

Guiding Principles of Biblical Interpretation

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*When the Scriptures we cherish
Then the soul is full of light
But that light will quickly vanish,
When of Jesus we lose sight¹*

From the Ground of the Unity, we affirm the following

God's Word and Doctrine

“The Triune God as revealed 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 the doctrine and faith of the Unitas Fratrum and therefore shapes our life.

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes the Word of the Cross as the center of Holy Scripture and of all preaching of the Gospel, and it sees its primary mission, and its reason for being, to consist in bearing witness to this joyful message. We ask our Lord for power never to stray from this.

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. Also it is true that through the Holy Spirit the recognition of God's will for salvation in the Bible is revealed completely and clearly.”

From the earliest days of our history, Moravians have held the Word of God in highest esteem. Yet we have always made it clear that the *written* word points and directs us not to itself, but to the Word *made flesh*, that is, Jesus Christ. A hymn of the Bohemian Brethren expresses that relationship beautifully:

The word of God which ne'er shall cease,
proclaims free pardon, grace and peace,
salvation shows in Christ alone,
the perfect will of God makes known.²

¹ *Moravian Book of Worship* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Moravian Church in North America, 1995), 717. A revision of the text of hymn 717.

² *Ibid.*, 509. Verse 1 of hymn 509.

John Hus was willing to give his life because of his conviction that the church of his time was not following the will of God as revealed in Scripture. Yet, his dying words were directed to the living Word as he sang, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

In 1419, four years after Hus’s death, the Hussite league declared as one of the Four Articles of Prague, that “the living word in dialogue between the preacher and the congregation is the real expression of faith.” They spoke of it as the “prophetic and apostolic message of the Word of God,” and said that it should be preached freely and in the vernacular of the people. Peter Chelcicky preached that people should “accept the simple words of Scripture and believe above all in the example of Christ.”³

In 1457, a group of Hussites, led by Gregory, distinguished themselves as “Brethren of the Law of Christ,” and in 1464 they passed a resolution affirming that this law of Christ was shown through the Bible. By the late 1400’s, the Brethren were making an important distinction between the essentials and those things that *ministered* to the essentials. The Bible was considered to be a *ministerial*, but the great Moravian theologian, Luke of Prague, called it “that first, greatest and most necessary ministerial thing.”⁴ The *Apology* written by the Unitas Fratrum in 1503 stated that the “Word of God is the *ministrative* by which God is made known.”⁵

While Moravians have always valued the totality of Scripture (the Hebrew Bible as well as the New Testament) there was a tendency to interpret the writings of the Old Testament in light of the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament. The Confessions of Faith formulated in 1535 said that the “apostolic writings should be preferred over others as sacred to profane and divine to human.”⁶

Moravians also sought to read Scripture with both mind and heart. In the 1500’s, Jon Blahoslav emphasized the importance of the mind (serious study of Scripture) but affirmed that all great knowledge was to no avail if it is not guided by true piety. In the 1600’s, Jon Amos Comenius observed the two extremes of faithless rationalism and fanatical, unreasonable devotion.⁷ He proposed that there must be a “middle course” between the neglect of Scripture and the abuse of Scripture.⁸ The combination of knowledge and piety could be seen in his life and can serve as a model for Moravians today.

In the 1700’s, Zinzendorf reinforced the distinction between the “written word” and the “living word” (Christ). He did not speak of the Bible as the “Divine Book” but rather spoke of the “divine truth *in* the book.”⁹ For Zinzendorf, the starting point had to be Jesus Christ. He believed

³ Janel R. Rice, "The Biblical View of the Ancient Unitas Fratrum," *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 13:3, (2006), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Craig Atwood, "How Moravians Have Read the Bible in the Past," Eastern District of the Northern Province (Eastern District Conference of the Northern Province of the Moravian Church in North America, 2011), 3.

⁶ Rice, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ Atwood, 4.

⁹ Keith Stanley, "Moravians and Scripture," *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 13:3, (2006), 30.

that once one came to know the Savior, then the Savior would reveal the truth about the Father and the Spirit. And, he said, “that to which the Savior did not lead was not necessary for salvation.”¹⁰ With this in mind, Zinzendorf affirmed different degrees of clarity within Scripture: basic truths about salvation (these are clear); matters of knowledge that require historical understanding; and mysteries that remain uncertain (even for those with the interpretive tools).

Spangenberg expressed his views on the nature of Scripture, saying that the Holy Spirit did not dictate the words to the authors but rather led them as they wrote according to their own abilities and knowledge. Like Zinzendorf, he believed that the central theme of Scripture was redemption through Christ.¹¹

As the Renewed Moravian Church began to expand and “go into all the world,” more clarification and definition of our core beliefs was vital to maintain a common Moravian identity in geographically diverse mission. General Synods (now known as Unity Synods) often discussed and dealt with theological issues and attempted to formulate statements that reflected the belief of the church. In the late 1700s, a General Synod approved a statement of four “points” to which several more were eventually added. The General Synod in 1818 stated that “Holy Scripture is the ground of our teaching and the only rule of our faith and life.”¹² The 1879 General Synod added the final two of the eight cardinal “truths.”¹³

In 1909, a crisis arose concerning questions of Biblical authority as new theological ideas were being discussed at the German Province’s Theological Seminary. Many felt that it was important to affirm perceived Moravian theological boundaries in order to preserve what they considered to be orthodoxy. While it was agreed that new ideas could be discussed and studied, the General Synod of 1914 made it a point to reaffirm the eight cardinal doctrines and also formulated a statement about the authority of Scripture: “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are and shall remain the only rule of our faith and practice.” The Synod also declared that “we are convinced that all truths that declare the will of God for our salvation are fully contained therein.” They affirmed the “genuine Moravian view” that “it is not our business to determine

¹⁰ Tracy Pryor, "Zinzendorf's View of Scripture," *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 13:3, (2006), 11.

¹¹ Atwood, 8.

¹² Arthur Freeman, "Understanding of Scripture in the Moravian Church," (Northern Province of the Moravian Church in North America, 1994), 8.

¹³ C. Daniel Crews, in his book, “Confessing Our Unity in Christ,” explains that, at the 1775 General Synod, the “chief axiom” was expressed in a hymn by Zinzendorf: “that whoe’er believeth in Christ’s redemption may find grace and a complete exemption from serving sin. Four “points” were agreed upon: the atoning sacrifice and satisfaction of Jesus for us; the universal depravity of humanity; the divinity of Jesus; and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the operations of grace. In 1818, these were rearranged and a fifth point was added, resulting in: universal depravity of humanity; divinity and incarnation of Jesus; atoning sacrifice of Jesus; the Holy Spirit and the operation of grace; and the fruits of faith. The 1857 General Synod added (between the first and second points) a sixth point: the love of God the Father. This Synod also affirmed the “mysteries of Scripture.” In 1879 the final two points were added (the fellowship of believers with one another; the second coming of our Lord in glory, and the resurrection of the dead unto life or unto judgment), resulting in the eight cardinal “truths:” In the 1950s John Groenfeldt referred to these truths as the eight “essentials.”

what the Holy Scriptures have left undetermined or to contend about mysteries impenetrable to human reason.”¹⁴

Around that same time, Augustus Schulze, President of Moravian College and Theological Seminary, published his *Christian Doctrine*. This book of systematic theology does not contain a chapter on Hermeneutics or Biblical Interpretation, but rather a section in the introduction entitled “The Bible as the Standard of Christian Doctrine.” This seems to be in keeping with the historical Moravian view that Scripture is the means but not the end—the “ministerial” but not the “essential.”

The Moravian Church continued to grow and expand throughout the world. As provinces developed and formulated their own rules and regulations for church order, it was important that there be principles that would apply to the church in all contexts and cultures. The 1954 Continental Synod (Germany) appointed a committee to test the reforming of the principles for church order. During the next two years they drafted a document that was approved by the Synods of the East and West Continental Districts in June 1956 and then taken to the 1957 General Synod.¹⁵ The document was reviewed and affirmed by the Doctrinal Committee (who gave it the name, “*Ground of the Unity*”) and then approved by the General Synod.¹⁶

In December, 1993, the bishops residing in the Northern Province wrote a pastoral letter in which they stated that, “while the role of Scripture has not changed, God continues to be revealed to Christians of good faith. The Holy Spirit guides God’s people into all truth, dynamic truth.”¹⁷ The bishops proposed a modification of the phrase (in the *Ground of the Unity*), “only source and rule,” to “primary source and rule.” After discussion and some adaptation of this statement, it was proposed at the 1994 Northern Province Synod that the former statement in the *Ground of the Unity*, “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*,” be replaced with, “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 the doctrine and faith of the *Unitas Fratrum* and therefore shapes our life.”¹⁸ With this change, the *ground of the Unity* became more consistent with Luke of Prague in asserting that the “Triune God” rather than the Scriptures is our source of salvation. This revised statement was affirmed by the Northern Province Synod and submitted to the *Unity Synod* of 1995 in Dar Es Salaam, where it was adopted.

In more recent years, many Moravians (Daniel Crews, Craig Atwood, Frank Crouch, Art Freeman, Janel Rice, Tracy Pryor, Amy Gohdes-Luhman, Gary Kinkel, Riddick Weber, Lynnette Delbridge, Ben Wright, Worth Green, among others) have written articles, papers, letters and other documents that have addressed in one way or another the topic of Biblical Interpretation. All of these voices, while speaking from different contexts and with somewhat varying perspectives, seem to affirm what has been affirmed throughout our history: that as Moravians, proclaiming Christ and Him crucified as our confession of faith, and believing that the Triune

¹⁴ Atwood, 8.

¹⁵ This was the first General Synod held outside of Continental Europe and the first to include former mission provinces.

¹⁶ Freeman, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ For a broader understanding of the context see the histories recommended in the bibliography.

God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only source of our life and salvation, we do not believe that Jesus points us to Scripture so that we can find the answers there, but rather that Scripture points us to Jesus so that we can find the answers in him. As a church we must be attentive to God's Word (the word of the cross, the word of reconciliation, the word of personal union with the Savior, the word of love between one another),¹⁹ and our faith and order must be formulated under Scripture and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Yet, it is not Scripture and our conformity to a particular interpretation of it that unites us, but rather Christ, our Chief Elder, who holds us together by keeping us all close to Him.

With this narrative of the history of interpretation of Scripture in the Moravian Church in mind, we offer some guiding principles of scriptural interpretation. Before doing so, we share our hopes for this important task of the people of the Moravian Church in North America.

Our hopes for the Moravian Church as we interpret Holy Scripture:

- That our efforts be grounded in faithfulness to the centrality of Christ, the way of the cross, and obedience to the word of God.
- That we proceed with openness to the leading and grace of the Triune God, not presuming in advance the outcome of our study and discernment together.
- That understanding a Moravian way of interpreting Scripture is of value to our life and work and the Moravian church every day, in every situation. More specifically, understanding how we interpret Scripture is critical when disagreement arises among us.
- That such understanding and work strengthen our Christian fellowship with each other as Moravians (individuals, congregations, provinces), grounded in a recognition that, ultimately, our unity as Moravians is rooted in our affirmation of Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.
- That we have strength, patience, and love as we live, work, and worship together in community.

Guiding Principles for the interpretation of Scripture:

- As Moravians, we understand that Scripture:
 - o Points us to Christ so that we can find our answers in Him.
 - o Ministers (along with the Sacraments, preaching, etc.) to the divine and human essentials of our faith – that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creates, redeems and sanctifies us; and we respond in faith, love and hope.
- Scripture, as a whole, is the sum of many parts.
 - o Scripture includes the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament
 - o We affirm that not all texts are equally clear. With Zinzendorf, we affirm that scriptural passages have varying degrees of clarity:
 - § Basic truths about salvation (that are clear)

¹⁹ "The Ground of the Unity," ed. The Unity Synod of the Unitas Fratrum or Moravian Church (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: 1995), chapter 2, paragraph 100b.

²⁰ "American Moravian Church's Liturgy for the Ordination of a Deacon," Provincial Elder's Conference (Moravian Church in North America, 2006), Question 5.

- § Matters of knowledge that require historical understanding
- § Mysteries that remain uncertain (even for those with the tools)
- We note considerations for interpretation:
 - o Given our human contexts and experiences, we affirm that every reading of Scripture is an act of interpretation.
 - o Scripture is interpreted in a variety of ways: literal, metaphorical, historical, contextual, rhetorical, etc. We affirm that no one way is the prescribed way.
 - o Given the diverse witness of Scripture, we believe that any particular scriptural text must be interpreted in light of all Scripture.
 - o Our interpretation of Scripture is guided by heart and mind, piety and rationality, doing and thinking.
- Faithful interpretation acknowledges:
 - o The historical context out of which the texts arose.²¹
 - o The contemporary cultural and global contexts out of which questions of interpretation arise (including scientific, archeological, and other forms of knowledge.)
- In this work, we affirm the importance to Moravians of relationships to each other and God, and assert that biblical interpretation happens most faithfully in conversation and fellowship with one another, not as individuals (or even as individual congregations or provinces.)

As we interpret Scripture together, we acknowledge that:

- Given the mystery of God, we cannot predict in advance the final result of our search for truth. Refraining from starting with a specific end in mind is aided by acknowledging that we come to the text and task with presuppositions. By naming our presuppositions, we deepen our ability to discern meaning and truth in the Holy Scriptures.
- Even with shared principles of interpretation, we realize that individuals, congregations and provinces of the Moravian Church may draw different conclusions.

²¹ C. Daniel Crews, "Luke of Prague: Theologian of the Unity (1997 Moses Lectures)," *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 12:3, no. (1997).

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