

# Personal Reflections on the Nature of the Struggle for Truth and Faith

Arthur Freeman

Truth is not a simple matter. Like particles in Quantum Physics, whenever someone examines or seeks to measure, the results are affected by the examination. It is also helpful to remember that when we try to describe something whose realities are beyond description, but not beyond encounter, our description is only an intent and attempt. Because we examine we become aware, and often we are aware because we have touched (or been touched by) the reality we explore and not because we have fathomed, described and defined it.

Faith is very much bound up with our life process, the traditions we bring to it and the meaning with which we invest it. It is as if within the process of life we gain perspective, broaden experience, and thus have new vistas from which to approach life and its meaning. Life thus produces differing expressions of faith which must somehow be included within the community of faith and within the wisdom and tradition of generations of faith (the Bible and the Church's tradition) -- unless the tensions between the expressions of individual and community become intolerable. But there is that strange and wonderful gift of the Spirit which is called "love." Because of the relational nature of Christianity love is foundational and we hang on to each other as long as we can and we work out ways to stay together which would not be possible if the essence of our expression was intellectual agreement and coherent thought. Also, we find truth expressed in the one who, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself ..." (Phil. 2:5-7). God does not need to win an argument. The key to the process of God is the surrender of oneself into the mystery of God and life whereby one finds oneself "exalted" (in the sense of life clarified and person valued and loved). The act of surrender to the "Mystery beyond us" is when all differences become less than they are if we had to argue them apart from the mystery they express.

The Moravian tradition, from the Ancient to the Renewed Moravian Church, knew that creeds and confessions could not be final descriptions of spiritual reality, but were *attempts* to understand and describe. Thus Moravians in the Ancient Moravian Church listened seriously and learned much from the developing Reformation traditions. And in the Renewed Moravian Church there was utilization of the varied creeds of churches in the countries where Moravians existed and carried on their mission. The Augsburg Confession was extremely important, even utilized in the North American Moravian Church until about the 1840s. Zinzendorf also made extensive use of the Articles of the Synod of Berne, a Reformed confession, at the same time as the Augsburg Confession. For 50 years the Church incorporated three *Tropi* (Latin plural of *tropus*, "way"): Lutheran, Reformed, and Moravian, while giving serious consideration to the development of an Anglican *Tropus* and a Jewish-Christian *Tropus*.

The attempt to describe spiritual reality was not only limited because it in some sense transcends our descriptive powers, but because the essence of what was being described was a *person* – with the autonomy and complexity of person. The Ancient Moravian Church divided church matters into three categories: first there was the *Essential* of the Triune God responded to in a Triune way: faith, love and hope (totally personal and interpersonal); then there were the *Ministerials* which served the single Essential; church, creeds, Scripture, sacraments, etc.; and there were the *Incidentals*, the different ways things were done. The changes in para. 4 of the *Ground of the Unity* effected 1993-5 restated the Moravian position that the Triune God was the source of life, not Scripture (as stated in the 1957 edition), while Scripture was the sole standard of doctrine. The personal nature of truth is expressed in such paragraphs as The Belief of the Church, Personal Belief, The Unitas Fratrum As A Unity, and so on. There is also a section on Creeds and Confessions where it is said that the Moravian Church "recognizes

in the creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the Body of Christ.” And that these “creeds aid the Church in formulating a Scriptural confession, in marking the boundary of heresies, and in exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age.” But it also says that the Moravian Church “...maintains that all creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of Holy Scriptures.” Thus there is no unchangeable creed.

In the Renewed Moravian Church the relationship with the personal God was described in terms of the “heart relationship with the Savior,” a reaction to the Enlightenment and an expression of Zinzendorf’s own experience. This indicated that knowledge of God is more intuition and inner perception of the God we can know but can’t quite describe. Zinzendorf also developed this significantly in discussing the NT creation stories (John 1, Col. 1, Heb. 1). Christ is agent in creation and therefore he is the creator, though the Father was ultimately behind the creative activity of the Son. Not only has he created us, but when the one who created us comes into this world to do something for us, that something must be connected with our creation and our life process. In other words, having made humans Christ became flesh to participate in and complete the process of human development, spiritual realization, and human mission, and is still present in the process of each of us. We must be careful that the doctrine of the Ascension does not put Christ out of our lives and merely place him in heaven. Since Zinzendorf noted that God (as indicated in Scripture) has always acted personally and contextually, God’s facilitation of our development is not something same for all, but rather designed according to the needs of each. The Savior and the Spirit as Mother of the church (a very significant part of the understanding of God as person) then go with us into life. The common element of all religion and spirituality is then the Person who is always the same but does not always act the same because our needs are not the same.

Christians have always made a lot of the action of Christ to save us from sin, developing the meaning of the cross within the Jewish system of sacrifice. But this is not the only way that the Christ event can be described. In Galatians and Romans Christ’s atonement which brings an end to the Law is very important. But this is the issue which had to be dealt with in the context of those who lived under the Law. In Col. 2, a letter largely to Gentiles, though Paul talks about how God made them alive through forgiveness, the major problems for the Gentiles are the cosmic powers which influence their lives. In his cross Christ conquers these powers. Thus Paul knows he must speak about the cross one way to Jews, another way to Gentiles, and another way to the “weak,” a term used in Stoicism of those who did not yet adequately grasp truth but confused it with a lot of non-essentials carried over from their previous religious background (see I Cor. 9:19ff, and for the weak especially see Rom. 14). It is almost that Christ can fix whatever are the culturally experienced and perceived life and world issues and, in order to be sure that the church had enough resources to deal with the many issues of people, four very differing Gospels with rich and varied content were placed at the beginning of the NT Canon. We cannot deny that we have problems which we need God to solve, but what are the particular and crucial problems which keep *us* from God and life in our context? If the church wished only to emphasize the meaning of Christ's death, the passion stories would have been sufficient, for this is what was first turned into narrative for use in the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper before the construction of the longer Gospels.

What is essential is the Person of the Savior who did much that he is said to have done, and who did it personally and contextually and who in his ministry addressed different audiences differently as do the Gospels which narrate his ministry. The Person of the Savior is so important and central because he can meet our needs, in our time, in ways that use but transcend the historical narrative. He is so important because he taught certain crucial things: that God is present within (not above) the realities of life and history, that the power of the “traditional God on his throne” is renounced, that God joins us in our suffering and predicament. And as Zinzendorf pointed out in relationship to John 20, when Jesus came back from the resurrection/ascension he came back still wounded, determining to be wounded as long as

we are wounded. The Savior who has no wounds is not authentic. Thus he is essential because he models a way of God being with and for us, something unexpected though modeled in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. If we take Jesus seriously, God is different than traditionally expected. But most important, he is not primarily present in ideas or as atonement, but in relationship, satisfying our deepest human needs for relationship, and for relationship with him who is at the center of existence. Zinzendorf called him “my other ‘I’” which means that within my life and psyche he forms a dynamic center, similar to the ego, but leading and resourcing according to *his* values and vision.

I have no problem with trying to move beyond traditional ideas about the atonement because these are contextually conditioned (e.g. the context of Jewish Christianity). But I cannot move beyond HIM. I guess that perhaps we don't have to argue about the two natures and his full divinity, but if God is not present in him (as presented in the Prologue to John which interpreted Gen. 1 and used the model of Jewish Wisdom), if he has not come from the world of God, what is in him that I should then listen to him or bother with him?

The biblical materials emphasize greatly the importance of journey: that of Abraham, that of Moses, that of Joseph, that of the Jewish people, that of Jesus in the wilderness, that of Paul whose journey took him throughout the ancient world. Paul tells us his story frequently so that we may understand something by it, as the early church taught the story of Jesus in many ways. Somehow, ultimately, God is also involved in our stories and we should listen carefully to our stories, the stories of our friends, and the stories of the Moravian Church which hold gifts between the pages and within the narrative.

Sometimes it takes a life-time to tell or learn a story. It took Judaism generations of time. It took the early church four Gospels and a book of Acts which is only the beginning of the telling of a story. It is intriguing that John begins with "In beginning," as does Genesis 1, both leaving out the article so that "beginning" is not understood as "the beginning). To begin is to tell a story.

I started out in my home congregation with a faith centered on Christ and a congregation influenced by N. American fundamentalism. Then I took a course on the historical Jesus in College which left me thoroughly confused. Years after that I was still putting things together while studying at Moravian Seminary. When invited to the faculty of Moravian Seminary I began to teach about the historical Jesus and somehow lost familiarity with the Jesus about whom I had assembled a lot of interesting information. I knew more about him than I did of him. And yet I knew that my research and teaching was contributing to perspectives which could eventually be valued. The 20 year illness and death of my first wife applied its own critical process to my faith so that the traditional God of power and control no longer made sense. Then, towards the end of my Seminary career, Jesus “came back” to me and I became Christocentric again, not just in scholarship but also in life and faith. All that I had processed starting with my college education and experience of life began to cohere and make sense. HE was again THERE (or HERE) and became life's center. I could not have learned all this if I had felt that my life process was illegitimate. I could not have learned this if I felt that I had to have everything right away. And while I journeyed there was the church around me which (who) questioned, challenged, and supported. And I found that my Church's heritage contained information on all the experimentation and exploration I could manage.

I found that I could not be what I might be if there was no permission to be. But I was thankful for the church around me while I traveled. And I was particularly thankful for Zinzendorf who had anticipated many of my questions. Amazingly I was introduced to the meaning of Zinzendorf in my doctrinal program at a Presbyterian seminary. What would have happened if I had not gone there and what would have happened if I had not a professor who knew Zinzendorf, who lived through National Socialism and knew the reasons of Barmen. And what would have happened if I had remained a new church starter (my

initial vocation for 8 years) and never had the opportunity to explore what was started at Princeton. Life is filled with so many “what ifs”. Perhaps this means that the Seminary should help us with intentional exploration as well as information, so that if we do not graduate with the answers we know the methods and appropriate contexts for journey and exploration. And we are conscious of the needs of boundary as well as journey.

One thing Zinzendorf taught me was a way to view Christ as the foundation for universal religious experience. (Col. 1, Heb. 1, John 1 as previously indicated). All affirm Christ as Creator of the world and thus foundation for all religious experience. Christ is also the initiator of the evangelistic task. Thus he provided our spiritual resources and identity as Creator and as Savior guides us in the process and approaches which are right for us, working contextually and personally. He always bears his wounds and our security lies within his wounds. Christ does not belong to us, but to the world the existence of which he mediates. Others already know him – but they do not know whom they know: they do not know that he works personally and contextually and they do not know that he bears his wounds from his full encounter with life and that he renounces the use of power. They do not understand that all his action and all our lives start in grace, not in a conviction of sin. Life always starts in his gift. It is our task to go where Christ is already going and to be there when he makes persons ready, and then to explain who it is that they are experiencing and what he is like. It’s really that simple.

Christ of the wounds,  
come gently to me,  
embrace all my longing,  
held in your arms.

Mystery of living  
more than I grasp  
sustain my vision  
speak words of caring.

The plantings of time  
on the path that I walk  
entangle my feet,  
would keep me from you.

Yet I see beyond  
to the place of your going  
and follow the touch  
of your hand upon mine.