

Moravians and Scripture

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Most Moravians are well aware of the contributions of the Unity to the European heritage of religious music and to the world mission field. Some may be aware of its influence upon the education of children, warmly recognized by Jean Piaget, the father of modern child psychology. Others may be aware of its understanding, unique in the eighteenth century and controversial even now, of sexuality and the need for respectful, straightforward sex education. But relatively few are aware of the Moravian tradition, from earliest times, in the understanding of Scripture. At a moment when churches and nations — ours in particular — are tearing themselves apart over the meaning of words and the obligations and commitments they entail, it may be that members of this church in particular have much to gain and much to offer by exploring their own 500-year history as readers of the Bible.

I was going to write ‘readers of God’s word’, but I’m given pause by a startling remark made by Ludwig Zinzendorf at a church Synod in 1740: “One could not speak of ‘the Divine Book’, but rather of ‘the Divine Truth in the Book’.” In what follows I’ll try to suggest the background of this apparent distinction between

words that are thought to communicate truth in an unmediated and inarguably definitive way, and words telling the story of an experience of truth through various filters that need to be recognized.

The distinction was not Zinzendorf’s invention. Among Moravians three names (to reduce *my* story to manageable scope) are important in outlining a context, two before him, one later: these are Luke of Prague, Jan Amos Comenius, and then Friedrich Schleiermacher.

By the end of the fifteenth century, Luke of Prague, using the vocabulary of mediaeval scholasticism, had formulated a division of the Christian heritage into essentials, ministerials, and accidentals. ‘Essentials’ were understood as the grace of God the Father, the merit of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit — and on humanity’s part, faith, love, and hope. ‘Ministerials’ comprised Scripture, preaching, and the sacraments (including all seven of mediaeval tradition). And ‘accidentals’ (or ‘indifferents’) were the particular means of implementing the ministerials in a given time, place, and manner. It is important to note that in the order of priority here, the action of God and the response of an individual soul are given precedence without

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sweeping away all the impedimenta of Christian history, merely setting them to one side in an order of relevance.

As for Scripture, which for so many centuries had been a battleground of argument and competitive interpretation, there could be no question of elevating it to the apex of the faith-pyramid. Similarly for all the rest, which should be viewed as ancillary, but not determinative, to the primary emphasis and the main perspective—or perhaps rather as conducing to the essentials without becoming ends in themselves, as they had for centuries. Luke (no less than Hus) was responding to a movement for renewal within the western church that had already produced some of its most memorable witnesses to individual experience of God, ranging from the anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.

Comenius is elaborately concerned with Scripture as such but is emphatic in urging that it cannot be regarded as a literal standard for belief or behavior. He had been well forewarned by the explosive debates of the earlier 16th century, which had driven enlightened, scholarly investigation of biblical texts virtually underground in the face of bitter and often deadly theological controversy linked to powerful economic and political agenda (as we see in our own time). Neither Luther nor Calvin had any illusions about the uniform inspiration of Holy Scripture, but their successors were caught up in a war of survival that Comenius was helpless to moderate. He is explicit in opposing “those who turn their attention solely to Scripture, ignoring senses and reason (due to the nobleness of their conceptions), hover above the real world or

blindly believe things they do not understand, or stick literally at each letter, or take whatever absurdities and superstitions as articles of faith.... Similarly, as nothing is in reason that was not first in the senses, so nothing is in the faith that was not at first in reason.” Again, “The more closely Divine Revelation can be conformed to the testimony of intelligence and experience, the greater strength it gains.” As to ministerials in general, there should be toleration of differences, “allowing the whole Garden of the Church to blossom with voluntary piety.” In short, the essential inner life is more important than theological orthodoxy or biblical literalism, which may indeed be harmful to it.

Zinzendorf, though in a number of respects a child of his Age, continues firmly in the tradition set by Luke and Comenius; the link with the latter is given symbolic expression in his consecration as a Moravian Bishop by Comenius' grandson. Like his predecessor, he rejects *a priori* concepts of Scripture while retaining a profound commitment to the figure of Christ as Savior. The result is a spiritual relationship that does not dispense with Scripture but uses it devotionally, without requiring a narrow, mechanical concept of verbal inspiration to sustain faith, and is therefore open to historical and critical approaches to the text.

Although any leading of the Spirit should be in harmony with Scripture, “the consideration of Scripture must never be made by us equal to the fellowship which we should and can have with our God and Savior in person.” This relationship is not only distinct from experiencing the Bible but may also differ from individual to individual: “each one builds his own system, each one must

be able to speak for himself.” In the tripartite scheme, the relationship is essential; Scripture is ministerial in various ways for different persons; and there is much in it, taken as a whole, that one must recognize as falling on the side of accidentals, being historically conditioned and limited by the horizons of the individual writer.

The language and ideas in Scripture were for Zinzendorf conditioned by time and context, just as the formation of the canon of Scripture was a historical process subject to accident and human circumstance. The texts we have include obvious mistakes, inconsistencies, misconceptions, and (in the case of the letters attributed to Paul, for example) much of unequal quality. Indeed, Zinzendorf goes so far as to reject the claim that Scripture represents a body of Revelation sufficiently consistent and unified to provide the basis for a closed theological system — a limitation that, in his view, lends a paradoxical credibility to its core of essential truth. His distinction between the Divine Book and Divine Truth in the Book, cited as we began, should be clearer now, as well as the reasons for it. Here we have an emphatic break with the Reformed tradition that Scripture should be read and explained solely within the context of Scripture (as in the familiar Lutheran tag *solâ scripturâ*, ‘by Scripture alone’) and a no less telling rejection of the Roman Catholic argument that Scripture and Tradition (as recognized by the Church) have co-equal authority.

In another area Zinzendorf points the way towards the future: he is sensitive to language and to stylistic differences between various writers. In his day, the Greek of the New Testament seemed so remote from the language of the

Classical period that it was thought to represent the unique, idiosyncratic voice of unmediated inspiration: “Holy Ghost Greek.” It was not until the later nineteenth century that papyrological evidence revealed that this Greek was in fact the international Mediterranean language — or *koinê* — of communication in law, business, and private affairs, subject for better or worse to the educational experience of the writer. On just this basis Zinzendorf found evidence for the individual personality and background of the writers of the New Testament that affected what they had to say and how they said it: a hermeneutical principle that is still important, indeed essential, today.

Zinzendorf’s achievement in reinvigorating the Moravian identity cannot be denied. But as a legacy of the “Sifting Time” in Bethlehem and elsewhere, the complications of which are still being unraveled, his intellectual and spiritual heritage suffered some eclipse in Moravian thinking. “Even so,” remarks A. C. Outler in a valuable essay on Pietism and the Enlightenment as alternatives to Tradition, “[Zinzendorf’s] influence was widespread and lasting — not least of all through the transformation of his thought that was achieved by Friedrich Schleiermacher.” Regarded as the founder of modern Biblical hermeneutics, Schleiermacher was educated in Moravian schools at Gnadensfrei, Niesky, and Barby, a sequence that in the latter phase seems to have left him with some frustration, along with a more lasting gift: respect for that essential relationship to God we have seen in the thinking of Luke, Comenius, and Zinzendorf.

Years later, when his intellectual questioning had led him beyond their personal frontiers, he

returned for visit to Gnadenfrei, where as a child he received his first introduction to Moravian teaching. There, in a letter of 1802, he wrote with affectionate irony, “There is no other place which could call forth such lively reminiscences of the entire onward movement of my mind, from its first awakening to a higher life, up to the point which I have at present attained. Here it was that, for the first time, I awoke to the consciousness of the relations of man to a higher world.... Here it was that that mystic tendency developed itself, which has been of so much importance to me, and has supported and carried me through all the storms of scepticism. Then it was only germinating, now it has attained its full development, and I may say that, after all that I have passed through, I have become a Herrnhuter again, only of a higher order” (tr. Frederica Rowan, 1860).

In this spirit of devotion to essentials and freedom to reconsider all the rest, Schleiermacher was largely responsible for laying the foundation of twentieth-century theories of language and how it functions, and for outlining the questions inherent in approaching and understanding any text: issues at the heart of each successive movement in critical theory and practice, Biblical and literary. It is rewarding to note that, in this spirit also, the 1909 Herrnhut General Synod chose not to oppose scientific methods of Biblical scholarship: a remarkable stance in a rising tide of Fundamentalism that has shown no sign of receding.

Wisely, in this context, a revision of the *Ground of the Unity* offered by the Southern Province of the Moravian Church in America and adopted by the Unity Synod of 1995, defines

Biblical interpretation as an ongoing process:

“The *Unitas Fratrum* takes part in the continual search for sound doctrine. In interpreting Scripture and in the communication of doctrine in the Church, we look to two millennia of ecumenical Christian tradition and the wisdom of our Moravian forebears in the faith to guide us as we pray for fuller understanding and ever clearer proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But just as the Holy Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, so the *Unitas Fratrum* also has not developed any of its own because it knows that the mystery of Jesus Christ which is attested to in the Bible cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement....”

The past, as most of us know from personal experience, has a good deal to do with the future, and we can conclude with a brief glance at both sides of the coin. The earliest Christians fell into two main groups: pagans with some classical education, and Jews with a mixed experience of their own traditions of religious training and exposure to the Greek schools in which Paul, for example, would have read his Homer. In both groups the prevailing approach to a text involved deriving its ethical significance through figurative, or symbolic, interpretation — a practice indispensable to every Sunday preacher. Literal meaning was not at issue: Old Testament material was used to support an argument, not to recover the historical record or moral imperative in the sources. Christian tradition developed a variety of methods for this purpose: allegorical (concerned with ethics), typological (the Old Testament fulfilled in the New), and anagogic

(prophetic, concerned with the future of the soul). Results differ, extending from the early Epistle of Barnabas, who interprets the Mosaic prohibition of certain foods as forbidding certain forms of sexual activity, to the very much later John Calvin, who interprets Jesus' circumcision, the Jews' passage across the Red Sea, and the pillar of cloud over the tabernacle in Numbers (9.18), all three, as figures anticipating infant baptism. Among Jews the divisions and the rules for procedure within them became far more complex and explicit.

Early on in the midst of all this, perhaps the most profound and moving portrayal of the difficulty of defining literal meaning in Scripture appears in the last three books of Augustine's *Confessions*, offering an extended meditation on the first verse of Genesis 1. While theology went on its own way in terms inherited from the traditions of Greek and Roman philosophy, it would be nearly a millennium before Augustine's quandary was revisited. The twelfth century saw a movement towards a fresh view of language and logic in establishing the primacy of the literal, historical sense in Biblical texts as a control over excessive figurative interpretations.

In the thirteenth century, Anthony of Padua was insistent upon a careful grounding in the linguistic context of Scripture; Hugh of St Cher anticipated the modern interest in isolating a core of inspired truth from elements that simply reflected the education, experience, and culture of the individual writer. In the fourteenth century Nicholas of Lyra was the first to produce a complete scriptural concordance, aided by a thorough knowledge of Hebrew: a work that greatly influenced Luther. We have

noted, however, that the sixteenth-century preoccupation with theological debate caused a turn away from philology to the rhetoric of persuasion. This distraction from the problematic implications of a literal reading (involving inconsistencies, contradictions, and the like) was not mended until the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, as in the work of Zinzendorf and Schleiermacher.

The status of Scripture has become an even more complex issue than in the lifetime of Schleiermacher, thanks to a constant, extraordinary growth of textual and archaeological material, along with new methods of assimilating evidence old and new. In the present state of controversy, however, several elementary observations are worth keeping in mind as we approach the gift of reading Scripture:

1. First, much OT material was subjected to a constant process of rethinking, reinterpretation, and adjustment to changing conditions and aims over time, whether one thinks of the variety of creation-stories — ranging from the juxtaposition of the Priestly and the Yahwist and Elohist accounts in Genesis to the quite different cosmological traditions represented in Psalms and Second Isaiah, or of evidence of reshaping in the prophetic books.

2. In the NT we find that the witness of faith in community lies prior to what we have come to consider the determinative Scriptural record. Thus our earliest textual evidence for NT belief is found not in Paul's formulations but in the hymns he quotes. The Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom tradition evident in intertestamental writings — marginal to the interests of much in the OT

but offering a religious universalism compatible with Christian experience — provided forms of thought and expression that were adapted to the hymns. These in turn supplied Paul and others with a voice and vocabulary for their own encounter with the Holy Spirit. Enough to give pause in attempting a ready answer to Tyndale’s question whether “the church or congregation be before the gospel, or the gospel before the church.”

3. The NT offers clear evidence of (a) adjustment of tradition to the immediate purpose of a given author and the substitution of one tradition for another, both habitual with Luke; (b) adjustment of tradition to suit local conditions (consider the differing treatment of divorce in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Paul (at 1 Cor 7.15)); (c) outright rejection of tradition, as when the exclusion of eunuchs in Deut 21.1 is pointedly abandoned by Christ Himself at Mt 19.12, perhaps on the model of Isaiah 56.3-7 (cf. Acts 8.14-25); (d) revision of a line of thinking within the writings of a given author, as at 1 Cor 11.11f, where Paul adjusts his own construct of the *ekklesia* as a hierarchy analogous to the Body of Christ in order to justify equality of the sexes.

4. Finally, there are elements that reflect points of view characteristic of the first century intellectual climate — philosophical, moral, and scientific — that cannot reasonably be accepted without careful study in light of present knowledge and understanding. Thus Paul’s concept of the soul, a somewhat inconsistent formulation heavily indebted to elements derived from Stoicism, can only be regarded as an ad hoc attempt to communicate an intuition, not a

coherent (much less inspired) dogma. In effect, there are passages where there is little gain in preserving the ancient thought form; elsewhere, we may need to differentiate between a kernel of truth and the terms in which it is expressed.

There is nothing here that is alien to the tradition of Luke, Comenius, Zinzendorf, and Schleiermacher: they, and the bishops who have succeeded them voting in Synod, seem to point the way to a future in which the more questions we ask of ministerials and incidentals, the richer we are likely to become in matters essential, as each new awareness nourishes the next with an unexpected grace among seekers in community.