

# Otto Piper and Arthur Freeman: Biblical Theologians

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*“Be an opener of doors for such as come after thee.”* (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

In the Preface to Arthur Freeman’s *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart*, he expresses appreciation to Otto and Elizabeth Piper for their encouragement while he was working on his Th.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary. He particularly thanks Otto Piper for directing him to the hermeneutics of Zinzendorf as a thesis topic. Again, at the beginning of the introduction to that book he writes that while raised in the Moravian Church, it was only when he was studying at Princeton that he was prompted to explore the theology of Zinzendorf in depth. Piper, he writes, had a deep interest in hermeneutics and often urged his graduate students “to pursue the hermeneutics of significant persons in their theological tradition.” As an advisor to Art Freeman in his doctoral work, Piper was able to bring not only a solid background in the German theological traditions, but also his own personal interest. He had a working knowledge of Zinzendorf and the Moravian contribution to German church life and thought and regularly used the *Losungen* himself in his daily devotional time. Art Freeman states in his tribute, “I have been forever grateful to Piper, for Zinzendorf has decisively shaped my own theology.”<sup>1</sup>

While others in this issue will doubtless explore Art Freeman’s relationship to Zinzendorf and his contributions to Zinzendorf and Moravian scholarship, I would like to take up in this essay something of his relationship to the work and thought of Otto Piper and Piper’s writings and teaching in the field of Biblical Theology. A reading of Art Freeman’s subsequent work makes it clear that his doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, and particularly his encounter with the teaching of Otto Piper, were a significant formative event that helped shape much of the direction that his subsequent career and scholarship would later take.

Who was Otto Piper? Born November 29, 1891, in Lichte, Thuringia, Germany, Piper attended the Gymnasium in Erfurt and began his university studies at Jena, where he remained from 1910 until 1913, with a short break for a semester at Marburg. He specialized in the courses in philosophy and in the New Testament, which he studied with Heinrich Weinel (1874–1936), Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938), and Hans Lietzmann (1875–1942). Although religious instruction had been a regular part of the German educational system he had grown up in, it was Piper’s studies with Weinel that helped him understand the personal significance which the gospel has for

the life of each member of Christ's church. In an autobiographical statement contained in his papers, Piper wrote that "Dr. Weinel succeeded in an impressive way in pointing out the necessity to combine both the scholarly aspects of theology and the formative power of the gospel." According to Piper, Weinel sought the essence of Christianity in "the life of Jesus and in personal fellowship with him."<sup>2</sup>

From Hans Lietzmann Piper learned "the importance of studying the historical texts, and thus the value of the study of Biblical languages." Besides philosophy and religion courses, Piper also took courses in Greek and Roman archaeology and in art history. The public library in Jena also had an excellent collection of modern literature that the students at the university made good use of. For two years Piper volunteered to help supervise an after-school program for mentally handicapped children, aiding them with homework and telling fairy tale stories with illustrations cut out from various fairy tale books. From his high-school days Piper had also been active in the German youth movement, the *Wandervogel*, an important part of the cultural scene in Germany from about 1890 until the outbreak of World War I. He was active in organizing groups that took hiking and camping trips over the weekends and vacations, learning to sing the old German folk songs and discussing for long hours together the kinds of changes that young people of the day felt needed to be made in the German educational system and in the values and structures of German society.

In 1913 Piper spent eight months in Paris, where he studied simultaneously at the Sorbonne and at the Faculté Libre de Theologie Protestante. This time in Paris was an important event in his life. Some of his own ancestors had been French Huguenots, and in France he was impressed by the vitality of the religious life of the French Reformed Church (a minority church in France) as compared to the State-controlled Lutheran Church with which he was familiar in Germany. Of particular influence on him in Paris was the ministry of Wilfred Monod (1867–1943), a vibrant preacher and pioneer leader in the work of ecumenism and in the social witness of the Christian church. "I was led by Wilfred Monod," he writes, "to a new understanding of what he called the 'realism' of the Hebrew prophets as opposed to the spiritualism of Greek philosophy."<sup>3</sup>

A short period was spent at Heidelberg in 1914, studying economics and political theory, after which Piper took his ordination exams in August 1914. With the outbreak of World War I, he went into the army and was sent to the front as an officer. Piper's time on the actual battlefield was limited. On August 15, 1915, he was seriously wounded when a bullet struck and entered his head directly under his right eye, crushing his nose and ripping out much of the bone behind his right ear as it exited again. It grazed near, but did not penetrate, his brain. Nevertheless, when the Red Cross wagon came to the area where he had been wounded he was at first left for dead. Only as the medics were about to pull away did they notice that one of

the soldiers they had already loaded into their truck had died.

Piper was then taken back to the dressing station in his place, and his life was saved. Skillful doctors were able to do much for him, including repairing his face, but Piper spent much of the remainder of the war in hospitals. He permanently lost the sight of his right eye and his vision with his left eye was impaired. In future years he would often resort to the use of a magnifying glass to help him in his reading. His facial muscles had also been irreparably damaged, which made facial expressions such as smiling extremely difficult.

This close brush with death and his lengthy recovery gave him much to reflect on and time to do so. In the closing months of the war, Piper was in Munich. Here he used the opportunities available to become acquainted with Roman Catholic theological thinking by taking courses at the University of Munich. At the same time he participated in circles of progressive Protestant thinkers such as that of Johannes Müller of Elmau (1864–1949), who built a retreat center in the Bavarian Alps south of Munich where he urged a form of Christian life that went beyond intellectual theological concepts to an experiential approach of living in the spirit of the gospels.<sup>4</sup> Piper and Müller were to remain lifelong friends. Another significant event from these Munich days was the position Piper took as tutor to a young son in the Salinger family. This boy's sister, Elizabeth, would become Piper's first wife.

After his Munich period, Otto Piper would

move to Göttingen, taking some of his new friends with him to do graduate theological studies. At Göttingen he focused especially on the writings of Luther and the reformers and on the exegetical work of the Swabian school, Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), Johann Tobias Beck (1804–1878), and Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938). In 1920, Piper took his doctorate with a thesis analyzing the concept of religious experience in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Over the next dozen years or so, Piper published widely including in such important theological periodicals as *Die Christliche Welt*, *Theologische Blätter*, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, and *Die Furche*. He also contributed articles to the second edition of the important *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* and wrote several books and booklets of varying length, including two volumes on theological ethics, a booklet on youth and religion, and *Weltliches Christentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1926), an exploration of piety and religious sensibility outside the institutional church. His speeches and publications also explored the relationship of church and state and the relationship between experience and redemption, the latter published as *Erlösung als Erfahrung* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1932). He taught first at Göttingen as a university professor and then at the University of Münster, as successor to Karl Barth. In explaining the style and content of his teaching and university work in those days, he wrote:

I emphasized the value and necessity of combining several fields of specialization and also the desirability of devoting some

courses to a broad survey of the whole field of theology. I also emphasized the value of courses in which the student would take an active part. In particular, I offered, in each semester, a special course in which a work of literature or philosophy would be interpreted by the participants. In order to attain to the universality of outlook, I interested my colleagues of the other faculties to meet regularly and to present papers in their field of specialization. I also advocated the necessity of a close relationship between the Theological faculty and the denominations. In the German system, the Theological faculties were considered as being institutions of research, yet without any responsibility in the spiritual and theological life of the Church. I succeeded in persuading a number of younger ministers to meet regularly and to discuss the practical problems which confronted the denominations in a theological perspective. In like manner, some of my colleagues in Münster joined me in organizing theological retreats, as a result of which the participants were given an opportunity to discuss their theological and practical problems in a general manner.

“In all my lectures,” he wrote elsewhere, “I was anxious to show the bearing which theological statements have upon the problems of our days.”

Politically, Piper was unafraid to speak out on national issues. He openly joined the Social Democratic Party because of its active concern for the needs of the working classes, despite the unpopularity of a socialist position among his colleagues on the university faculty. In the midst of the growing sentiment in Germany for a militant National Socialism, which preached German re-armament and the cultivation of strong German nationalism under the leadership of a charismatic Führer, Piper spoke out for a Christian pacifism which would work for international understanding and reconciliation between the German people and their former wartime enemies. “It is completely erroneous,” wrote Piper, “to say that pacifism weakens the bones in view of the fact that God has called us to establish peace, and that call demands courage.”

Piper also continued to work for the ecumenical cooperation of the churches. In 1927 he was one of the German delegates to the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order. In 1928, 1930, and 1931 he made extended trips to France to further inter-church contacts and understanding. In 1930 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Theological Faculty of Paris.

When, in 1933, the new regime in Germany began its attacks on the Protestant Church, he delivered a course of lectures on State and Church, which did not please the authorities. He was dismissed from his teaching post and no longer allowed to hold a professorship in Germany. There followed a very difficult time

of upheaval and uncertainty in his life. In a talk he later gave in 1942, he recalled feeling at the time

very much like a shipwrecked sailor...His boat has been smashed by the violence of the elements, he has spent many days in a rather precarious situation on the waves of the ocean, time and again being tossed up by the billows and submerged into the salty flood, his mouth and tongue filled with the bitter waters of the infinite sea, his skin parched by storm and pitiless sunshine, his mind tired from incessantly looking over the unlimited vastness of the element...From a career in which most everything seemed to be settled definitely for the rest of my life history unpredictable vicissitudes and the arbitrary whims of men uprooted me completely.

Dismissing his last class in July 1933 he knew the Church struggle was underway, but he did not anticipate that “soon Fate would separate me from my students, my family, my home church, and my native country. There followed times of uncertainty and fear, of loneliness and perplexity, of profound shame for what was done in the name of my country.”<sup>5</sup>

Unable to return to teaching in Germany, by November of 1933 he had been taken in as a refugee by the Quaker College at Woodbrooke, Birmingham, England, where he spent a year. In 1934 Swansea University in Wales invited him as a “guest of the college” and this was followed by an invitation from the College of North Wales,

in Bangor, to serve as a “special lecturer.” There were no regular funds for his salary in Wales, but colleagues there pooled their resources to help support Piper and his young family. He was able to supplement this income with guest preaching and public lecture series, especially on the religious situation in Germany, and with teaching in Adult Education programs. He also gave of his time to the Student Christian Movement in Britain and to preparing for the World Conferences of the Churches scheduled to be held at Oxford (Church, Community and the State) and at Edinburgh (Conference on Faith and Order) in 1937.

It was in the academic year 1937–38 that Piper was offered a visiting professorship in Systematic Theology by John Mackay, President of Princeton Theological Seminary. In addition to teaching, he gave the Stone Lectures in the spring of 1938 on “The Christian Interpretation of History.” Over the next few years he stayed on in Princeton as a guest professor in New Testament and lectured widely at American colleges and universities and at clergy gatherings. The response to this work was quite positive. A collection of letters of appreciation to John Mackay for Piper’s services to the church at large in this period may be found in the archives at Princeton Seminary, which includes many expressions such as the following letter from a pastor testifying to Piper’s abilities in the field of Biblical interpretation:

The benefit and memory of that Conference still lives with me. In this day of conflict in the lives of thinking people where I minister I have been able to bring

a new faith and interpretation of the Bible through the wisdom and understanding of the lectures that Dr. Piper gave...he made the Bible the living Word of God to me. I take the liberty of using much of Dr. Piper's phraseology *ad verbum*, having made detailed notes, and time and again I have laymen in my community tell me that the interpretations I have given them are life and spirit. One man used the expression to me thus, "I looked on the Bible as an arid desert full of dead men's bones of interpretation but your living approach has made the Bible an oasis". I gave him Dr. Piper's approach.

In 1941 Otto Piper was offered a permanent chair at Princeton Theological Seminary as the first Helen H.P. Manson Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis and in 1942 he became a naturalized U.S. citizen. In addition to his regular teaching load and his work with pastors, Piper was a key person in helping Dr. Mackay develop the doctoral program at Princeton Theological Seminary.<sup>6</sup>

In a sense, many of the most troubling years of Otto Piper's life should have been over at this point, but it was not to be entirely so. Both of Piper's sons were drafted into the US Army during World War II and Gerhard ("Gero"), the eldest, was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. A former student remembered how, at the close of the first seminary Chapel service following the Christmas break, in January 1945, Piper went to the front of the Chapel and read with tears in his eyes the telegram he had received

informing him of his son's death. The Chapel grew very quiet, this student writes, but then came "the comfort of the Holy Spirit in the closing prayer. Others, of course, had lost loved ones in the war. We prayed that the war would soon end."

Following the Chapel service, Piper was scheduled to teach an introductory course in New Testament exegesis on the First Letter of John. Students wondered if he would show up, for he had been delayed at the Chapel due to people wanting to express their condolences. In a short time, however, Piper arrived and began his lecture. "Seldom had a lecture on I John made such an impression on a class as that morning. Against the backdrop of the hatred of war and the devastating telegram that he had just read, it was as if he wanted the students to be challenged that day by the beautiful passage of God's love and brotherhood... 'For we know that we have passed from death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother remains in death...and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren...'" Further unexpected tragedy was to come when on Thanksgiving eve in 1948 his wife, Elizabeth, died suddenly of a severe attack of asthma.

Otto Piper also felt a special responsibility to the terrible situation in Germany and other parts of Europe as a result of the war. He put in many hours in the mid- and later 1940s, drafting Princeton Theological Seminary students to help him, collecting, sorting, listing, packing and posting clothing, medicine, food and other relief items donated for refugees in

those war-torn lands. He also served as founder and president of the American Emergency Committee for German Protestantism that sought to further personal contact between congregations of Germany and the US and to secure American sponsors to help support 5,000 German pastors following the war. In 1960 he received the Officer's Cross of Merit, First Class, from President Heinrich Lübke of the Federal Republic of Germany for these efforts.

In the course of a sabbatical leave in Germany in 1950 Piper renewed an old acquaintance and found a second wife in Elizabeth Rüdiger, a former German schoolteacher. After some initial problems in getting the necessary paperwork she was eventually able to join him in Princeton and by all accounts was a very congenial helpmate in the many years that remained. The couple was especially known for their flower garden and for the gracious Friday afternoon teas the Pipers prepared for their students, where conversations ranged far and wide, "from some political crisis to some burning theological issue, to his moral and written support of a Presbyterian minister in Cincinnati in the minister's refusal to pay his income tax [because of the large portion going to military expenditure which he felt was inconsistent with his Christian beliefs], to some special challenge facing a former student in an overseas post..."<sup>7</sup>

Building on his earlier publications in Germany, Otto Piper's major English language publications include *Recent Developments in*

*German Protestantism* (London: SCM Press, 1934); *God in History* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); two explorations of Christian sexual ethics, *The Christian Interpretation of Sex* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) and *The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959); and a re-working of his *Christian Ethics* (London: Nelson, 1970). He also continued to contribute numerous articles to theological publications.

However, much of his important work in Biblical theology became available only in a more limited way, through mimeographed compilations of his lectures which his students put together and circulated privately. These included notes from seminars on "The Biblical Theology of the New Testament" from various years, but which in its most complete version consists of three parts. The first part is labeled "Prolegomena" and treats such topics as the historical roots and development of Biblical Theology, the relationship between the two Testaments, and the relationship of Biblical imagery to theological terminology.

The second part is labeled "Kerygma." It treats first of the idea of the "Kingdom of God" and its nature, then of the purpose of God and its mystery. Further sections cover additional problems such as the relation of the Kingdom of God to the Incarnation, the Redemptive Function of the Kingdom, the contrast between "the World" and the Kingdom, and the relationship of Christ to "the World."

A third major collection of notes on New Testament Biblical Theology continues the

exploration of the “Kerygma,” this time with a focus on the term “The Messiah.” It develops at some depth a Biblical Christology, including an exploration of the meaning of prophecy and fulfillment and an exploration of the significance of both historical and supernatural factors in the New Testament accounts. Other sets of class notes, seminar papers, and exegetical notes also survive in the archives including those on “The Parables of Jesus,” “Biblical Apocalyptic,” “The Gospel of Mark,” and materials related to a seminar on the “Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.”

Piper continued in his teaching role at Princeton Theological Seminary until his retirement in 1962. He taught many who were preparing for the vocation of parish ministry, but also gave of his time in a special way to doctoral candidates under his direction. Some of his students went on to become teachers themselves in various colleges and seminaries around the country, including Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Church of the Brethren and Mennonite schools, and, as we know, at the Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem. Others went on to teaching positions at colleges and seminaries overseas.

In his retirement years, Piper worked on a project compiling New Testament bibliography and on a commentary on the Gospel of Mark which remained unfinished. In a tribute at the time of his retirement in 1962, then President McCord of Princeton Theological Seminary remarked of Piper, “His is the happy combination of massive erudition, deep piety,

and a puckish sense of humor, and concern for the church that is not tangential to but an outgrowth of his New Testament concern.”<sup>8</sup> He lived on to the very full age of 90, passing to his eternal reward on February 13, 1982.

*“You are rewarding a teacher poorly if you remain always a pupil.”* (Friedrich Nietzsche)

### **Arthur Freeman Dissertation**

Turning now to the work of Art Freeman in its relation to that of Otto Piper, one place to begin is with Art Freeman’s 378-page detailed study of the hermeneutics of Zinzendorf which constitutes his thesis for his doctoral degree at Princeton Theological Seminary. This work was submitted to the faculty of the seminary in 1962. It is a carefully researched and thoughtful undertaking, reflecting much attention to original sources. Art Freeman specifically thanks Henry Williams of the Moravian College and Seminary Library, and the staff of the Archives of the Northern Province of the Moravian Church at Bethlehem for helping make possible his research. In his introduction to the work he points out that North American Moravians had often lost sight of Zinzendorf’s important contributions in part because of their loss of facility in the use of the German language. He further notes that although there had been increasing discussions in Europe regarding Zinzendorf’s contributions, especially in light of the theme of ecumenism, and that there had been new German-language explorations of some of Zinzendorf’s creative insights, there had yet to appear a thorough study of Zinzendorf’s principles of Biblical interpretation. He cites a

letter from Richard Träger, Herrnhut Archivist, confirming this.

Art Freeman then goes on to suggest that his own focus would be largely historical, but that “it is also the desire of the author to point up the relevance of Zinzendorf to contemporary hermeneutics wherever feasible.”<sup>9</sup> Because of the large amount of material available, Art Freeman gives his rationale for focusing especially on Zinzendorf’s sermons; the notes, comments and explanatory materials to be found in Zinzendorf’s Bible translations; as well as, to some extent, Zinzendorf’s catechetical works, poetry and hymns. Following a thorough study of the primary materials, important secondary sources were consulted. Also attended to were the standard lives of Zinzendorf and background historical materials on the eighteenth century and on hermeneutics in general.

This is not the place for a thoroughgoing examination of this highly interesting work, only parts of which were eventually reworked after a lifetime of Zinzendorf studies and incorporated into Art Freeman’s book *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart* (Bethlehem: Moravian Church in America, 1998). Not the least of its value is the making available to the reader extensive quotations from Zinzendorf’s works (for those who have the ability to read Zinzendorf in his original German).

The overall structure of the dissertation sets up the investigation of Zinzendorf’s hermeneutics in three steps. The first stage is a biographical presentation of Zinzendorf, placing him in his historical context, noting

the particular materials which will be the focus of the study and exploring at some length Zinzendorf’s personal wrestling with the religious and philosophical issues which challenged his own Christian understanding, particularly the relationship of philosophy and theology and the nature of religious truth.

The second major section treats the theme of hermeneutics proper. Here there are a total of seven very full chapters. Among the topics discussed in this section is the impossibility of approaching scripture without some presupposition (cf. Bultmann on the topic of *Vorverständnis*) and therefore the responsibility of the interpreter to acknowledge this and be intentional in choosing the point of departure for their exploration of scripture. Alan Richardson’s work on the relation of fact and interpretation in modern historical method is also drawn upon.

Zinzendorf’s understanding of the “Christ of the Cross” is shown to be his chosen interpretive principle in the study of scripture and his work is brought into dialogue with other approaches to Biblical interpretation of his time, including rationalism, Lutheran scholasticism, and in some depth with the Biblical hermeneutics of Johann Albrecht Bengel who wrote several contemporary critiques of Zinzendorf’s thought. The third division of the dissertation explores Zinzendorf’s practice of Biblical exegesis.

There is much wrestling in each of the chapters of the section on hermeneutics, which explore in detail Zinzendorf’s approach to

topics like the nature of scripture, the role of the Holy Spirit in Biblical interpretation, and the language best suited for the communication of religious truth. For instance, in the section on “The Language of the Bible,” Art Freeman points out that for Zinzendorf it was the Bible itself that provided the kind of speech best suited to convey the objective realities of Christianity. Such language is experiential, and not systematic and abstract.

Art Freeman draws particular attention to a letter of Zinzendorf’s regarding translation addressed to “einen besonders treuen Lehrer.” He sees the purpose of this letter as encouraging this teacher to use the language of Scripture (“Bibel-Sprache”, or as Zinzendorf elsewhere terms it “Apostolisch Teutsch nicht aber Theologisch und Lateinisch Teutsch” — Apostolic German, rather than theological or Latinized German) in his teaching and preaching. The point is that in addressing the *Gemeine* in “Bibel-Sprache” one would be using a theological language which would “cut across all the different national and religious languages.”<sup>10</sup> In using “Bibel-Sprache” to speak about matters of faith and life, Christian truth would be expressed “in the heart-language in which it became incarnate before man put his efforts to explaining it.”<sup>11</sup> The language of Scripture, it was thought, would bring people of various theological understandings together because it would bring them back “to the original fount of their experience and the starting point of their theology.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it was a form of language which could be used with the simple and uneducated, and which in its

humility and simplicity mirrored the Christian truth itself, which “comes in the form of a humble incarnation.”<sup>13</sup> An appreciation similar to Zinzendorf’s for the value of “Bibel-Sprache” is perhaps part of what drew both Art Freeman and Otto Piper more strongly to the field of Biblical Theology, rather than Systematics.

In his summary chapter of the central part of his dissertation Art Freeman explores what Zinzendorf means by “Heart-Religion,” making a distinction between understanding the term “experiential” in the sense of “feeling” versus what Art Freeman prefers to speak of as “Zinzendorf’s particular brand of inner empiricism.”<sup>14</sup> Heart-Religion “consists not of knowledge of a systematic theology, but the knowledge of the Saviour-Creator Jesus Christ. This knowledge is personal and real, not ideal.”<sup>15</sup> It depends neither on our ability to express or explain what it is we know, nor on the abilities of our efforts and intellect to discover it, but rather it “begins in God’s grace, Christ’s action toward us, and it concludes in our response to Him. Religion can then be summed up in ‘Umgang mit Christo.’”<sup>16</sup> Although Art Freeman does not use the term here, this is the core of what he will later often refer to as a *relational* theology.

At this point in his dissertation Art Freeman breaks out from a strictly historical analysis to share his own reflections:

It seems to the author that Zinzendorf is emphasizing something which needs serious consideration. Where does Christianity begin? Does it begin with

historical studies of a Jesus of Nazareth and attempt to systematize his teachings and those of the early church about life, man, and God — or does it rather begin with an experience of the reality of the living Christ, the Christ experienced and described by the Apostolic Church. This thesis has already contended that Zinzendorf was right in stressing the latter. If so, then man must begin with all of the limitations of his mental apparatus, his language, his culture, and his science to seek to explain this reality in the light of the Biblical revelation, knowing that he will falter and err, and knowing that if his explanation becomes only explanation he will indeed lose that which is the one great pearl: the reality he sought to define...The doctrinal system which one develops does not necessarily have rational coherence, and it may contain large gaps which one feels no urgency to fill out. The coherence of this theology lies in the reality experienced in the heart, a reality which is never vague, but has the content of the historical Saviour.<sup>17</sup>

Having laid out the central premises of his understanding of Zinzendorf's hermeneutics, Art Freeman then goes on to develop a third large division of the thesis, looking specifically at Zinzendorf's exegetical practices, including his approach to textual criticism, to philological concerns, historical concerns, and the use of such modes as allegory and typology in doing

exegesis. There is also attention to Zinzendorf's exegetical procedure in preaching, his use of exegetical aids such as commentaries and alternate Biblical versions, and his contacts with other scripture scholars of his day. The final chapter of this section explores Zinzendorf's understanding of the Church (especially the Church as *Gemeine*), the use of scripture in the Church and the place of the Church in understanding scripture.

Nowhere in Otto Piper's published writings do we find such an extended study in the history of Biblical interpretation as Art Freeman provides in his study of Zinzendorf's hermeneutics. Nevertheless, one understandably can see in the dissertation the influence of Piper's teaching and concerns. In discussing the principles of biblical interpretation, Piper pointed to two different but related processes: exegesis and appropriation. "The interpretation of a document consists of two different though closely related processes," he writes. "Exegesis makes the document both intelligible and comprehensible; appropriation is the personal response to the intrinsic challenge of the document."<sup>18</sup> While he felt that modern Biblical interpretation had made great strides in exegesis, providing greater understanding of the Biblical texts in their historical and literary contexts, he suggests that it has often "utterly failed in understanding the task of appropriation."<sup>19</sup>

Traditional Protestant orthodoxy, for example, tended to identify the Bible and its message with a certain system of theology. "The result," he writes, was that "the exegete

always finds his special brand of theology in the Bible.” This approach presumes to “know the content of the Bible before it is interpreted” and thus the very nature of the Bible as a living communication of God demanding a fresh personal response of faith is disregarded.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, historical and literary criticism which “take up so much of the time and energy of the modern exegete” can also miss the mark: “For instance, how little does it matter for our appreciation of the last twenty-seven chapters of the Book of Isaiah that in all probability they were not written by the prophet who speaks in chapters 1–39 as long as we can be sure that God is speaking to us through them!”<sup>21</sup> One can clearly see the parallels here between Piper’s concerns and Art Freeman’s presentation of Zinzendorf’s struggles with both the sterility of Protestant scholasticism and the limitations of Enlightenment rationalism.

Another interesting point of connection between Piper’s concerns and Art Freeman’s presentation of Zinzendorf is in the matter of both the simplicity and the profundity of the Biblical text. Piper writes:

Moreover, by the grace of God the language of his revelation is of extreme simplicity. A child can understand the words of the Bible. Whereas the value of philosophical and scientific language consists in its subtle differentiation, the value of Biblical language consists in its profundity. On account of the simplicity of Biblical language it is possible to reach agreement upon the essential truths among all those who are capable at all

of understanding the spiritual nature of these symbolic terms; and yet at the same time on account of their profundity ample room is left for diversity according to the nature and degree of spiritual insight given to various interpreters.<sup>22</sup>

While one may challenge this statement, there is no doubt that it resonates with certain themes in the writings of Zinzendorf.

In a section of his dissertation discussing “Proof of Inspiration” and in the following one on “Simplicity—Viva Vox” Art Freeman explores these topics further in the thought of Zinzendorf. In Art Freeman’s exposition, Zinzendorf is shown to admire most not the orator “who takes many hours to express something in his well-turned phrases” but rather “the man who in a few, precisely chosen words in a simple fashion makes his statement so that all may understand him.”<sup>23</sup> Art Freeman reports that the differences, defects and contradictions in Scripture, and the fact that these defects and contradictions were kept in the Bible through the centuries, far from undermining Biblical authority for Zinzendorf, were actually seen as testimony to its divine inspiration.

The writers of Scripture “have honestly and simply written under the guidance of the Spirit within their own personal and historical terms and no one has tried to harmonize the historically conditioned differences. . . they wrote and spoke from the heart what they knew in simple fashion which did not obliterate their humanity, their personal defects, or their faulty understanding in certain areas of knowledge. . . Scripture as man

has it now is the product of the Spirit-inspired experience of the living reality of God in Christ Jesus.”<sup>24</sup> It is this understanding which is also related to Zinzendorf’s endorsement of poetry and hymnody as a better vehicle for conveying religious truth than prose, for it “arises from the heart, rather than only from the mind.”<sup>25</sup>

An interesting theme which appears at several places in the dissertation is Zinzendorf’s understanding of Biblical interpretation, and indeed of any understanding of religious reality as *öconomisch*. In discussing Zinzendorf’s use of this term, Art Freeman points out that while the term was used by the Federal theologians such as Cocceius and Lampe, it is used in a somewhat different fashion by Zinzendorf. While Cocceius stresses the idea of the growth and broadening of the knowledge of God in successive stages of revelation, for Zinzendorf this is not so. “History does not represent a growth from one level of revelation to another, from one Economy to another. Rather is each Economy an entrance of God (Christ) into that particular time in history, with methods pertinent to that time and offering man an experience of truth which he is capable of at that moment.”<sup>26</sup>

Art Freeman has included some further exposition of Zinzendorf’s ideas on “The Economies of God” in the chapter on Scripture in his *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart*, so there is no need to spell them out in detail here. What is pertinent for our purposes is the way this discussion of Zinzendorf’s understanding of the *öconomisch* nature of God’s revelation

illuminates Piper’s comments on ample room being left for diversity “according to the nature and degree of spiritual insight given to various interpreters.” If the nature of inspiration is essentially *öconomisch* (“for that particular person or group, at that particular time, in that particular culture”) then differences of interpretation are not only natural, but may even be expected.<sup>27</sup>

The insight behind this understanding will be an important theme that Art Freeman will return to in a number of his subsequent writings. To take just one small example, in his piece on “Our Theological Journey” in which Art Freeman addresses differences in the understanding of Christ and the atonement in various synods in the Moravian Church, he prefaces his more particular remarks on the *Ground of the Unity* with a piece of New Testament Theology about the “Many New Testament Presentations of the One Christ.” He carefully states that while the placing of the Gospels first in the New Testament may be seen as in a sense the affirmation of the centrality of Christ and his story, that “it is important to note that the presentation of Christ is not limited to one Gospel...Christ as the center of the presentation and the message of God cannot be presented in a single way, thus the choice of four perspectives preserving not only the perspective of four early Christian communities but perhaps also representing the Christ who spoke differently in different contexts.” He goes on to suggest that the differences within the Gospel traditions may well be as much due to the contextual concerns

of Jesus as to the particular concerns of the various New Testament communities. “Though Jesus is the center and speaker of his message, it is not worded the same to all. Context is determinative.”<sup>28</sup>

Further, there is the need to take into account the process of growth in understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “It is important to note that Paul’s process took 14 years from his conversion to the mature theologian we meet in Galatians and Romans. Peter’s process culminating in I Peter, the maturing of his theology, took over 30 years. In I Peter he advocates views to which he objected during the ministry of Jesus,” writes Art Freeman.<sup>29</sup>

Piper also spoke of the need to continue to wrestle with scripture in order to find new spiritual insight. He spoke of his own struggles to continue to ponder and grow in understanding of the meaning of scripture: “I for one must admit...[t]he more intensely I try to understand the meaning of the basic concepts of the Bible the greater is the perplexity they cause in my mind.”<sup>30</sup> “Our theological views and systems have constantly to be revised in the light of new exegetical insights...The Holy Spirit is not a destructive principle. But as a life-giver He is certainly opposed to stagnation and complacency.”<sup>31</sup>

The final chapter of Art Freeman’s dissertation on Zinzendorf is given over to the topic of “Scripture and the Church.” After examining Zinzendorf’s usage of the various terms “Kirche,” “Religion,” “Sekte,” and

“Gemeine,” Art Freeman goes on to recount the various ways Scripture found a place in the community of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Unitas Fratrum, and then asks, “What is the place of the *Gemeine*, or Church, in the process of interpretation?” He goes on to say that another way this could be phrased is to ask “in what way is the interpreter dependent upon the *Gemeine* if he is to understand and interpret Scripture correctly.”

He comes up with three points which he feels are important. First, for Zinzendorf interpretation is never a solitary scholarly venture. Rather Zinzendorf was always ready to check his interpretation and translations with others, recognizing his place within both a particular historical expression of the church and also in relation to “the invisible and real Church which transcended historical confessional bodies.” Second, “since the truth resulting from interpretation is not a theological system but primarily an understanding of religious reality, then the *Gemeine* becomes the place where one’s interpretation may be tested, for this is where that reality may be found.” Closely related is the last point, that “since the *Gemeine* possesses the reality of which Scripture speaks, this reality is only learned there.” Art Freeman concludes by remarking that it is greatly to Zinzendorf’s credit that in a day when many sought meaningful religion primarily in a retreat to a religious individualism, Zinzendorf continued to emphasize the importance of the Church.<sup>32</sup>

This centrality of the Church as the context for biblical interpretation is also a concept emphasized by Otto Piper. “Now the Holy Spirit is given to the whole Church as the Body of Christ, and He operates in the individual believer only inasmuch as the latter is a member of that mystical body. Applied to the task of exegesis this statement means that the subjective element in the individual exegete’s work has to be checked by the spiritual insights of the Church as a whole.”<sup>33</sup> Piper hastens to add that this is not to be taken in the Roman Catholic sense whereby a church hierarchy strictly prescribes the acceptable rules for interpretation or decides authoritatively how certain biblical passages or books may be understood. Rather, it means that those that attempt biblical interpretation can only do acceptable work when they recognize the way they have been conditioned by, and hold responsibility for, the spiritual life of the Church.

“[N]o exegete has made himself a Christian. His personal faith presupposes the teachings, the experience, the spiritual fellowship, and the example of his denomination...while the doctrinal standards of our church can never be absolutely binding for our exegetical work, they are of the greatest heuristic value for our interpretation of the Scriptures.” This is because they are “a condensed expression of the spiritual insights of past generations, who have earnestly striven for the true understanding of the revealed truth.” On the other hand, he places strong value on those from differing denominational traditions listening to one another to see if there might be some leading of the Holy Spirit expressed in these alternative

teachings which might be missed or underplayed in one’s own.<sup>34</sup>

In the spring of 1975, Art Freeman sent a draft copy of the completed manuscript for his book *Prayer and the Doing of Theology: An Approach to New Testament Theology* to Otto Piper for Piper’s comment. He had previously shared with Piper earlier portions of the work in progress. In a letter dated June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1975, Piper wrote back that he appreciated that his former student had taken the time to share his work. He also wrote, “It gives me special pleasure to witness your theological activity in view of the fact that a number of my former students never completed an extensive theological study.” After making some suggestions as to possible publishers Piper felt Art Freeman should contact, he also offered to lend the weight of his own endorsement if Art Freeman felt that might help in finding a publisher for his work. “In submitting your manuscript to publishers,” he wrote, “you may refer to my name and indicate that in my opinion your essay is apt to advance protestant theology beyond the subjectivities of modern existentialism in the direction of some scriptural realism.”

If the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has often been thought of as a “Golden Age” of Biblical Theology,<sup>35</sup> by 1970 Brevard Childs had published his *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). This manuscript on *Prayer and the Doing of Theology* may be seen as Art Freeman’s own response to that “crisis.” It had grown in part out of Art Freeman’s regularly teaching a course on the “New Testament Theology of Prayer and

Religious Experience” at Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem. In this manuscript Art Freeman set forth the conclusions he had arrived at regarding the centrality of “the disciplined life of prayer” for the doing of theology:

In simplest terms, it is my belief that the intellectual and critical doing of theology must be brought into a dialectical relationship with Christian experience and action. In this way the intellectual, critical, historical study is informed and corrected by experience and action...and experience and action is challenged and qualified by historical study. This means that the study of N.T. Theology can never be seen as merely a historical task. The historical task is essential, but one does not really understand unless one comes to know and experience the real “subject matter” of the historical material. In this understanding of the process of doing theology I feel that the disciplined life of prayer is absolutely essential, because this is a primary way of relating to the subject matter of the text.<sup>36</sup>

This manuscript is already a rather rich exploration of the New Testament theology of prayer drawing especially on the work of Joachim Jeremias, but also presenting Art Freeman’s own studies directly in the New Testament texts. An opening chapter examines critically the state of Biblical Theology, both in terms of a crisis of subject (“loss of faith in the relevance of the biblical materials as its historically-conditioned nature becomes

apparent”) and crisis of method (“what satisfies the mind does not always satisfy the heart”).

Later chapters explore at some depth the practice of prayer in the Judaism of Jesus’ day and in the early church, the Gospel portrayals of the place of prayer in the life and teachings of Jesus, an in-depth study of the Lord’s Prayer, and the Christology implied in New Testament terms such as “Son of Man” and “Kyrios,” as well as that embodied in the accounts of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. There is also an examination of Christian anthropology focusing on the relational nature of human existence and a final appendix with “Suggestions for the Practice of Relationship with God.”

In light of our particular concern here, we may look especially at the place given to Mark 4 in Art Freeman’s manuscript (and in later writings by Art Freeman as well) as a key to the understanding of the presence of the Kingdom of God as a mystery. The parables of the “sower who went out to sow,” with its attendant explanation, and of the Kingdom of God as a “mustard seed,” are seen by Art Freeman as “quite illustrative of the problem of understanding” when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom:

In the parables of the seed growing and the mustard seed Jesus describes the Kingdom as present as a seed (but nevertheless really present), growing according to the slow and mysterious process of growth, and as coming to fruition in a time beyond human control. Jesus’ contemporaries could not identify with this portrayal of the Kingdom, but saw it in more

Apocalyptic terms. Jesus presented the Kingdom as really present in ways other than power. Its presence was a mystery in the sense that one might debate the reality of its presence. To accept it as really present was an act of faith; an act of one who had ears to hear.<sup>37</sup>

Even the disciples in this passage, although aware in some way of the mystery of the Kingdom, seem to have little understanding of the parable and its meaning and are in need of further instruction. Parables are not easy to understand, at least in part because they make a point which runs contrary to the grain of contemporary Jewish understanding.

Jesus' contemporaries were expecting the Kingdom to come in a demonstration of God's power. For Jesus, in Art Freeman's understanding, the present existence with all of its limitations was to be seen "as the scene of God's presence and activity." Jesus embodied the paradox of the righteous sufferer (cf. Job, Psalm 22, etc.) and God would therefore be found in a life where he seemed absent. God's presence would be found in a life that "partook of all the suffering of this world and wrestled with the question of God's will and presence."

Jesus' cry of abandonment on the cross was the "cry of a man in a world where suffering makes God seem absent," but whose resurrection was a vindication of his faith. The early church was aware that although God had created the world, the world was now under the dominion of demonic and satanic powers and was "groaning in travail" (Romans 8:22)

as it awaited its new birth. Yet until that time, God was present "in all of the tragic of life to hold us in his love (Romans 8:28–39)." Like Christ, Christians bore within themselves the power of the Gospel and of the Spirit, but also in imitation of Christ, they bore within their lives "the paradoxical presence of both God (the Spirit) and suffering (I Thess. 1:6; 2:13–16)."<sup>38</sup>

Otto Piper was also taken with Mark 4 as a key to understanding the parables and a clue to the mysterious presence of the Kingdom of God. He even preached on this passage in Bethlehem, PA, at one point, and focuses on it in his article on "The Understanding of the Synoptic Parables."<sup>39</sup> The typescript of a report on a seminar he gave on the "Parables of the Kingdom" on January 5, 1939, contained the following remarks:

The nature of all the parables is basically mysterious for there is an element in them that goes beyond human reasoning... There is an apparent contradiction in Jesus' saying that the Kingdom is at hand, for He did not possess all the pomp and circumstance that the Jews expected of the Messiah. So it is that we see the mysterious character of the Kingdom. The apparent contradictions of the Kingdom become reconciled only to those to whom Jesus reveals the mystery. The final answer and meaning of the parables of the Kingdom are to be found in the Person of Christ Himself... The Kingdom is a reality but its development is a paradox... To His own [Christ's] work appeared small as yet but they knew it would develop into the

Kingdom for He had revealed to them the inner meaning of His words.

Like the planting of the seed of the Kingdom by the preaching of the Gospel, the results might be quite different in different persons. Yet as the parable of the mustard seed shows, from a small seed may come a great result.

The encounter of Art Freeman with the teaching of Otto Piper at Princeton Theological Seminary was clearly a formative event for his spiritual development as well as for the career path he would follow. Yet it was certainly not the only major formative event in his adult life. Arthur Freeman's work for many years as a part of the Lilly Endowment Project for the Deepening of the Spiritual Life of the Seminary Faculty, a program under the direction of Charles Whiston, was clearly another such event. Out of it grew much of his later work on the topic of Spiritual Formation, building on his earlier work on a New Testament Theology of Prayer.

His writings in the fields of spirituality and psychology and spirituality and health reveal the mastery of entirely new fields of literature that went far beyond the material he had studied in his graduate work in New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. Still, much groundwork had been laid, as can be seen, for instance, in the section on "Healing in the New Testament" in his book *Healing: A Rainbow of Hope* (Bethlehem: 2001).

I would like to bring this essay to a close with a few remarks from Otto Piper which seem particularly appropriate as we celebrate the role Art Freeman has played as a teacher, mentor and spiritual friend in our own lives. After setting

out his discussion of "Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis," Piper suggests that it is one thing to set forth a vision of our calling and its tasks, but "a long rough way from the vision to its realization." None of us, he remarks, "who are teaching here in the Seminary will see his vision come completely true. We shall all die by the wayside. All we can do is this one thing; that coming out of a great tradition we hand the torch on." In some ways, we may rightly be dissatisfied. (Piper sees a certain amount of dissatisfaction with things as itself the work of the Holy Spirit prodding us on.)

Not much seems to be achieved thereby. Yet doing this for the succeeding generations is not a hopeless and futile thing. For we have the assurance that our life-work will not be lost. If we erect it on the solid ground, which is Jesus Christ we shall be living stones in the temple He is building here on earth. Not every one of us can be a pillar or an ornamental frieze. But each stone is needed for the perfection of the whole building. Suffice it that on the day of His glorious coming the Lord will say to us: "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord!"<sup>40</sup>

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Arthur J. Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf* (Bethlehem: The Moravian Church in America, 1998), pp. v and 1.

- <sup>2</sup> All biographical materials concerning Otto Piper in this and subsequent paragraphs, including quotations, are taken from various unpublished documents located in the Otto Piper Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>3</sup> Piper takes up this same theme a number of different times in his writing and speaking. Cf., for example, “Hellenistic and Hebraic Mentality,” *The Seminarian*, Official Student Publication of Moravian Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, Pa., Vol. 9, No. 1 (Fall, 1954), pp. 3–4.
- <sup>4</sup> for an example of Müller’s academic writing see *Der Persönliche Christentum der Paulinischen Gemeinden* (Leipzig: J.S. Hinrichs’sche, 1898); for a sample of his more popular writings, see *Die Reden Jesu verdeutscht und vergegenwärtigt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1909) and *Die Bergpredigt verdeutscht und vergegenwärtigt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1911).
- <sup>5</sup> Otto A. Piper, “Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 36, No. 1 (1942) p. 15.
- <sup>6</sup> see Otto A. Piper, “Principles of Graduate Study in Theology,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 38, No. 1 (1944), pp. 21–25.
- <sup>7</sup> “Otto Alfred Piper: 1891–1982,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 4, New Series, No. 1 (1983), p. 54.
- <sup>8</sup> James I. McCord, “Otto Piper: An Appreciation,” in William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder, *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in honor of Otto A. Piper* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. xiii.
- <sup>9</sup> Arthur James Freeman, *The Hermeneutics of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf* (Princeton: 1962), p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 227.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 228.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 229
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 243.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 244.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 245–246, 257.
- <sup>18</sup> Otto A. Piper, “Principles of New Testament Interpretation,” *Theology Today*, Vol. III, No. 2 (July, 1946), p. 193.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 201.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 203.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.
- <sup>22</sup> Piper, “Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis,” p. 9.
- <sup>23</sup> Freeman, *The Hermeneutics of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf*, p.119.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- <sup>28</sup> Arthur Freeman, “Our Theological Journey,” *TMDK*, 25 (2002), pp. 59–60.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>30</sup> Piper, “Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis,” p. 9.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>32</sup> Freeman, *The Hermeneutics of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf*, pp. 346–351.
- <sup>33</sup> Piper, “Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis,” p. 13.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.
- <sup>35</sup> James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 39–48.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur James Freeman, *Prayer and the Doing of Theology* (Bethlehem: n.d.), p. i.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>39</sup> Otto A. Piper, “The Understanding of the Synoptic Parables,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (January 15, 1942), pp. 33–34.

<sup>40</sup> Piper, “Modern Problems of New Testament Exegesis,” p. 14.

**The next issue of *The Hinge* will focus on the theme of religion and violence and will feature reports from different provinces of the Unity.**