

Zinzendorf's View of Scripture

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In the contemporary Moravian Church we seek faithful approaches to interpretation that help us not just to speak about the “good news” but also, by grace, to become the good news. Amidst a culture that promotes polarization and dichotomy we desperately need a starting place for theological discussion that will encourage unity (if not unanimity), and so, quite naturally, we are led to explore and reflect upon the historical expressions of hermeneutical practice within our denominational tradition.

It is by way of this search for understanding that we arrive at one of the Renewed Moravian Church's most controversial leaders, whose influence in the area of theology and religious practice was profound and extended beyond the Moravian Church. Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf sought to bring new vitality to the Christian faith in the period of stagnation in the German church following the Protestant Reformation.

As a student of both Scripture and the theology of Zinzendorf, I offer these reflections in hope of spurring further discussion and struggle for truth, both in our witness and presentation of the gospel. What follows is a brief look at Zinzendorf's hermeneutic so that we

may use his practical approach to interpretation as a springboard for Christ-centered mission. In other words, for the sake of Zinzendorf and his dedication to our Savior, may this intellectual activity lead us to the Savior and call us out in mission.

Cultural Context

It is generally understood that all persons are influenced by the culture that surrounds them. Zinzendorf was born into a time when many great minds of Europe were looking to nature and human reason for the answers to humanity's great spiritual questions. In response to the Reformation and the Thirty-years War, Europe was evolving into a different world. The printing press had done its part to transform the political and spiritual world-view and the roads of commerce and travel were bursting with new ideas and challenges. Out of this era of social turmoil came the philosophical developments known as the Enlightenment, modern scientific method, historical criticism, and the French and American Revolutions. On the opposite end of the spectrum, German Pietists were looking inward to the heart where a personal experience of the Savior was the foundation for all religious pursuits.

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One might expect that Zinzendorf himself would be caught up in this struggle between head and heart. As a child Zinzendorf expressed concern over his own feelings of doubt, yet he held to a commitment to serve Christ that was unusual for someone of his age and position in society. While still a student at Halle, Zinzendorf began to develop a vision of a mission for Christ; however, social and family responsibilities kept him from pursuing this call to ministry until adulthood.

In his studies at Wittenberg, Zinzendorf was re-introduced to what he understood as the “true” teaching of Luther on “justification by grace.”¹ Zinzendorf was influenced by Luther in much of his theology and practice, but he disagreed with the Lutheran scholarship of his day that sought Christ through an intellectual and rational process. For Zinzendorf, the only way to Christ was through a personal relationship initiated by the Savior Himself. It was never his intention to create yet another systematic doctrine since he believed it impossible to know and express God in a systematic way. “Any attempt to systemize understanding of God will always have gaps because of human limitations. One needs to accept that the only Christian system is Christ, the historical expression of the Person of God.”²

Hermeneutical Development

According to Arthur Freeman, “Zinzendorf was impressed by the Enlightenment’s historical sensitivity. However, as in so many cases, he used its arguments for his own purposes. For him revelation was always *ökonomisch*, bound to the particular history in which it is given. That is the way God works, for God works in a way relevant

for each time...Each person in each period has the faith which is right for them.”³

Based on this premise, true religion is not fixed. It is individualized according to the relationship the Savior has with each person extending through all time and cultures. “Evidently Zinzendorf saw a parallel between what happens in the Christian life and what happened in the origin of Scripture, namely, that both reflect the glory of Christ.”⁴

However, to say that Christ, the historical expression of the Person of God, can be the only Christian “system” does by its nature imply a “system,” a way of interpreting all of Scripture though the lens of the Incarnation. This “system” is a hermeneutic of relationship that starts not with the written word, but with the Living Word and a relationship of the Divine with humanity. With this lens for understanding, it becomes inevitable that our relationship with Christ impacts our relationship to those around us, and Holy Scripture becomes a means by which the Savior draws us closer to His heart and at the same time closer to one another. Again, quoting Freeman, “His theology seems to have progressed experientially. In the Catechism for the Heathen he advised those to whom the Gospel was preached to start with the Savior and then allow the Savior to teach them about the Father and the Spirit, a process which reflected his own experience.”⁵

Zinzendorf’s hermeneutic developed through his own personal experience with Christ. His reliance on personal experience for interpretation rather than doctrine was rooted in the earnest belief that the Savior would lead

one to the knowledge of what was necessary for understanding. “That to which the Savior did not lead, was not necessary [essential] for salvation. Theological reflection was acceptable but would remain unsure matters until their truth was revealed in human experience.”⁶

The “historical problem,” the difference and variety within Scripture, was not viewed by Zinzendorf as a problem to be solved. He believed the diversity of Scripture was related “to the divine accommodation of truth to each historical period and the limitations and characteristics of each writer.”⁷ Unlike some of his contemporaries, these differences led Zinzendorf to assert that interpretation and study would be difficult without guidance and at the same time he acknowledged that it was not difficult for the one in whom the Holy Spirit resides. From a sermon on this subject he states,

One of the most important observations that must be made in the current times, however, is that the Holy Scriptures need no explanation. Rather they are as clear as they should be to each person who comes to them with a simple heart and who has a right to understand them. Therefore nothing is less necessary than the explanation of the Holy Scriptures. However, it is healing, blessed and good if a person correctly explains the truth as it is, dissects it, and interprets it for the hearts of people. In this way many kinds of people and minds who cannot grasp a particular part of a talk can get something which satisfies their hearts from another part. So the application of the Holy Scriptures, or as the apostle [Paul] calls it, “the sharing of

the word of truth,” is a beautiful, profitable manner, sharing what is already there.⁸

Perhaps these two seemingly contradictory thoughts offer a glimpse at understanding Zinzendorf’s ongoing efforts in regards to teaching and discipleship. One manifestation of this effort would be the development of the Daily Texts, a daily devotional tool providing a guide and model for scriptural reflection within the community. Another would be the establishment of “choirs,” small groups of people grouped by gender, similar life circumstance and/or experience wherein a leader or elder would guide spiritual formation.

A comparable explanation of the role of the Spirit in guiding our understanding is found in 1 Corinthians 2.13-14 where Paul writes, “We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” One familiar with Moravian missions in Zinzendorf’s era may recognize in their “gentle” approach to evangelism the underlying assumption that it is not the work of the evangelist that convinces or convicts, but only the presence of Christ and wisdom of the Spirit that instructs and guides one outside the faith towards conversion.

Zinzendorf believed that God would open up the meaning of Scripture for the person and the Church, in such a way that could not occur through historical or scholarly analysis. This unfolding could only occur as the individual

and/or community sought to “live” prayerfully with the Scripture(s).

In his later years Zinzendorf worked on a harmony of the gospels that, despite various modifications in congregational practice, the Unity continues to treasure and utilize as a vital part of Holy Week observance. His work was titled the “Story of the Days of the Son of Man upon the Earth,” although contemporary readers may find it titled, *Readings for Holy Week* or *Passion Week Manual*.⁹ In this “harmonized” account of the last days of Jesus life Zinzendorf sought to bring together the variety of voices and witnesses one finds in a parallel reading of the gospels. The readings, divided into sections for each day of Holy Week with verses of hymns added for community response, not only offered a way for believers to “walk” through this crucial period in the experience of Christ, they also demonstrate the power of shared Scriptural testimony and hermeneutic to shape the community to be and become a living expression of the Body of Christ.

In these tangible, practical ways Zinzendorf acknowledged the challenge of the diversity in Scripture without undermining Scripture’s divine nature. “Scripture was this way because God worked this way, and it was divine because the divine truth always lay behind the historical accommodation...The goal of interpretation was the going behind historically conditioned concepts of the writers to an encounter with the religious reality behind revelation: to an encounter with the Savior, who is the Revealer, and to know him and his Atonement in one’s heart.”¹⁰ For Zinzendorf and the renewed Moravian congregation, Scripture’s primary purpose was

for devotion. They came to it individually and as a community with the expectation of meeting within it the mystery of Christ.¹¹

For the purpose of mission and education, Zinzendorf divided the Scripture into three different classifications: basic truths about salvation upon which he understood Scripture to be clear, matters of knowledge that require an experiential and historical understanding of Scripture, and mysteries which remain uncertain even for those with the tools for interpretation.¹²

One example of how a mystery remains a mystery in the worshipping community is in the understanding of Christ’s presence in the sacrament of communion. Instead of seeking to define the nature of Christ’s presence, the modern Moravian Church states that persons may bring differing understandings of Christ’s presence to the Table and still partake of communion together.

Zinzendorf also divided the witness of Scripture into Economies, which represent a historical period in which God relates to humanity in a particular way. This idea expresses his underlying hermeneutic of the relationship of Christ and the Cross. The periods were the Economy of the Invisible God (which included the Economy of the Patriarchs and the Economy of the Law); the Economy of the New Covenant when knowledge of God comes in the form of his suffering Son; and the final Economy when God shall be known even as He is.

In describing the Economies, Freeman notes, “It should also be mentioned that in regards to the Economy of the New Covenant

the presence of the Spirit and the new birth of man are characteristics — and important ones; for these make possible the knowledge of Christ as a living reality in the heart.”¹³ Zinzendorf said very little about the final economy since he believed that eschatology was one of the mysteries that will remain uncertain until that time as God chooses to reveal it completely within human experience.

The Ancient Unity, before the second Reformation’s uplifting of the Pauline materials, developed a hermeneutic from an emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount. Central to their faith and practice was the Savior as encountered through the synoptic tradition. The emphasis on Christ’s teaching as witnessed in the synoptic tradition led to an ethical hermeneutic and a practical expression of faith lived out in daily life.¹⁴ Zinzendorf, influenced by his own time and experience, focused heavily upon the Gospel of John and Hebrews because of the understanding that they were written as a culmination of all the other gospels. One recognizes in Zinzendorf’s hermeneutic the influence of the fourth gospel in regards to the inseparable interrelationship between Divine and human, a relationship most fully expressed in the Incarnation. From the beginning John’s gospel is relational, inviting the believer to “come and see, come and spend some time with me.” Based on the success of Moravian missions among outcast groups of people, it would seem that the relational approach to God’s nature provided a tangible connection for individuals living in a wide variety of cultures.

In contrast to the synoptic gospels, John’s more developed Christology understands all revelation of God as originating with Christ.

Likewise, Zinzendorf experienced the Son, and in particular the wounds of Christ,¹⁵ as the channel to a deeper understanding of the Trinity rather than the other way around. God does not lead one to Christ; rather, God comes to be known only through Christ. The focus on Christ was not a dispute about the role and relationship with the Father or the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, it was an effort to determine what was essential and unique to the Christian witness in order that their missionary efforts meet with greater effect.

In light of Zinzendorf’s concern for evangelism, it is possible that his emphasis on Christ stemmed from a particular relevance for the time in which he lived. “Part of the reason for this [emphasis] is to be seen in the challenge which Rationalism presented to him... A second reason is the problem of Deism, which of course is closely related to that of Rationalism. The Deists seem to have been a deep concern of Zinzendorf, and he believed that this approach met with success amongst them.”¹⁶ Christ is central for Zinzendorf not just because Christ is the core of all Scripture, but also, because “He is the Revealer, the Mediator between God and man not only in the New Testament, but in the Old.”¹⁷

Zinzendorf’s theodicy, rather than developing from the Sermon on the Mount, comes from the understanding that God joins in the sharing of suffering. A theology of the cross and the suffering Christ is Zinzendorf’s answer to questions about God’s presence in the world in the face of human suffering. The wounds of Christ, as witnessed by Thomas in John 20, are evidence of the historical reality and a consequence of the Incarnation. “When remarking that Christ

must never be seen except in the light of the cross, he [Zinzendorf] reminds his listeners that the crucified Christ is also the risen and exalted Christ.”¹⁸ Added to Zinzendorf’s hermeneutical principle of understanding all Scripture in light of Christ was an interpretation of Scripture in light of the cross wherein the whole of scripture is understood as the story of God’s suffering and grace.¹⁹

Zinzendorf encouraged individuals to come to the Holy Scriptures in faith believing that Christ would reveal understanding and truth for each person as needed. This belief was lived out in community, each person being encouraged to learn to read in order that he or she would be able to personally read and reflect upon the scriptures as guided by their Savior/Husband and the Holy Spirit or Mother of the Church. God is understood as active, but cannot be seen or touched. Jesus is the tangible, interactive representative of God, and the Holy Spirit is our Mother.

Relational Nature of the Trinity and our Community

“The doctrine of the Trinity means that relationship is in the very nature of God. When we come to God we join God’s inner family, Father, Son and Spirit (which 18th c. Moravians liked to call “Mother” because it [the Spirit] cared for us as Mother).”²⁰ Freeman goes on to offer two examples of this reflection of the relational nature of God. The first is from John 20, in the story of the Beloved Disciple and Mary gathered around the cross of Christ. The second comes from Luke 1 in the story of the baby John the Baptist in his mother’s womb leaping for joy when Jesus in his

mother’s womb came into the room. The first story promotes the equality of men and women before God. This understanding was reflected in the Moravian Church of the 18th c. as women were ordained and assumed leadership roles in the religious life of the community. The second story expresses the equality of all before God even though not all have the ability to understand. A child in the womb cannot comprehend but God (Christ) relates to a child just as a parent might also relate to one in the womb.

In the Moravian community all were believed to have the capacity for faith from the un-born to the infirm, the mentally challenged to the academic. It was not that Zinzendorf believed rational thought and theological reflection unimportant; he simply did not believe them to be the essence of religion. Relationship is at the center of God’s nature, and in this way the Trinity becomes a model for human relationships and the transformation of society is based on this relationship.²¹

Gary Kinkel helps us to understand that the development of Zinzendorf’s hermeneutical principles were shaped by the life of the community, and in turn, community life was shaped by Zinzendorf’s theological interpretation and development. “Zinzendorf’s thought about the Holy Spirit emerged from the convergence of his practice of Christian community and his theological sources, in turn, the theology of Zinzendorf developed, informed and shaped his practice of community. Thus, these claims about the Holy Spirit were crucial to his hermeneutical thought, to his thought about the Christian life and to his thought about the Christian community.”²²

Zinzendorf believed it beneficial, even essential, to share Christian discipleship with companions of faith and circumstance. In new areas of mission he expressed the need for a congregation to be established right away in order that potential converts begin to see and experience Christian community. The decision to believe in Christ is a decision to enter into relationship, to become a member of a community that is bound to God just as they are to one another, a community whose relationship to one another is an extension, a reflection of the Divine nature.

Looking to the Future

We are living in a time of great transition and upheaval, not unlike the era of Zinzendorf. In view of the complexities of contemporary culture what does it mean for us to seriously consider the relational expression of our faith as found in Zinzendorf's hermeneutic? We can begin by defining the nature of our community or lack thereof, and then seek answers to questions that arise regarding how decisions are made and who holds the power for decision making within the community.

The Church under the influence of Zinzendorf understood community as a reflection of the divine glory. This not only implies a sacredness of all life but a trust and respect that seems to be lost in a culture where someone must be either right or wrong, where respect for diversity within the Scripture, interpretation and religious practice is viewed with suspicion. Zinzendorf's hermeneutic seems to suggest that the nature of our community will influence our theology — conversely our theology will influence our

practice of community or lack thereof.

What do we gain from Zinzendorf's understanding of the nature of God and the church that sheds light on our own search for truth and understanding? How can we approach the future in a way that is in keeping with our theological heritage and at the same time responsive to God's revelation in our own time?

Zinzendorf would teach us that as the Church works out its theology, God recognizes the limitations of human understanding and offers a specific revelation appropriate for that era; therefore, theological development is not fixed. It is not God that changes, rather it is our understanding and revelation that changes based on what God desires to reveal to us in each age.

Zinzendorf would also have us come to the Scripture in mutual trust, acknowledging that Christ is somehow speaking to each person, even though what the Spirit teaches you is sometimes different from what the Spirit teaches me. This is what makes it possible for us to encourage one another as brothers and sisters to remain in prayer and study the texts together until the Spirit speaks in a way that provides unmistakable clarity or convicts us of its ongoing mystery. At the same time, we should never shift our focus from the work of the Great Commission. As God continues to work within the hearts of the Body, speaking to the community through Christ and the Holy Spirit, changes are made and the church transforms.

I have heard it said that one of the greatest heresies in the Moravian tradition is to split the church because a division of Christ's body represents human rather than Godly action.

While division of the Church may bear witness to our limitations and sin we have seen how God can bring new life out of division. If this statement remains true for the Church today, then perhaps Zinzendorf's hermeneutic of relationship and a renewed understanding of Christ's sacred wounds and blessed suffering can provide a way for the church to move from brokenness to healing and from division to reconciliation.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Arthur J. Freeman, *Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf* (Board of Communications Moravian Church in America: Bethlehem, PA, 1998), 34-35.
- 2 Ibid, 6.
- 3 Ibid, 49.
- 4 Ibid, 131.
- 5 Ibid, 35.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Arthur J. Freeman, "The Hermeneutic of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf" (Th.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1962), 98
- 8 Nicholas von Zinzendorf, *A Collection of Sermons from Zinzendorf's Pennsylvania Journey*, trans. Julie Weber and ed. Craig Atwood (Bethlehem, PA: Interprovincial Board of Communication, 2001), 49-50.
- 9 Freeman, "Understanding of Scripture in the Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum), 1996," (unpublished manuscript), 11.
- 10 Freeman, "Hermeneutics," 98-100.
- 11 Freeman, "Understanding of Scripture," 11.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Quoted by Freeman, "Hermeneutics," 133.
- 14 Craig Atwood, "Faith, Love and Hope: The Moravian Theological Heritage," *Hinge* 11, no.3 (Autumn 2004), 15.
- 15 For further discussion of wounds theology, see Craig Atwood, "Blood, Sex and Death: Life and Liturgy in Zinzendorf's Bethlehem," (Ph.D. diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 1995); and Riddick Weber, "Blood and Righteousness, Blood and Wounds," *Hinge* 8, no.3 (summer 2001).
- 16 Freeman, "Hermeneutics," 81.
- 17 Ibid, 87.
- 18 Quoted by Freeman, "Hermeneutics," 90.
- 19 Ibid, 100.
- 20 Freeman, "Moravians and Luther in North America," (unpublished paper presented at Augsburg Lutheran Church: Winston-Salem, NC, January 30, 2000), 5.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Gary S. Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother the Spirit* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1990), 9.