesson 2 - Applications to Principles. In what way did the early phase of these zealous movements make practical application to biblical principles? What affect did losing these applications have on the communities?
- Lesson 3 - Protestantism. Did the Protestant reformation help the Bohemian revival, or hinder it further?
- Lesson 4 - Is there hope? Can God still raise up a people to live like Jesus taught?

Summing up my appeal to you to read this book, on the back cover Bro. Mike gives us an excellent quote from Peter Chelcicky:

We are like people who have come to a house that has been burnt down and try to find the original foundations. This is the more difficult in that the ruins are grown over with all sorts of undergrowths, and many think that these undergrowths are the foundations and say, "This is the foundation" ... This makes the search more difficult, for if all said, "The old foundation has been lost among the ruins," then many would begin to dig and search for it and to really begin a true work of building upon it; as Nehemiah and Zerubbabel did. It is much more difficult now to restore the spiritual ruins—so long fallen down—and get back to the former state, for which no other foundation can be laid than Jesus Christ, from whom the many have wandered away and turned to other gods and made foundations of them."

Bro. Mike closes the back cover with his friendly invitation ... "Join me in an eye-opening trip back in time to see how Peter Chelcicky and others of his age dug deep, seeking the Living Christ."

If you have a heart for the direction of the church, or if you have a burden for a true expression of Christ to be represented here on the earth today, this book is a "must read." ~

*The Birth, Life, and Death of the Bohemian Revival* can be read online or downloaded as a pdf file at [www.PrimitiveChristianity.org](http://www.PrimitiveChristianity.org)

Printed copies are available from the author, who can be reached at Mike Atnip, PO Box 292, Ephrata, PA, 17522.

Printed copies are also available from Scroll Publishing at <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/more-Bohemian-Revival.html> or by writing Scroll Publishing, PO Box 122, Amberson, PA 17210, or by calling (717) 349-7033.