

The Biblical View of the Ancient Unitas Fratrum

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Although over-shadowed by the Lutheran Reformation, the Czech Reformation of John Hus and its spiritual descendants, the Unitas Fratrum, have important insights for our modern church. The Unitas Fratrum taught its followers to; 1) practice or act out of the Biblical witness for the greater work of God, and 2) interpret the Scripture as a community of the faithful, with each believer being given the authority to read the Bible and receive the Holy Spirit for him or herself. What can the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors teach our Moravian Church about Biblical interpretation and application today?

The Bible and the Unitas Fratrum: An Overview

The Unitas Fratrum's theology has always taken the Bible as its first and basic source for knowledge of God and God's saving actions (Rican and Molnár 401). The Unitas Fratrum, coming out of the Hussite Reformation, gave greater authority to different parts of the Bible than the Lutheran Reformation did. "Where the [Lutheran] reformation concentrated its theology on the Pauline message of justification, the Czech [Hussite] Reformation focused on the evangelical commandment of Jesus" (Lochman 7).

The Unitas Fratrum saw the Gospel tradition, and particularly the Sermon on the Mount, as the foundation for their faith. Constantly appealing to the earthly example of Jesus, they used their Biblical foundation to look outward to the world, often with a prophetic vision for Christ's kingdom on earth and a "readiness to accept a revelation of the Holy Spirit directly" (Rican and Molnár 391). Through this understanding of Scripture, the Unitas Fratrum grew to be concerned with the Bible's ethical and social impact, especially in the eradication of the class and economic distinctions between the believers.

Out of their interest in allowing all people, regardless of class, to receive the Gospel message, the Unitas Fratrum saw a great importance in education and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. The Czech people had a long history of reading the Bible in the vernacular. Since the days of the Eastern missionaries Cyrill and Methodius (850 C.E.), the Bible had been translated into the Czech or "Bohemia" language. John Hus also promoted the vernacular reading of the Bible while preaching in the Bethlehem Chapel, and he began to codify the modern Czech language out of his Czech Bible.

Although the earlier leaders of the Unitas Fratrum such as Peter Chelcicky and Gregory

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the Patriarch saw the New Testament as the only source for their doctrine, later generations of the Brethren grew to appreciate and use the Old Testament as well (Segert 28). The translation of the Bible into the vernacular reached its pinnacle in the Unitas Fratrum's history with the publication of both the Old and New Testaments in Kralitz Bible in 1593.

The Unitas Fratrum believed that Scripture was not only to be read by the laity in their own tongue, it should also be interpreted by their own hearts and minds. There was no authoritative interpretation of Scripture; interpretation was a communal act and spoke a message to both the individual and the community (Rican and Molnár 401). Furthermore, this corporate act of interpretation encouraged the witness of Scripture in everyday Christian life and discipline, not to develop a personal creed, but to carry out God's activity "as Servants of the Word" (400). "At each word of the Bible, the Czech Protestants used to ask what they were to do, and only in the second place what they were to think" (Otter 81). Through Biblical study, they taught to live in service of the Word, with ethical and social obligations.

The Biblical Viewpoints of Hus and leaders of the Unitas Fratrum

As mentioned earlier, John Hus was a priest with strong ideas about the power of the vernacular Scripture. He preached from the Czech Bible in the Bethlehem Chapel and encouraged his followers to search for the truth, not in the words of the Pope or the clergy, but in the Bible and the law of Christ (Hutton 22). For Hus, the Bible was the foundation of the church and theology, and it is the "only infallible

norm," upon which all Church teachings must agree (de Schweinitz 46-47). Hus' view of the Bible was later echoed by the Hussite League. In 1419, they wrote the "Four Articles of Prague," a declaration of their religious beliefs as Hussite followers. One article stated that the living Word, in dialogue between the preacher and the congregation, is the real expression of faith. The "prophetic and apostolic message of the Word of God," they concluded, must be preached freely and in the vernacular (Lochman 2).

Peter Chelcicky was a student (and sometimes critic) of Hus and the spiritual father of the Unitas Fratrum. "Accept the simple words of Scripture," Chelcicky preached, "and believe above all in the example of Christ," as is shown through the literal truth of the Bible (Sawyer 18). Like many in the Unitas Fratrum, he saw the necessity of living a life out of this Biblical truth and example of Christ (Rican 21). Chelcicky never acknowledged any human authorities in his faith and interpretation of the Bible. This attitude may have influenced the Unitas Fratrum to shy away from human-composed creeds or doctrines, and initially to reject theological education and training to interpret the Bible. Seeing other (non-Biblical) writings as the "screens which keep him away from the Bible," Chelcicky was uncompromising in his Biblical literalism and dedication (Odlozilik 255).

In 1457, a group of Hussites, led by Gregory (Rehor) and influenced by Chelcicky, distinguished themselves the "Brethren of the Law of Christ." This law of Christ, the Brethren affirmed in a resolution of 1464, was shown through the Bible. Later statements of the Unitas Fratrum would continue to affirm Hus' view

on the centrality of the Bible, which they saw as the source and rule for their community. It is interesting to note how the *Unitas Fratrum's* apologies would center on the affirmation of the Bible, not a leader's opinion, written theological statement, or doctrine. Many of the resolutions and apologies that came out of the Lutheran Reformation affirm the theological or Biblical interpretations of their particular leader, but the *Unitas Fratrum*, with their emphasis on the Bible and not theological doctrine, rarely affirmed one leader's view as orthodox. For example, in the Synod of 1495 the *Unitas Fratrum* declared that they were no longer bound to the writings of Gregory or Peter and instead affirmed the Bible as their only standard of faith and practice.

Throughout their history, the *Unitas Fratrum* continued to uphold the Bible as their only standard (or rule) of faith and life. However, the leaders never mistook the words of Scripture for what the Bible revealed, that is the Trinitarian God. The Bible was not God nor was God found only in the reading of the text. Hus contended that the inspired Scripture revealed faith and an understanding of the unseen (Schwarze 91), and the Bible pointed us toward the essentials of faith, our Triune God. This understanding of the Bible was further developed by the Brethren's Luke of Prague in his system of essentials and ministratives of faith.

Luke defined essentials as divine and human. The "divine" essentials are the grace of God, the saving work of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The "human" essentials of faith, love, and hope are the necessary human responses to live in a relationship with God. Ministratives are those means which help humans to reach the

essentials. The Bible is the primary and most necessary ministrative for faith is the "divinely appointed means decreed by God for persons to come to salvation" (Crews 19). In their 1503 Apology the *Unitas Fratrum* wrote that the "Word of God" is the ministrative by which God is made known (de Schweinitz 201). The *Unitas Fratrum* noted that the ministratives, such as the Bible, should never be exalted or placed above the essentials (Crews 19). The words of Scripture are still "directly dependent on the essential Word of God, which is Jesus Christ" (Rican and Molnár 409).

Since the time of the "Four Articles of Prague," the followers of Hus understood the necessity for the Bible to be preached freely in their faith. An individual reading of the Bible, even in the vernacular, was not enough for this ministrative to lead us to the essentials of our faith. The Scripture was to be preached, since it is in the hearing of the holy reading that "we may instruct people in the essence of faith and penance" (Crews 21). The written Bible is only an echo or description of the true nature of Christ, and it is through a public reading, interpretation, and application in the community that Luke believed one can truly hear the essentials of his or her faith (Crews 21). The followers of the *Unitas Fratrum* also believed that it was the responsibility of the entire community to hear Christ present in the Biblical proclamation and to live a disciplined Christian life out of this proclamation, rather than out of a particular interpretation of Scripture. "Holy Scripture, apart from any disputed interpretation, should be [our] only standard of faith and practice" (Hutton 60).

I believe that the ability to distinguish the ministrative use of Scripture from the essential living God allowed the Unitas Fratrum to begin an early form of Biblical and historical criticism. Believing that the Biblical word was not the immediate Word of God (which is Jesus Christ), Luke was able to see the written text of the Bible in a particular social and historical location. Luke “always paid attention to the time, the place, the persons and the motives of the Biblical narratives and history,” (Crews 22) demonstrating an early tendency toward criticism in the forms, types, and social histories of the Biblical text.

The Brethren’s John Blahoslav, in the later part of the 16th century, would also demonstrate a tendency of Biblical criticism in his writing on the Book of Revelation. In his 1566 commentary on Revelation 13, Blahoslav rejected the common Catholic interpretation of 666 as referring to Luther. Instead he wrote that the interpretation of this mysterious text needed a “good knowledge of Roman and Church history, careful study of the book of Revelation and of the biblical books related to it, and especially a comprehension of the specific sense of these matters” (Rican 218). Blahoslav’s call for a historical inquiry into the time and place of the Book of Revelation shows the Unitas Fratrum’s early movement toward a historical critical reading of the Bible. However, in no way should we assume that the Unitas Fratrum saw the Bible only as historical and its interpretation as an academic endeavor. While holding strong to the inspired word of Scripture as a revelation of God’s activities, the Unitas Fratrum never placed the Bible above God and in this understanding they were able to understand

it both as a historically bound and inspired text to teach humans of salvation.

Although Blahoslav encouraged higher education for the interpretation of Scripture, this attitude was not always shared by other members of the Unitas Fratrum. Throughout its history, the Brethren displayed differences in opinion on the role of higher education for the priests or anyone who wished to interpret the Bible. John Blahoslav represented a new movement in the Unitas Fratrum toward an appreciation of higher education, knowledge of ancient languages, and the beginning of the historical critical method. “Only a thorough education” Blahoslav said, “for the leaders [and] for the simple Brethren, can ensure a peaceful development of the Unitas. Of course all great knowledge is to no avail if it is not guided by true piety” (Strupl 10).

More than 50 years after Blahoslav’s time, John Amos Comenius combined great knowledge with true piety as he advanced the Unitas Fratrum in the areas of Biblical understanding, education reform, and spiritual development. Comenius advocated for higher education while also understanding the Bible as a divine ministrative which could bring people to God by teaching of Jesus and the practices of the Christian life (Comenius 64).

Comenius centered his faith on the teachings of the Bible and refused to speak definitively in areas where the Scripture was silent. “Let us remember,” Comenius wrote, “mystery was ordained not that the hearts of believers be thereby alienated, but rather tied and bound together into one” (Spinka 60). The ability to humbly accept the mystery of the Bible while

seeking reconciliation around its teachings became a practice of both the ancient and modern *Unitas Fratrum*. Since a community was united both in Biblical understanding and Biblical mystery, the community should also participate in Biblical interpretation. Following Hus' thought, he concluded that differences arose when the Church or its leaders sought to place themselves and their own opinions above the Bible (Spinka 35).

Since its founding, the *Unitas Fratrum* experienced degrees of persecution and peace. When they were denied public worship and attacked because they lacked a strong doctrinal theology, they often clung to their Scripture and its message. As the *Unitas Fratrum* fled from the persecution of the Thirty Years War, they climbed through the White Mountains singing this hymn: "Nothing have we taken with us/ Everything is lost/ We have our Bible of Kralitz,/ Our Labyrinth of the World" (Sawyer 37).

This hymn, sung by exiles who had lost their material possessions, financial security, and freedom in the Thirty Years War, demonstrates the great value of the Bible in their lives. Indeed, their Scriptures were the only thing that the world could not take. Here we see the value beyond the written word in the Bible, for even if the exiles had their written Bibles taken from them, the persecutors could not take their essential and Biblical truth; their faith in Christ. The Bible was more than the written word. For these descendants of the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Bible was a ministrative leading them to their faith essentials of a merciful, loving and saving Triune God.

How does the *Unitas Fratrum's* Biblical interpretation and application speak to us today?

The *Unitas Fratrum*, unlike some other Protestant movements, understood the Bible as a ministrative; a divine mean to connect a community with God. Out of this understanding of the Bible, the *Unitas Fratrum* encouraged its followers to move from an individual reading or hearing of Scripture to a Biblical practice of Christian discipline in their communities. The *Unitas Fratrum* realized that "every word of the Holy Scripture must be understood in its relation to the concrete and actual situation in which the congregation and its members are living" (Molnár 11). Each individual in the church was given the opportunity to interpret Scripture which would point the believer outward to a Christian life.

As members of the modern *Unitas Fratrum*, do we still see Scripture as a ministrative to lead us to the essentials of our faith; our Triune God and a relationship with God lived out in the human community with faith, love and hope? Do we see the Bible as a divine means to push us outward to the essentials of our faith and its practical application in our Christian lives? Can we create a theology that does not rest in dogmatic, inflexible frameworks of Biblical interpretation, but allows each believer to ask practical questions of our Scriptures in light of the social, ethical and political circumstances of our contemporary world? I believe we, as modern members of the *Unitas Fratrum*, must explore and rediscover our unique, historical view of Scripture as a ministrative for our church today.

J. L. Hromadka, a modern Czech theologian, writes that when the Bible is seen as a ministrative it has the unique ability to help people “penetrate through the freedom of their faith to the deepest roots of contemporary events and to cope with them in pertinent responsibility” (Molnár 13-14). We, who claim allegiance to the Biblical word as members of the *Unitas Fratrum*, must in turn practice the Biblical message through responsible and responsive lives in our contemporary communities and our world.

This paper asks you to reconsider and rediscover the heritage of the *Unitas Fratrum*, especially around their unique and important views on the Bible. Instead of tritely dismissing a “Moravian method of Biblical interpretation,” or half-heartedly attaching ourselves to the popular Biblical interpretative methodology of our day, what can our church learn from its distinct Biblical interpretation and application? Like Blahoslav and Comenius, can we approach the Bible and theology with both piety and theological education?

The *Unitas Fratrum* has always lent one ear to the contemporary theology while also reminding ourselves of our own religious beliefs. “Contemporary” theology, whether it is in the form of the Lutheran reformation ideas of the 16th century or the emerging church movements of the 21st century, should never be dismissed by our Church. However, like our spiritual ancestors, we ought to examine new theologies in light of our standard and rule, the Bible, and ask if they lead us to our faith essentials; the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. We cannot

shun higher theological education in Biblical interpretation, but we must also remember that we need true piety as well. As we look outward to the ethical and social applications of the Biblical word, we also must not forget that we work out of an essential, spiritual relationship with God.

While the social involvement by Christians is an urgent matter today in view of the global distress of humankind, it is persuasive and effective only when it is not the overreaction of unreflective activism overcompensating for the lack of spiritual discipline and concentration, but rather issues from thoughtful and dynamic faith. (Lochman 10)

Biblical interpretation of both the head and the heart, I believe, will lead us to both a thoughtful and dynamic faith.

Finally, we must always approach our faith remembering that no matter how we interpret the Bible, ultimately the Word of God is a living Word, powerful and active beyond the will or arrogance of the human spirit. We would all be wise to humbly learn from Amedeo Molnár’s reflections whenever we interpret the Bible:

There has been a reformation before Luther and Calvin, and the reformation has continued to do its works after they were gone, for the Word of the Lord, the law and witness of the Gospel cannot be imprisoned in ready-made forms, burning through the shells in which we enclose it. (Comenius 8)

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