

Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of Scripture in a Moravian Context

Introduction

Begin with the end (look at the last 2 paragraphs of the handout to see where we are going).

When the Scriptures we cherish then the soul is full of light,
But that light will quickly vanish when of Jesus we lose sight.
(with my apologies to Spangenberg!)

As Moravians, proclaiming Christ and Him crucified as our confession of faith, and believing that the triune 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), and our faith and order must be formulated under Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Yet, it is not Scripture (and our conformity to a particular interpretation) that unites us, but rather Christ, our Chief Elder, who holds us together.

A Hopefully Helpful History Lesson:

An early hymn of the **Bohemian Brethren**

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.
Petrus Herbert (1566) tr. Louis F. Kampmann (1876)

1415: Jon Hus willing to give his life for his conviction that the church was not following the will of God as revealed in Scripture, but his final words were, "*Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me.*"

1419: Hussite League 4 Articles of Prague

"the Living word in dialogue between the preacher and the congregation is the real expression of faith."

Petr Chelcicky: "*accept the simple words of Scripture and believe above all in the example of Christ*"

1457: a group of Hussites led by **Gregory** called themselves the "Brethren of the Law of Christ"

1464: resolution affirming that this law of Christ was shown through the Bible

*By the late 1400's the "brethren" were distinguishing between **essentials** and **ministerials***

Around 1500: Luke of Prague called the Bible "that first, greatest and most necessary ministerial thing."

1503: Apology "the Word of God is the *ministrative* by which God is made known"

The ancient Unity valued the totality of Scripture but there was always a tendency to interpret the Old Testament (Hebrew Scripture) in light of the New Testament.

1500's Blahoslav: importance of serious study but to no avail if not guided by true piety

1600's Comenius saw 2 extremes: faithless rationalism vs. fanatical, unreasonable devotion
Proposed a "middle course" of knowledge *and* piety

1700's Zinzendorf distinguished between the *written* word and the *living* word

- Didn't speak of a divine book but rather of the "divine truth in the book"
- Start with the Savior
- That to which the Savior did not lead was not necessary for salvation

Zinzendorf's degrees of clarity in Scripture:

- Passages that are essential to salvation (these are clear)
- Passages that require "tools"
- Passages that remain a mystery (even with tools!)

Spangenberg: Redemption through Christ as the central theme in Scripture.

The Holy Spirit did not dictate words of Scripture but rather guided people

1732 Missionary movement begins / expansion into "all the world"
More clarification and definition of core beliefs was vital
Maintain common Moravian identity in midst of much diversity

1818 General Synod stated that "Holy Scripture is the ground of our teaching and the only rule of our faith and life."

1914 General Synod: "the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are and shall remain the only rule of our faith and practice."

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.

1954 Committee to test the reforming of the principles for church order.

1956 Principles approved by East and West Continental District Synods

1957 General Synod (now "**Unity Synod**") approved the document, which was given the name of "**The Ground of the Unity.**"

1993 Bishops residing in the Northern Province, proposed in a pastoral letter a change from "only source and rule" to "primary source and rule"

1994 Northern Province Synod: "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."

1995 Unity Synod in Dar Es Salaam adopted this change

Agreement on the following: It is not Scripture and our conformity to a particular interpretation which unites us, but rather Christ, our Chief Elder, who holds us together by keeping us all close to him.

As Moravians, we understand that Scripture:

- Points us to Christ so that we can find our answers in Him.

John 5:39-40

³⁹"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. ⁴⁰Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (NRSV)

(also *translation* issues!)

- Ministers (along with the Sacraments, preaching, etc.) to the divine (God creates, God redeems, God sanctifies) and human (faith, love, hope) essentials of our faith.

*When we attempt to use Scripture to support or refute a particular position, we need to try to examine **all** relevant texts in their entirety. We should not choose texts (or portions of texts) that support our argument and then ignore portions or texts that are problematic or that challenge our position on an issue.*

Examples:

What does the Bible say about the state?

Revelation 13	the beast
Romans 13	ordained by God
I Peter 2	human institution, often used by God

What does Paul say about women in ministry?

I Timothy 2:12
I Corinthians 14:34
Galatians 3:28
Romans 16:1-16

Who does Paul say will not inherit the kingdom of God (in I Corinthians 6:9-10)?

NRSV: ⁹ Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰ thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

KJV: ⁹ Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, ¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Faithful interpretation acknowledges:

- The historical context out of which the texts arose.
- The contemporary cultural and global contexts out of which questions of interpretation arise (including scientific, archeological, and other forms of knowledge.)
- Given our human contexts and experiences, we affirm that every reading of Scripture is an act of interpretation. We must distinguish between Scripture and our interpretations of Scripture.

Matthew 26:26 “This *is* my body, given for you.”
(What does “is” mean in this statement? Some major denominational differences surround the interpretation of that one word!)

Matthew 16:18 “You are Peter, and on *this* rock I will build my church.”
(What does “this” mean in this statement? Again, some major denominational differences and divisions surround the interpretation of that one word!)

John 21:17 ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”
(Are these words only for Peter, or are they for others – and us - as well? If they are for us, what do they say about how we show our love for Jesus?)

An important question:

Which statements or commands in the Bible are timeless and eternal and which are culturally and temporally conditioned?

(In other words, which ones are timeless truths for all people in all times and places, and which ones are specific directives for particular people in particular times and places?)

A Conservative Baptist missionary's helpful thoughts concerning 3 degrees of authority in Scripture:

Commands of Christ
Apostolic practices
Human customs / actions

Helpful principles from the Interprovincial Faith & Order Commission:

- As Moravians, we understand that Scripture:
 - Points us to Christ so that we can find our answers in Him.
 - Ministers (along with the Sacraments, preaching, etc.) to the divine (God creates, God redeems, God sanctifies) and human (faith, love, hope) essentials of our faith.
- Scripture, as a whole, is the sum of many parts.
 - Scripture includes the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament
 - We affirm that not all texts are equally clear. With Zinzendorf, we affirm that scriptural passages have varying degrees of clarity
- We note considerations for interpretation:
 - Given our human contexts and experiences, we affirm that every reading of Scripture is an act of interpretation.
 - Given the diverse witness of Scripture, we believe that any particular scriptural text must be interpreted in light of all Scripture.
 - Our interpretation of Scripture is guided by heart and mind, piety and rationality, doing and thinking.
- 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.

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.