

## Reading the New Testament

*Mary Lynnette Delbridge*

Let me begin by thanking *The Hinge* for asking me to consider the ways, as a Moravian, I read and interpret the New Testament (NT) texts. I confess that I gazed with nostalgia at my shelf of New Testament interpretation books, as I first considered this assignment. These books outline the various methods of interpretation I learned during my years as a seminary and doctoral student and which I taught as a seminary professor. Obviously, they inform my approach to the NT. I seek to read the texts in their historical, cultural, and social context. I look for the literary and rhetorical structure of the texts. I listen to the texts understanding that they were written and canonized largely by those in the Early Christian world who had social power and authority. I try to read between the lines, seeking to hear as well the voices of those who lacked power and authority. Often, I find that reading non-canonical Early Christian writings and the broader world of Greco-Roman literature helps me to hear and understand the social dynamics I find in the NT texts. Finally, I realize that as I read and interpret the NT, I also need to be honest about my own presuppositions, preoccupations, and prejudices.

So far, nothing I have said sounds particularly “Moravian.” Many other readers of the NT say the same sort of things, regardless of their denominational identity. The question then remains: How do my sensibilities or experiences as a Moravian inform the way I read and interpret the NT? This question brings to mind a conversation I had long ago during my first year of doctoral study. The church history professor had graciously agreed to read with me the Apostolic Fathers, a collection of Early Christian texts reflecting life in the church in late first to mid-second century CE. We were reading together the letters of Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch who was traveling to Rome where he was to be executed. As he journeyed through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), he visited and then wrote letters of thanks and instruction to several of the churches in the towns and cities he had passed through. Apparently, the leaders of these churches had rolled out the red carpet and provided warm and loving hospitality for him as he stopped along the way. After all, he was a Bishop of the church and he faced martyrdom. He was also a Christian leader in a world that was still largely pagan. It was a joy for the Christians

*The Rev. Dr. Lynette Delbridge has a PhD in New Testament from Union Theological Seminary and is co-pastor of Castleton Hill Moravian Church in Staten Island, New York.*

of Asia Minor to be with another Christian, to honor his faithfulness, and to feel connected through him with the churches he had come from and those he would be visiting.

I commented to Professor Norris that their behavior reminded me of the way Moravians open their homes and churches to welcome Moravians traveling from other parts of the world. He raised his eyebrows. Was I naïvely idealistic? Was I seeing my denomination through rose-colored glasses? I assured him that Moravians would be pleased to welcome each other just as the Christians of Asia Minor had been pleased to welcome Ignatius. After all, compared to the large sea of people in other religious traditions and in other Christian denominations, we Moravians are also a fairly small band of believers. Like the Christians who were a tiny minority in the Greco-Roman world and who welcomed Ignatius, it does give us joy when we have the opportunity to be together, to share news with each other about our churches, and to pray and care for each other.

I'm not sure whether I convinced Professor Norris. Our conversation did, however, alert me to the fact that I do read from a Moravian perspective. I am curious about and sensitive to the community dynamics I see reflected in the NT and in other Early Christian texts. I want to understand how Christians experienced the Risen Christ and the work of the Spirit in the context of their community life together. How did they define their sense of identity? How did they hammer out their relationships with outsiders? How did they fight and reconcile with each other? And how did they support and care for each other? In the larger academic world, I

suppose I would be identified as a scholar who favors sociological or social-scientific methods of interpretation. In my heart, I know that I am reading as a Moravian.

I am grateful that the years I spent in the classroom and library were fruitful, rich years. The knowledge and skills I gained did teach me how to listen carefully to the voices of Early Christians in the NT and in other Early Christian texts. As each year passed, I felt I knew and understood my Christian forebears better. Gradually, instead of being an object of my study and historical investigation, they became people with whom I could have a relationship. Like good mentors, they started teaching me about life in the Church. Now that I serve as a co-pastor of a local congregation, I am particularly grateful for my relationship with them. When I let them, they stand beside me. They encourage me, correct me, shake their heads with me, and remind me to stay focused on the things that are really important. I am grateful for the conversations they are willing to have with me.

For the purposes of this reflection for *The Hinge*, I would like to explore some of the conversations my Christian forebears have had with me about “difference.” Inevitably, in our local congregations and in our denomination, we have to deal with differences in the ways we encounter the Risen Christ, worship, and seek to live and do mission in the world. Sometimes we can celebrate and rejoice in our differences. Sometimes they make us uncomfortable and threaten our ability to stay together. Should we avoid those differences and try to make everyone feel, believe, and speak of Jesus in the same

ways or should we accept our differences? If we do accept them, how do we deal with them in productive rather than destructive ways? To explore these questions further, I would like to consider the conversations I hear my Early Christian ancestors having with each other and with me about Christology, the interpretation of the Jesus' traditions, and ways we live out our lives out in the larger cultures that surround us.

My Early Christian mentors remind me that from the earliest days, Christians have always had a variety of viewpoints about the identity of Jesus. Here are just a few examples. Some Early Christians tell me that Jesus was a fiery-eyed, apocalyptic prophet preaching the doom of a coming, cataclysmic judgment (Mark 13). Others bear witness to Jesus' power as a healer who gave sight to the blind (Mark 10:46-52) and restored the lepers and those with mental illness to their communities (Mark 1:40-45; 5:1-20). Some see Jesus as an insistent advocate for social justice who pointed out abuses of power by the wealthy (Matt. 20:1-15; 25:14-30) and who also called his followers to alleviate the sufferings of those around him (Luke 4:18-19; 14:13, 21). Some say Jesus was a suffering servant messiah who insisted that he must suffer and die (Mark 8:31-36) and who called his followers to be servants as well (Matt. 23:11; Mark 9:35b; Mark 10:42-45; John 12:25; John 13:14). Some see Jesus as a high and exalted Lord who disarmed the "principalities and powers" and who is now seated on the right hand of God (Col. 2:14, 3:1). Many more examples of other Christologies abound in the NT texts.

As my Early Christian forebears speak from the texts and bear witness to their own deeply held and differing beliefs about Jesus, they teach me that God's revelation to us through Christ cannot be confined to one way of understanding. Nor, they say, should we be so threatened by differences in our Christologies that we try to make one Christology normative and exclude other Christologies. They remind me that different understandings of Jesus do not have to be mutually exclusive. Instead, they can live together in creative tension within our communities just as they do within the NT texts. We should consider ourselves blessed then, as Moravians, when our various viewpoints about the identity and work of Jesus are all present in our communities and when they are in conversation and exchange with one another. Our different understandings of Jesus and the different ways we respond to him enable us to speak to the world in a variety of ways about God's love and redemption through Christ.

If we can deal with differences in our Christologies, can we deal with differences in the way we understand and apply the teachings and actions of Jesus? Again, my Early Christian mentors would say yes. They remind me that the Jesus' traditions take on a life of their own as Christians in various times, places, and situations seek to interpret and understand them. An excellent example of this phenomenon is Jesus' saying about being "for or against." Remember the story about the man casting out demons in Jesus' name even though he was not part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples? John was offended and reported to Jesus that he and the disciples had

told the man to stop. But Jesus told his disciples to let the man continue his work of healing and restoration. He said, “For he that is not against us is for us (Mark 9:40, Luke 9:50).” Here Jesus’ response is one that supports inclusion. Even though the man casting out demons is not part of their own particular inner circle, his ministry to the world in Jesus’ name is valid.

Early Christians in a different context, however, could remember this saying in an entirely different way. When the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, Jesus defended himself. “And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?” In this antagonistic atmosphere, he goes on to say, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23).” Here the lines are drawn. Either you are part of the group or you are completely outside and against it.

These different interpretations of Jesus’ “for and against” saying in the gospels show me that Early Christians were willing to reflect upon the sayings and teaching of Jesus in light of their own situations. Because their situations were different, they found different meanings in Jesus’ teachings. Other examples of Early Christians giving different interpretations to Jesus’ teachings and actions abound in the gospel literature. As my Christians forebears share with me their own interpretations, they help me realize I cannot vacuum pack Jesus’ sayings and actions in their original historical context or in my own context for that matter. By their own example in the

NT texts, they encourage me to participate in the creative process of hearing, reinterpreting, and handing down the traditions of Jesus. They give me permission let these traditions live on in other times and contexts. They also help me expect and accept that since our situations do differ, our interpretations of the Jesus’ traditions may differ as well.

A third conversation I have with my Early Christian mentors is one about the stance we take toward the larger cultures in which we live. As Christians who believe God’s Spirit is already working in us and that God is raising us to a new life, how do we continue to live and work in the world? How do we live out our lives as people who are radically changed, redeemed, and committed to the Kingdom or Realm of God rather than to the temporal rulers and social structures of our day? Inevitably, as they dealt with these questions, my early Christian forebears made different choices; sometimes, they found themselves in conflict with each other.

Let’s focus on a practical example. Early Christians found themselves wondering how following and being transformed by Christ would affect their families, the use of their household resources, their status as masters or slaves, the gender roles they played, and the decisions they made about marriage and celibacy. For the sake of this discussion, we will focus on one particular issue. Should Christians marry or remain celibate? We find that Paul, writing in the 50’s CE, dealt with this issue as did the author of the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), who wrote in Paul’s name sometime between 100 and 125 CE.

First, in 1 Cor. 7, Paul gives us a glimpse of the Christians in Corinth asking many questions related to this issue. Should Christian couples continue to have sexual relationships with each other (7:1-7) or divorce (7:10-11)? Should Christians who were married to non-believers divorce their spouses (7:12-16)? Should Christians who are currently unmarried follow social expectations and marry or should they remain single (7:8-9; 7:25-27; 36-40)? Apparently, some in the Corinthian community strongly felt that their new life in Christ called them to embrace celibacy and Paul is probably quoting one of their slogans when he says, “It is better for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1).

Paul engages the issue by giving practical reasons for preferring celibacy. Why would Christians want to deal with the responsibilities of family during the “impending crisis” of the end time (7:25-29)? And certainly Christians without family responsibilities would be able to give “unhindered devotion to the Lord (7:32-35). And yet, even as Paul offers this practical advice supporting celibacy, he acknowledges that Christians have different gifts (7:7) and that both lifestyles, celibacy and marriage, are legitimate (7:28; 7:38; 7:39-40).

For all Christians, regardless of their life situations and their choice to be celibate or not, Paul offers theological considerations to keep in mind. He says the external conditions of a Christian’s life such as being circumcised, uncircumcised, slave or free are secondary. By implication, being celibate or not is also secondary. The important thing is to “remain with God” (7:17-24). Finally, Paul leaves the decision up to individual Christians and suggests

that whatever their marital status, they should live life with a sense of detachment from the “world” which is passing away. They should stay focused on God (7:29-31).

The Pastoral Epistles offer us a second example of a NT writer dealing with celibacy and marriage. The author of these letters mentions opponents who forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods (1 Tim 4:3). He believes that they are “making their way into households and captivating silly women” (2 Tim 3:6) and that they are “upsetting whole families” (Titus 1:11). He also refers to a group of widows which the church supported and which included both older widows and younger celibate women (1 Tim 5:3-16).

For the author of the Pastoral Epistles, the debate over celibacy and marriage is a quite heated one and he gives it great importance in his writings. He makes being married and raising respectful children a requirement for those who wish to be church leaders (1 Tim 3:2-12; 1 Tim 5:9-10; Titus 1:5-6). He insists that the church should only support widows who have been married and who have brought up children (1 Tim 5:9-10). He instructs younger celibate women to leave the widow’s group and to marry and bear children instead (1 Tim 5:14; See also Titus 2:3-5). He also makes bearing and raising faithful children a requirement for salvation for women when he says that a woman “will be saved through childbearing, provided they [the children] continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty” (1 Tim 3:15).

We have to wonder about the motivating factors behind these instructions. In addition

to wanting the Christian “faith” to be preserved and handed down in an orderly fashion from one generation to the next, the writer of the Pastoral Epistles wants his communities to enjoy social stability. To that end, he is preoccupied about the opinions outsiders have of the Christian community. His instructions for choosing leaders (1 Tim 3:7; 3:13); instructions which would have eliminated celibate younger women from the widows’ group (1 Tim 5:14); instructions to slaves (1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:10), and general instructions to younger women and men (Titus 2:5; 2:8) all suggest that Christians should behave in ways that would earn the Christian community the respect and regard of outsiders.

The Early Christian debates about marriage and celibacy which we find in 1 Cor. 7 and in the Pastoral Epistles are interesting, not because they are necessarily a front-burner issue for us today. In our churches we accept, both as members and as leaders, people who are married and single and people with and without children. These debates, however, are interesting because they raise larger questions for us. How do our Christian values and sense of mission affect the ways we live in the world? To what degree are we willing to be “different” from and even in conflict with the larger cultures in which we live? How important is it for us to be well-thought of by outsiders so that we can make a living, quietly go about our business, and avoid hostility and negative attention from outsiders? And how do we deal with each other when we come down on opposing sides of such issues?

When I reflect on the issues that have the most potential to divide us as Moravians, they are often not about our shared belief in the

redemptive work of Christ or our call to bear witness to him in the world. They are about the ways we choose to live in and make sense of the world around us. For instance, how do we deal with right to life issues like capital punishment, abortion, and euthanasia? How do we respond to our governments when they wage war? Do we refuse to be employed by or benefit from companies that exploit their workers or companies that make and sell products that harm the public health? What kinds of attitudes do we have toward those who are immigrants and towards those who come from different religious traditions? Should we welcome and provide civil rights for all persons regardless of their sexual orientation? And how much should we refuse to participate in activities or support corporations that do damage to the environment? The decisions we make about any of these issues could well put us at odds with one another and at odds with the world around us. They are choices that can radically and very practically alter the way we live in the world.

When I realize that I am caught up in a debate over one of these social issues, I find it helpful to observe and learn from the ways Paul and the writer of the Pastoral Epistles dealt with the issue of celibacy and marriage. They offer us two quite different approaches. On the one hand, we find in the Pastoral Epistles a conflict that is so heated no room is left for real dialogue between those who disagree. Instead of engaging his opponents on the theological issues at stake, the writer of the Pastoral Epistles calls them names (For example, 1 Tim 1:8-11; 2 Tim 3:1-5). He insists that his way is the only way for Christians to be faithful and claims that those who practice

celibacy are non-Christians. They “renounce the faith” (1 Tim 4:1). He suggests requirements for leaders which, if followed, would have shut out anyone who could not or would not conform to his ideals. Finally, he seeks to limit God’s free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ by saying that women save themselves, not through faith, but through childbearing (1 Tim 2:15).

On the other hand, we find Paul dealing with his church conflict in a way that enables Christians who have different sensibilities about the issue to remain in community with each other. He does not mention the reactions and opinions of outsiders as a reason for Christians to choose celibacy or marriage. He does not resort to name calling nor does he seek to exclude anyone from the church or from leadership in the church. He discusses the practical and theological issues at stake and then makes it clear that both celibacy and marriage are legitimate options. Finally, he encourages Christians to make their own well-informed theological decision about the way they choose to live.

As a Moravian, I am grateful that I can listen in on and learn from the conversations Paul and the writer of the Pastoral Epistles had with their respective communities. Observing their approach to this particular conflict helps me to become more self-conscious of the ways my Christians communities and I deal with conflict. Carefully listening to and evaluating the words and behavior of these two Early Christian authors is like holding a mirror up to examine myself, my church, and my denomination. After listening carefully to the author of the Pastoral Epistles, I wonder. Do we ever call our

opponents names and try to make the rules so only the people in our “camp” can lead and have influence in the church? How much do we broker God’s salvation in ways that support our own agendas and power? How much do we care about what other people think?

I admit that I find Paul’s style of conflict management much more redemptive and “Moravian.” He does not make a person’s marital or reproductive status into an “essential” but focuses instead on a person’s relationship with God and attitude toward the world. He gives Christians the liberty to decide how they will use their different gifts and life circumstances. And in 1 Cor. 13, we do hear him extolling the virtues of love. Listening to Paul encourages me to ask whether we give people good practical advice along with solid theological reflection. Are we gracious enough not to control people’s decisions but to allow them to make their own choices? Can we live with the tension of “both/and” in our communities?

I have talked in this reflection about the conversations I hear my Early Christian forebears having with one another and with me. When I listen to them, I learn a great deal about accepting differences and dealing with conflict. Does this way of reading the NT texts, however, truly help me to experience the Risen Christ and move ahead in faithful discipleship? Is it a legitimate as a “Moravian” way to read the NT? For me, the answer is yes. Listening to the different ways my Early Christian forebears experienced and understood the Risen Christ helps me speak more effectively to a world with many different needs. Listening to voices of my

Christian ancestors empowers me to interpret the Jesus' traditions in light of my own context and experiences, even if the meaning I find is different from the meanings others find.

Conversations with my forebears in the faith also protect me from becoming overly disillusioned when tensions arise in the church. Understanding the human dynamics of living in community helps me to be sanguine when our differences lead to conflict. Finally, while personal revelation and mystical experience are important ways to encounter God, I do take incarnational theology seriously. I know the Risen Christ in large part through the proclamation and struggles of my sisters and brothers past and present, in the words of appreciation and encouragement they speak to me, through the arms with which they lovingly embrace me, through the hands that join mine in service, and through the voices that raise with mine in worship. And so, as a Moravian, I read seeking to understand the communities of faith that have gone before me in the distant past as well as my own. As I read, sometimes, I am blessed with glimpses of the Risen Christ.