

The understanding of scripture within the Moravian Tradition

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It is quite clear that the Moravian Church stands within the stance of Protestantism which utilized the authority of Scripture as a means of reforming the church, and thus as an authority over against the authority of the church. Actually this meant that the churches which came out of the Reformations in the 15th and 16th centuries tried to various extents to utilize the authority of Christ and the earliest church (which produced the New Testament and preserved the Old Testament) over against the authority of the later church and the transformations the church had undergone. Though the Renaissance, Humanism and some of the early reformers applied some criticism to the Biblical material so that it was seen as originating in the historical process of the life of the early church, frequently those who followed the Reformers utilized theories of inspiration extant since the early church (and even in Judaism) to see the Bible as produced apart from the life of the early church by the over-ruling activity of the Spirit of God. Thus the authority of scripture was seen to exist apart from the early church that produced it so that it might be an authority over against the church. It was seen by various of the Reformation Churches as providing explicit advice on church organization and life (without realizing that the church organization and life reflected in the New Testament were forms assumed in the context of its historical and cultural situation) and as providing the basis for extended doctrinal positions (arrived at by "proof-texting" and harmonizing the vast variety of thought in the biblical material in a way that did not see the difficulties in creating conceptual unity out of the biblical material). One only has to look at the differences of the denominations, churches and sects which regard the Bible as their authority to become aware that accepting the Bible as authority does not solve the problem of what to believe or what to do about various issues. The differences existing between religious groups are not merely matters of interpretation, to be solved if only one interpreted correctly. The differences are there in the biblical material itself. It is no accident that the Roman Catholic Church before Vatican II preferred the Gospel of Matthew, Lutherans prefer Pauline material, the Orthodox Church prefers Johannine material and a group such as the Jehovah's Witnesses prefers such books as Daniel and Revelation. And yet, even if the problems mentioned above are accepted, the Bible must remain a unique authority for the church. The Protestant Reformation and Vatican II were not wrong in this. The question is the nature of this authority.

The Moravian Church's views on Scripture might be examined from two different directions. The first would be the official pronouncements of the church. For example, the form of the Brotherly Agreement presently accepted by the Moravian Church, North and South, U.S.A., states: "The Holy Scriptures are and shall remain the only source and rule of our doctrine, faith, and practice." The Confession of 1573 from the ancient Moravian Church states about the Holy Scriptures: "They are true, infallible and worthy of all belief, having been inspired by the Holy Ghost." Such official statements frequently represent the attempts of the church to come to terms with the beliefs and positions of others within their culture. The Confession of 1573 was an attempt of the Moravian Church to explain itself to and gain respect from the Reformed and Lutheran Churches of that time. One can also see in the 18th century how Spaagenberg and others attempt to explain the views of Zinzendorf more "Lutheranly". Another example of this would be the views of Scripture which developed in some American Moravian churches in the context of conservative or fundamentalistic views of Scripture.

A second way to approach the understanding of Scripture within the Moravian Church would be to examine the views that were held in the most creative periods of the Church's history, which arose through its own insights rather than as accommodations to the views of others.

The ancient Moravian Church had its beginnings at Kunwald in northern Bohemia as a loosely organized society which focused primarily upon the Sermon on the Mount. They sought for standards by which the Christian life might be guided and first called themselves "Brethren of the Law". For the first hundred years of their existence, "the Brethren had only lived with the New Testament," comments Amedeo Molnar, former Dean of the Comenius Faculty, Prague, and one of the foremost authorities on the ancient Moravian Church and the Hussite movements. It was the ancient Church's contacts with Calvinism in the 16th century which caused it to look seriously at the whole of the Bible, including the Old Testament. This also led the Moravian Church to the creation of the Kralice Bible, a revision of a former Taborite version (another Hussite Church).

Molnar states that the structure of the theology of the ancient Moravian Church expresses the view that "everything in Christian tradition can be divided into two categories: there are fundamental things (essentials) and then there are things (ministerials) that only serve the essentials - essentialia and ministerialia. In church history people have not always differentiated between the two, which leads to the deformation of Christianity ... The essentials are the great deeds of God for the salvation of man, and this God acts as the Triune God... These essentials have two aspects: objectively, God, Son, Holy Spirit, and subjectively, faith, love, hope. Everything else is of secondary importance. The distinction between this and the Second Reformation becomes quite clear: the principle of Scripture is clarified only now. A Christian could quite easily live without Scripture; he need only accept God in Christ. Scripture is therefore only an instrument serving these essentials of God. The church also serves this purpose ... These ministerial things are similar to sacraments. The essen-

tials will not be changed. The ministerial things (which serve the essentials) are subject to reformation(1)". Molnar sees this structure of theology as present among the ancient Moravians until the late 16th century, even the hymnals being structured in this fashion.

The similarities of the views of Zinzendorf, the foster-father of the Moravian Church in the 18th century, are striking. Zinzendorf sought to answer the issues that were being raised for Christianity by the German Enlightenment, which included the direction of historical and rational criticism at religious institutions, including the Bible. Zinzendorf saw the human and historical nature of Scripture as due to the way God worked with people: "(The Holy Ghost) lets people (biblical writers) speak as well as they can, he does not give them any better understanding or memory than they have, he doesn't change anything in their natural qualities; but as the person is constituted in his body and mind, so he remains even when he is converted and becomes a servant of God in the highest degree. There can be servants of God in the same degree of blessedness and estimation in the heart of God, where one has a poor and the other a great intellectual capacity. If the two people write, so the one writes with his greater capacity and the other with his limited intellect; if they argue, so the one argues according to the 'school' from which he comes and the other argues according to his (school). The Holy Spirit does not change them nor overcome their nature, but allows each to go his way (2)". The variety of ways that people respond to God today was also characteristic of the Biblical period: "When one believes, one is afforded an inner experience and feeling of God, a little *sensus numinis* as it is proper for the time in which one lives. Each time has its own *sensus numinis* which never contradicts that of the previous time but from generation to generation increases and becomes clearer. This is apparent in the great historical periods (in German - "Economies") before and under the Law and under Christ where the sense of the divine in each was appropriate for its own time. Accordingly each time has its own *systema theologicum* (theological system) which already leads to the following period [as I Peter 1:11 indicates]. However, the theology of the following period cannot be learned before the time is fulfilled, and still each person of this historical period has the faith which is right for him. That which is of primary concern then is not so much the completeness of knowledge, but the faithful faith-obedience which a person expresses in his historical period towards the content and object of faith which is presented to the heart's and mind's eyes. Each soul is evaluated in God's heart according to whether or not it is willing to do that (3)".

The biblical books, in order to be understood, should then be arranged according to the order of their historical origin and this he did in his second Attempt at A Translation of the New Testament. Since the Old Testament involves special problems of understanding, in the last years of his life he sought to create an Old Testament Handbook which would eliminate doublets, geneologies, and other material not significant for the Christian.

The primary purpose of Scripture is to provide the place where God can be met, where Christ can be met. The experience of the living Christ, and of his heavenly Father and the Spirit through Him, are the *essentialia*,

as in the ancient Church. Scripture is of the ministerialia, those things which serve the central concern of relationship with Christ. This relationship is a matter of the heart. To make religion primarily a matter of concepts is to allow only an intellectual elite to be religious and to miss the focus of the biblical message which points to the primacy of relationship with God. In a supplement to a later collection of a weekly he circulated while in Dresden, Zinzendorf stated:

- 1) Religion can be grasped without conclusions drawn by reason, otherwise no one could have a religion except the one who has an enlightened mind, and they would be the best students of God who had the greatest rational capacity; however, that is not believable and wars against our experience.
- 2) Religion must be something which is obtained without any concepts, through mere experience; otherwise no one deaf, or still less someone born blind, or even less an insane person, or a child, could have the religion which is necessary for salvation. The first could not hear the truth, the second lacks the sensual perception which would awake his mind and incite his thoughts, and the third type lacks the ability to understand concepts, relate and test them.
- 3) Truth in concepts is less important than truth in experience, errors in teaching are not as bad as in essence, an ignorant person is not as badly off as one impervious (to God).
- 4) The conceptual meanings vary with age, education and other conditions. The experienced meanings are not so much subject to these variations; they remain firmly established in the face of time and circumstances (4)."

There is, however, conceptual material in Scripture - material of three types. First, there are the "basic truths" (Grundwahrheiten) which are clearly understandable to all and are necessary for salvation (Zinzendorf would seem to mean that what they are about is necessary for salvation - i. e., Christ and the atonement). Secondly, there are "matters of knowledge" (Erkenntnisse), materials only understandable to those who are trained and engage in further study. Lastly, there are materials which Zinzendorf calls "secrets" (Geheimnisse), dealing with matters not clearly defined in Scriptures so that their interpretation tends to produce different opinions. The interpretations one attempts of these "secrets", such as the Trinity or the nature of the Lord's Supper, or what will happen at the second coming of Christ, should be kept private, not argued about, and certainly not forced on anyone else (5).

The ability to deal with the Bible in such a way as to form conceptual truths or doctrinal statements out of it is limited. Those especially trained and gifted will be able to do more with what can be conceptualized from these "matters of knowledge". However, Zinzendorf asserts that interpretation is not merely a matter of intellectual understanding, but of allowing the Spirit to lead to an experiential understanding of what the words and concepts "mean". God never asks of us that which he has not yet led us to understand (6). Moreover, interpretation is always affected by the historical context in which it is done so that doctrinal and conceptual theological systems are right for their time and context, but not necessarily right for everyone else in other contexts (7).

Thus Moravians in various countries adhered to the major doctrinal

formulations of the church of that country and yet, in spite of these different doctrinal expressions, realized that in Christ they were all united. Unity came not from uniform biblical interpretation nor doctrinal formulations, but the heart experience of the Christ to whom the interpretations and formulations bore witness.

In 1978 a landmark book was published in Biblical Theology, Samuel Terrien's *Elusive Presence* (8). Intended as a possible foundation for a new ecumenical theology, it sees the unifying element of all the variegated biblical materials as the theme of the presence of God which is elusive because it cannot be manipulated by man. Both Old and New Testament traditions are seen as speaking of the God who was present in the past in his saving acts, who will be present in the future, and is experienced in the present by past and future being taken up into the cultus of his people, in the New Testament in preaching and worship. Though not adequately stressing the presence of God in the resurrected Christ and the Spirit, it nevertheless affirms the perceptions of Zinzendorf and the Moravian Church: Scripture serves that which is "essential": the presence of and relationship with God (for Zinzendorf described in terms of the relationship with Christ).

I believe thus that our inheritance as Moravians points us to the fact that the essential purpose of Scripture lies not in formulations and doctrinal statements derived from it which will legitimately differ if developed in different contexts, but as an open door through which we may enter into relationship with God and develop a life in responsibility to Him. This is the theme of my other article, "Reflections On the Right Use of Scriptures With a View to the Love of God."

However, both for the sake of Christian understanding and for the sake of preserving what is essential in the Christian understanding of God and life when confronted with issues that challenge this understanding, formulations and conceptualizations of faith need to be developed. These same concerns gave birth to the creeds and doctrinal statements of the Church. Yet the following should be kept in mind:

1. The nature of the biblical material.
 - a) It should be kept in mind that Scripture belongs to the *ministerialia* serving the *essentialia*. One should also look for the "Basic Truths" of Scripture, that essential message to which its variety bears witness; the reality of a gracious God who enters into relationship with humankind and calls persons to live out the responsibility of that relationship and bear witness to it.
 - b) Scripture is "incarnational". It contains the action of God and the reaction of man. The varieties of human reaction to and interpretation of God's action produce the varieties of theology in the biblical material expressing various understandings of God, life-style, and the institutional life of God's people. The presence of this variety enriches our understanding of God and the possibilities of human response. However, it does make it more difficult to develop doctrinal statements based on the biblical material. The biblical materials were produced within a 1000 year stream of the history of God's people. A particular portion of that history is not adequately represented in the biblical material - the Judaism of the inter-testamental period. (Some

material from this period, now known to us as the Old Testament Apocrypha, was in the Old Testament of the early church because the church down to the Reformation used the broader canon of the Greek Old Testament later rejected by much of Protestantism.)

c) Many of the concepts and terms used in the Bible had a history of use before they were used by the biblical writers. One must always carefully ask how the biblical writer intended to use his terms and not make them mean more than intended.

d) Frequently an issue is dealt with in different ways at different periods (e.g., the New Testament understanding of the state - Rom. 13, Rev. 13, I Pet. 2). Frequently an earlier theme is interpreted and reinterpreted at different stages in history (e.g., the Exodus). In the New Testament, Old Testament ideas are frequently reinterpreted (e.g., Jesus' treatment of the hopes of Israel and the Kingdom of God). Thus it may be helpful to look at the "history" of the treatment of an idea.

e) For the Christian Church the authority of Christ, the Word of God, is ultimate. One must listen carefully for his approach to concepts and issues. There is, however, sometimes a problem in ascertaining the position of Jesus on an issue because of the various presentations of him in the Gospels. Also, one must ask the extent to which Jesus was arriving at solutions and making statements merely for his contemporaries and their needs, speaking on their terms.

f) As Zinzendorf pointed out, there are limitations to what one can do with the biblical material in making theological statements. The "Basic Truths" are relatively clear when one brings to Scripture the church's and one's own living relationship with Jesus and his heavenly Father. Then there are those "matters of knowledge" which can be dealt with by those adequately trained and thus there is a place for the "expert" in theologizing from the biblical materials. Then there are the "secrets", those matters where it is extremely difficult to gain a definition and statement which might be agreed upon by the community of faith. The definition of these matters should be left open - and perhaps, at times, even kept private.

2. The New Testament church revived the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. It assumes that life is not merely worked out by applying the Scriptural tradition. Jesus worked out his life primarily in responsibility to God and man, not in terms of the Law and the Prophets or the traditions of the interpretation of these worked out by Post-Exilic Judaism. The early church experienced the Spirit and knew that Christ had been raised from the dead, becoming its contemporary Lord. The church then sought to respond to life and issues with responsibility to the risen Lord and through the guidance of the Spirit (e.g., I Cor. 2:10-16; 7:40). Most of the early church also harkened back to the tradition of Jesus' life and sayings, but it assumed that God would help it to deal with situations which might not even have been faced and dealt with in the Jesus tradition. The early church also utilized the Old Testament, but primarily used it prophetically, as pointing to what occurred in Jesus and in the life of the early church.

3. There may be a need to place 1st century ideas in 20th century language. The early church established the pattern for this by expressing in the conceptualities of the Hellenistic world a Christianity which began within Judaism. Paul, for example, primarily describes Christianity in terms of his Jewish background in Romans and Galatians, but in different concepts in the Corinthian correspondence and in Colossians.

4. We must recognize the limitations of knowledge which are not only inherent in the problems of knowing, but of which Paul, our earliest theologian, was so well aware (I Cor. 13:8-12). We must recognize the primacy of relationship and love over knowledge (I Cor. 13; I Cor. 8:1). We must recognize that all biblical interpretation and theological reflection, in the variety of their expression, exist for the sake of the Gospel, to draw persons close to God and the realities of the Christian life. (I Cor. 9:22-23).

Anmerkungen

- 1) Amedeo Molnar, "The First Reformation". The Bulletin, Moravian Theological Seminary, vol. 1972-77, Bethlehem, Pa. Lecture delivered in German in Prague during European Seminar of the Seminary, 1973.
- 2) Sermons on the Litany of the Wounds: Vier und dreissig Homilien über die Wunden-Litaney der Brüder ... , 1747, pp. 145-6.
- 3) London Sermons: Der Predigten die der Ordinarius Fratrum von Anno 1751 bis 1755 zu London gehalten hat, Abth. IV, London and Barby, 1757, pp. 35f.
- 4) The German Socrates: "Gedancken vor gelehrte und doch gutwillige Schüler der Wahrheit", Der teutsche Sokrates, Samuel B. Walter, Leipzig, 1732, pp. 280-90.
- 5) The Pennsylvania Sermons: Öffentliche Reden ... die Derselbe als vocirter Pastor bey der einzigen damals zu Philadelphia in Pennsylvania bekannten Evangelisch Lutherischen Gemeine in ihrer Kirche daselbst im Jahr 1742 gehalten hat, Dritte Auflage, Clemens, London und Barby, 1760, pp. 68ff.
- 6) Hermann Plitt, Zinzendorfs Theologie, Band III, F. A. Perthes, Gotha, 1869, p. 10.
- 7) See previous quotation from the London Sermons.
- 8) Samuel Terrien, The Elusive Presence: Toward A New Biblical Theology, Harper and Row, N. Y., 1978.

DAS SCHRIFTVERSTÄNDNIS DER BÖHMISCHEN BRÜDER UND BEI ZINZENDORF

Will man den Stellenwert und die Sicht der heiligen Schrift innerhalb der Brüder-Unität untersuchen, so bieten sich nach Freeman zwei Wege an. Es ließen sich einmal die offiziellen Verlautbarungen der Brüderkirche betrachten, z.B. das Brüderbekenntnis von 1573. Eine genauere Prüfung solcher Texte würde darzustellen haben, so meint Freeman, inwieweit sie Ausdruck ihrer zeitgeschichtlichen Situation und Umwelt sind und auf damals eingenommene kirchliche Positionen reagieren. So sei das Brüderbekenntnis von 1573 der Versuch, den Standpunkt der Brüderkirche gegenüber der reformierten und lutherischen Kirche darzustellen und deren Anerkennung zu gewinnen.

Ein anderer Zugang zum Thema - und dafür entscheidet sich Freeman - erschließt sich, wenn man die Äußerungen der "schöpferischen Perioden" der Kirchengeschichte, die eher die eigenen Erkenntnisse einer Bewegung enthalten, analysiert. Demgemäß stellt er kurz die Auffassung der alten Brüderkirche im Anschluß an eine Vorlesung Molnars dar und hebt vor allem die Unterscheidung der wesentlichen (essentialia) von den dienlichen (ministerialia) Dingen hervor. Die heilige Schrift gehört zu den dienlichen Dingen ebenso wie die Kirche, die den Zugang zu den wesentlichen Dingen, zu Gott Vater, seinem Sohn, zum heiligen Geist oder auch zu Glaube, Hoffnung und Liebe eröffnet. Die böhmischen Brüder lebten in den ersten 100 Jahren nur mit dem Neuen Testament, erst die Kontakte mit der reformierten Kirche führten zur Beschäftigung mit dem Alten Testament.

Die Ähnlichkeit dieser Gedankengänge mit denen Zinzendorfs hält Freeman für schlagend. Zinzendorf sah die menschliche, historische Entstehung der Schrift und wollte die biblischen Bücher schon in historischer Reihenfolge anordnen. Freeman sagt: "Die Erfahrung des lebendigen Christus und seines himmlischen Vaters und durch ihn seines heiligen Geistes sind die wesentlichen Dinge wie in der alten Brüderkirche. Die Schrift gehört zu den dienlichen Dingen, die dem zentralen Anliegen der Konnexion mit Christus dienen". Die lebendige Beziehung zu Christus ist Herzenssache, nicht eine Angelegenheit des Verstandes oder der richtigen Begriffe. So habe es Zinzendorf schon in seiner Schrift "Der teutsche Sokrates" und auch später geschrieben. Darum seien theologische Bekenntnisse und Lehrformulierungen, die der heiligen Schrift gemäß sind, zwar nützlich und gut, aber doch nur "richtig" in ihrer Zeit und in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext, nicht aber notwendigerweise ebenso richtig für Menschen einer anderen Gesellschaft und Kultur.

Diese Erkenntnis habe die Brüdergemeinde zu einer erstaunlichen Anpassungsfähigkeit gegenüber den jeweiligen Konfessionen und Kirchen geführt. Sie konnte sich den wichtigsten Lehrformulierungen der Kirche eines Landes anschließen und trotz der unterschiedlichen Bekenntnisse der Kirchen daran festhalten, daß in Christus alle eins sind:

In diesem Zusammenhang macht Freeman auf das 1978 veröffentlichte

Buch von Samuel Terrien mit dem Titel: "Elusive Presence" aufmerksam, da hier in dem Leitmotiv der Gegenwart Gottes das die verschiedenen biblischen Bücher verbindende Thema angegeben wird. Er empfindet diese These als Bestätigung der brüderlichen Sicht. "Die Schrift dient dem, was wesentlich ist, eben der Gegenwart Gottes und der Gemeinschaft mit ihm".

In vier Punkten faßt Freeman das Ziel seines Aufsatzes zusammen.

1. Die Eigenart der biblischen Bücher liegt in ihrem dienlichen Charakter. Sie ist Ausdruck der Menschwerdung Gottes. Darum ist der geschichtliche Charakter der biblischen Begriffe, Vorstellungen und Sprache zu beachten. Mit Zinzendorf sollten wir unterscheiden zwischen den "Grundwahrheiten" für jedermann, den Erkenntnissen für die Gebildeten oder Theologen und den Geheimnissen der Schrift, die uns verborgen sind.

2. Das Neue Testament nimmt die alttestamentliche prophetische Überlieferung auf und deutet damit an, daß das christliche Leben mehr als die Anwendung der biblischen Überlieferung auf die Gegenwart ist.

3. Es ist unumgänglich, die Vorstellungen des 1. Jahrhunderts in die Sprache des 20. Jahrhunderts zu übertragen.

4. Wir müssen uns der Grenzen unsrer Kenntnisse bewußt bleiben und die Ursprünglichkeit der liebenden Gemeinschaft mit Gott vor allem Wissen anerkennen.