

# LECTURES

## For Moravian Theological College, Mbeya, Tanzania

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*These lectures were presented on various subjects at the Moravian Theological College at the time of my visit, June to August 1995. In December of 1994 I received the kind invitation to lecture and to assist with the development of the projected B.D. program, an honor to which I was happy to respond. I arrived on June 17 and delivered these lectures to the students on June 19-26. I dedicate them to the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, its students, its staff, and its future -- to the honor and glory of God.*

### **ZINZENDORF II — The Bible's Nature and Authority**

There is little question for most Christians that the Bible is a very special authority for faith and life. However, there are questions as to what in it is authoritative for us (most persons have their favorite passages or books) and in what sense it is an authority.

The church by the fourth century pretty well decided what was to go into the Canon of Scriptures. In fact, the inclusion of the OT and the acceptance of 22 books of the NT was decided for mostly by the end of the second century. But there were those, like Marcion, who wondered whether the Old Testament should be included at all and Tatian in his Diatessaron who tried to simplify things by creating one Gospel out of four. It is important to recognize that as far as the OT is concerned, the early church used the Septuagint, the Greek Version of the Old Testament, up to the time of the Reformation when Protestants went back to the Palestinian Hebrew Canon. In the Septuagint there were books which were not in the Hebrew Canon, known today as the Apocrypha, and some of the books in both existed in different form in the Septuagint than those in the Hebrew Canon. One may ask the question of which OT should be our OT. The Septuagint has more frequency of quotation in the NT than does the Hebrew OT.

Then there is the variety of perspectives represented in different books of the Canon, so that Christians of many different approaches find their differing perspectives supported by particular biblical materials. The fact that so many books from different perspectives and different periods in history were put together raises an interesting question. How should we read the Bible? Should we read each individual book separately, in its historical context, or should we read each book as a part of the Canon, now qualified by the others. A canonical reading of the text really should be considered because it is the whole of Scripture, not individual books, that are our authority. The trouble is, no one in the early church, to the best of my knowledge, told us how to do this: to read the books of the Canon together. Thus the eschatology of Revelation and the Gospel of John should qualify each other. But how should this be and which perspective should be final?

It is only natural that there should be differences and debates among Christians about how to regard and interpret their sacred literature.

In the last several years there has been a debate in the North American Provinces of the Moravian Church about the nature of Scripture. It centered on the word “source” in the statement in the *Ground of the Unity*. This statement said:

The Holy Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament are and abide the only source and rule of faith, doctrine, and life of the Unitas Fratrum.

Before 1957 the Moravian Church had never called Scripture the “only source”, but always the “only rule”.<sup>1</sup> As the only source some wished to understand it as our only source of religious information, and that reason, experience and tradition had no place. Some also felt that to call Scripture the only source was to neglect the Moravian position that not Scripture itself is not the source of faith and life, only God and Christ are. Differences threatened to keep us from gathering around Scripture together, to feast from the “Word of God.”

The Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church in America then asked the statement in the *Ground of the Unity* to be changed to:

The Triune God as attested to in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is the only source of our life and salvation; and this Scripture is the sole standard of our doctrine and faith and therefore shapes our life.

All of the various groups that held differing opinions agreed on this. It will be considered at the coming Unity Synod in Dar es Salaam. It was argued that these changes bring the statement in the *Ground of the Unity* more into harmony with our Moravian theological tradition.

Let me now share with you, as a part of our tradition, Zinzendorf’s understanding of Scripture.

Zinzendorf was profoundly affected by the challenges presented to Christianity by the German Enlightenment and the developing historical criticism of Scripture. He bought into many of the insights of historical criticism, but turned it to his own ends. (It is important to note that scholarly analysis may be for the defense of the faith and does not have to be destructive of faith.) Essentially he said that God allowed the authors of Scripture to write according to their own limits and characteristics, giving them insights which were right for their historical period, not requiring of them more than he gave them. Thus each historical period has its own awareness of the divine and theological system which is right for the time. God does the same with each succeeding historical period, so that understanding Scripture is not merely a matter of observing the *development* of insights and ideas from one period to another, but understanding *each period as in some sense right in itself*. What God gives within each period is all that God asks of us. Zinzendorf says that only the theologians think that they must know everything at once.

As God works within each historical period, so God works individually with each biblical writer, allowing each to express himself as he is able.

Thus Scripture has as many differences within it as there are historical periods and individual writers, certainly with many common elements and themes. These differences indicate Scripture's divine

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<sup>1</sup> . See the doctrinal statements made by the General Synods of the Moravian Church from 1782 to 1914. The Synod of 1931 did not deal with doctrinal questions because of other concerns. The Synod of 1782 described Scripture as “the ground of our teaching and the only rule of our faith and life.” The Synod of 1825 dropped the phrase “ground of our teaching”.

character, for human beings would have designed everything to agree and fit into a system. But that is not the way God works. God works in a way right for each time and person.

In the final analysis, the real unity of Scripture is not a unity of ideas, but a unity of Person, the person of Christ, to whom all of Scripture bears witness.<sup>2</sup> By the simplicity of Scripture, God's letting each author write as able, one is put into contact with the writer's experience of the Savior in a way that would not be true if the writer tried to create a system of ideas. The relationship of Christ to all of Scripture is well expressed in the *Ground of the Unity* section on "Word and Doctrine," where it is said that while the Moravian Church takes part "in the continual search for sound doctrine," Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, but it attests to the "mystery of Christ" which "cannot completely be comprehended by any human statement." Zinzendorf even warns about ways of studying Scripture which get in the way of relationship with Christ, citing John 5:39. Scripture only attests to the One from whom life comes, it does not provide life in itself.

Thus one of the primary usages of Scripture for Zinzendorf and Moravians became the devotional, and they searched for ways of meeting the mystery of Christ in the text. The Daily Texts were developed in 1731 as a devotional tool which would not pose the problem of contextual and historical study for those not equipped to do so. In this way a person could live each day with some biblical texts. In the last years of his life Zinzendorf composed the "Story of the Days of the Son of Man upon Earth Extracted from the Four Gospels," which came to be called the *Passion Week Manual* (and later *Readings for Holy Week*). This harmony of the four Gospels covering the last days of Jesus enabled Moravians to experience and relive this crucial time in Jesus' life and receive its meaning.

Zinzendorf also divided Scripture into three kinds of materials: *basic truths* about salvation which are clear in Scripture, *matters of knowledge* which take an expert with historical and experiential knowledge about the Bible to understand, and *mysteries* which are not clear in the Bible even to those who have all the tools for biblical interpretation. Persons may struggle over the meaning of mysteries, but because their meaning is not clear in Scripture no person can tell another what to think about them. Here, says Zinzendorf, we have such matters as the expectation of the end of time and the Lord's Supper.

If we take Zinzendorf seriously, we need to realize that differences will always arise when differing persons with different experience and backgrounds interpret the same text. We need to respect each other's perspective without anxiously trying to eliminate our differences. Even the scholars are unable to do that. While we gather together around God's Word we would expect to hear *the God* who might say different and personal words to different persons who might hear in personal and different ways. But though we may hear different messages, we will together meet the same Christ who will draw us to his Father, together.

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<sup>2</sup> . For Zinzendorf Christ was the person of the Godhead who always functioned in a mediatorial capacity. Thus the God experienced in the OT was really Christ and the Creator experienced within any religious tradition is always Christ. He utilized John 1:1-18 and Col. 1:15-20 as his biblical foundation for this.