

MORAVIANS ARE BIBLE-BASED

Moravians are Bible-based! What does this mean? The Moravian Covenant, the current version of the Brotherly Agreement originally adopted by our church in 1727 states, *“Scripture is the sole standard of the doctrine and faith of the Moravian Church and therefore shapes our life.”*

Where did we get this idea? We got it from the father of our church, the Czech Reformer John Hus who based his preaching on the text of the Bible. Hus wrote,

*“The Word of God which never shall cease, proclaims
free pardon, grace and peace. Salvation shows in
Christ alone. The perfect will of God makes known.”*

When he was on trial for his life at the Council of Constance in 1415, Hus was promised his life would be spared if he would recant, that is take back his teaching. He replied that he would gladly recant, if he were shown his errors, *“from the Holy Scriptures...”* Instead of correcting Hus from the Bible, the Council burned him at the stake as a heretic... Before he died singing in the flames, Hus cried, *“To bear witness to God’s truth is more important than life itself!”*

One hundred years later, in 1517, a priest in Germany posted a list of 95 criticisms of the church on the door of the city cathedral in Wittenberg... When he was given a chance to defend his views, he was asked *“Martin Luther, do you think you are the only one who knows the truth?”* Luther replied, *“I will tell you what I think. I have the right to believe freely, to be a slave to no man. A simple plowman armed with scripture and the Holy Spirit is mightier than the greatest pope without them.”* When Luther was accused of repeating the heresies of John Hus, he replied, *“Hus was right! I am a Hussite.”*

For more than five and one half centuries, the Moravian Church founded by followers of Hus has based our faith upon the text of the Bible. We are Bible-based! The Bible is to the Moravian Church what the Constitution is to the United States. It is the foundation upon which everything is based and by which everything is judged. It is our **“standard”**... If something is against the teaching of the Bible, it is therefore “unconstitutional” for our church!.

From time to time I meet people who tell me they have no use for the Bible because it is filled with contradictions and errors... “ I usually respond by asking, “Can you show me one of them?” Many people cannot point out a single error but they still insist the Bible is filled with them. I will share two examples of Bible contradictions and how they may be solved if one has the desire to do so. In MATTHEW 17:5 it says that Judas went and *“hanged himself”*. In ACTS 1:18, it says that he fell down and burst open in the middle and all his bowels fell out... This seems like an evident contradiction in the way Judas ended his life. But the contradiction disappears when we understand that these two passages deal with a sequence of events in time. Judas, distraught that he felt responsible for the death of Jesus, went out and hanged himself on a tree, thus causing his death. According to Jewish law, anyone hanged on a tree was cursed, thus no one wanted to take down his body, and so he hung there until he fell to the ground. When he fell, his body being partially decomposed,

his bowels did fall out as related in the book of Acts. When we understand the time sequence, the conflict between Matthew and Acts is easily resolved. In a similar fashion, in the Sermon on the Mount in MATTHEW 5:1 it says Jesus delivered his message seated on a mountain and in LUKE 6:17 it reads that Jesus came down from the mount and taught on a "level place". In my first church I was teaching a Bible class, and I explained that no one knew where Jesus had delivered these words, that the writers of Matthew and Luke simply placed them where it suited the writers. A man in my class who was a sheet metal worker and had helped install the ductwork in the World Trade Center raised his hand. "Pastor Steve" he said, why can't both accounts be correct?" "Maybe Jesus said the same thing on more than one occasion. After all we have heard you repeat yourself in different sermons..." Well, he certainly had me there. Of course I had repeated teaching in more than one sermon and why would we expect that Jesus would not do the same thing. Another supposed Bible contradiction resolved!

The late chaplain of the U.S. Senate, the Rev. Peter Marshall once said, "*There are aspects of the gospel which are puzzling and difficult to explain. But our problems are not centered around the things we do not understand, but rather in the things we do understand, the things we could not possibly misunderstand. This after all, is but an illustration of the fact that our problem is not so much that we don't know what we should do... We know perfectly well, but we don't want to do it!*"

Does this mean that we need to take everything in the Bible literally? Should we refuse to eat pork? Should we stone people who commit adultery? Should we insist that women keep silent in the Church? I remember the late Dean of Moravian Theological Seminary, Dr. Vernon Couillard teaching, "*Moravians take the Bible seriously, but we do not take it literally*" What do Moravians say? "*In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love*" We agree with Luther that the basic teaching of the Bible is clear enough that even a common laborer can understand it. Jesus died for our sins and he rose from the dead is taught in all four gospels and all of the epistles. This is essential and anyone can see this for himself or herself. But there are some parts of the Bible which are difficult to understand and on which Christians may honestly disagree. What is the order of events at the 2nd coming of Jesus? Do we believe the rapture of the church will come before or after the tribulation? Should Christians speak in tongues today, or was this only for the Church in the first century? May Women serve as priests and pastors or are these positions reserved for men exclusively? Should we baptize by sprinkling or by immersion? In the Bible you can find passages, which say women, should be silent, and you can also find passages, which say your sons and daughters, will prophesy.

Moravians believe that you cannot take a single passage here or there to prove something. You need to interpret and weigh the context and the entire teaching of the Bible! This is what Lutherans mean when they ask their pastors at ordination if they are willing to teach "*The whole counsel of God.*" I have learned that when people get fixated upon any single verse of the Bible they get into trouble... When I was in college there was a man who tried to tell me I shouldn't go to college, based on the teaching of I JOHN 2:27 which states that "*the anointing you have received abides in you and you do not need anyone to teach you.*" I tried to explain that this was written for a specific situation where teachers who claimed to have a secret teaching from Jesus passed down by word of mouth were upsetting the early church. Therefore, in this situation, the apostle John needed to write that the church needed to look out for the teachers. It was meant only for this local situation, since

teaching is one of the spiritual gifts mentioned several times in the rest of the New Testament. However, this did not satisfy the man who insisted that I did not need to go to college and seminary.

So what does it mean to be Bible-based? In a 1994 pastoral letter, the Moravian Bishops stated, "We support the principle that wherever the Bible speaks repeatedly, clearly, and without contradiction, this is what Moravians should accept with joy and gratitude as God's revealed word. We commend this acceptance on matters of faith, doctrine and morality."

The first congregation I served in New York City consisted exclusively of white members. Then a woman from Jamaica who lived directly across the street began to attend worship. Soon she requested membership. I brought her request to the church Elders and a lengthy discussion took place. This was shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 and a time of racial tension in the country. The Elders understood that receiving this woman would cause problems with our members, and some may leave the church. One Elder suggested that we refer her to another church. We considered what we understood the Bible taught about being open to those of different races and classes. We looked at GALATIANS 3: 27-28, where we read, "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" One of our Elders said that if we did not open our doors to all who wished to worship with us we might as well not call ourselves a church and we should shut the doors and close. The other Elders agreed and we received her as a member. Many other African-Americans followed her into membership and the church thrived. We based our decision on our understanding of the Bible. We were Bible-based. We took the Bible seriously!

Steve, why is it important that we base our lives and our decisions upon the Bible? Let me answer with a true story. What if you were lost in a strange country with no map and no guidebook? What would you do? Forty years ago Kathie and I were thrilled to take a tour of Israel. In the middle of a guided tour, we had one free day and decided to take a bus and explore the old city of Jerusalem. After several hours of wandering up and down the narrow streets we were thoroughly lost. A young Arab boy, sensing our confusion asked us if we needed a guide. We said we wanted to go to the temple mount and he offered to lead us there for a dollar. He proved to be a trustworthy guide and we happily gave him his dollar. For us as Christians, and as Moravians, we have a trustworthy guide! We read in PSALM 119:105 "*Your word, O Lord, is a lamp unto my path and a light to my feet.*"

This matters because contemporary life is in great confusion and darkness. Multiple voices call and tell us what to believe, where to go and what we should do...**WHO** will guide us through this jungle? **WHERE** can we find a secure place to stand? Moravian Christians gladly follow the teaching of John Hus who wrote, "*The Word of God which never shall cease, proclaims free pardon, grace and peace. Salvation shows in Christ alone. The perfect will of God makes known.*"

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