



THE HINGE

*A Journal of Christian Thought
for the Moravian Church*

**“The Debate Over the Question
‘Is Jesus the Only Way to Salvation?’
How to Avoid Winning the Argument and
Losing Your Soul”**

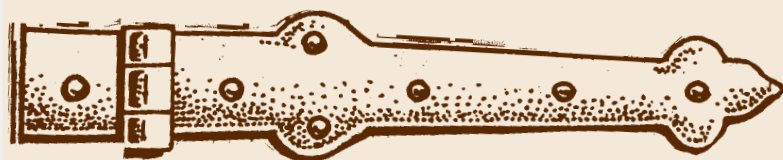
Frank L. Crouch

*Responses by: Hartmut Beck, David Fischler,
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Guest Sermon by Hermann Weinlick.

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The Hinge is a forum for discussion in the Moravian Church. Views and opinions expressed in articles published in *The Hinge* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or the official positions of the Moravian Church and its agencies. You are welcome to submit letters and articles for consideration for publication.

One of the early offices of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pa. was that of the Hinge. "The office of the Hinge requires that the brother who holds it look after everything and bring troublesome factors within the congregation into mutual accord without their first having to be taken up publicly in the congregation council." September 1742, The Bethlehem Diary, vol. 1, tr. by Kenneth Hamilton, p. 80.

This idea from the Moravian past has been chosen to represent the character of this journal. *The Hinge* is intended to be a mainspring in the life of the contemporary Moravian Church, causing us to move, think, and grow. Above all, it is to be an instrument for opening doors in our church.

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Notes from the Editor

The *Ground of the Unity* states “that our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him.” There has been a bitter controversy in the Southern Province over the meaning of this phrase since the 2002 Synod. Some of the controversy concerns church governance and personal relationships more than theology, but there are substantive questions about what the Moravian Church should teach about salvation. It is the mission of *The Hinge* to discuss controversial issues in a way that leads us to greater understanding and unity through reasoned conversation. As Phillip Melacnthon remarked before the Leipzig Disputation, “Truth is best served at a lower temperature.”

Since Moravians maintain that all doctrinal statements reflect our understandings of Scripture, it seems wise to draw upon the knowledge and wisdom of the Dean of Moravian Theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Frank Crouch, who is a scholar of the New Testament. In this issue, Br. Crouch proposes a distinctively Moravian approach to scriptural interpretation and doctrinal discussion. He also carefully examines two of the most important biblical statements that are the basis of the understanding that Jesus is the only way to salvation: John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. What do these verses mean within the biblical narrative? Br. Crouch shows that the answer is not as simple as it first appears. Do these two verses unambiguously endorse the claim that “there is no salvation apart from” Christ? Do they rule out the possibility that God may choose to save some who either do not or cannot profess faith in Jesus as the Christ?

This is not just an academic matter. Our understanding of salvation cuts to the heart of our life and mission as a Church. Were Zinzendorf, Spangenberg, and other Moravian leaders wrong, for example, to teach that infants who die before professing faith are treated graciously by God? If some may be saved by Christ without professing faith in Christ, does this mean that all are saved? If a profession of faith is necessary for salvation, then are we truly saved by grace without works? Since we proclaim our faith in Jesus as our savior and the savior of the world, is there any truth in other religions? Does salvation depend on Christ or on our doctrine of Christ? Can we be Christocentric and pluralistic? What is a genuinely Moravian approach to such questions?

Responding to Br. Crouch are five Moravian pastors from the Northern and Southern Provinces and Europe who are at various stages in their careers. Not only do they address different aspects of Br. Crouch’s article; they each raise different questions about salvation. Taken together their work offers the promise for much common ground as Moravians continue to define and refine our understanding of salvation in the light of Scripture and faith in Jesus Christ as the savior of the world. In this issue we also have book reviews, an essay, several letters to the editor and a sermon on the centrality of Christ.

The Debate over the Question “Is Jesus the Only Way to Salvation?”

How to Avoid Winning the Argument and Losing Your Soul

by The Rev. Dr. Frank L. Crouch

Two questions are currently tearing their way through the Northern and Southern provinces of the Moravian Church in North America—one, “What is the place of gay and lesbian people in the life of the Church?” and the other, “Is Jesus the only way to salvation?” This essay addresses the second question, particularly with respect to the function of scriptural authority in the debate. The two New Testament verses most often cited in support of the uniqueness of Christian salvation (John 14:6 and Acts 4:12) will be explored through the lens of other relevant New Testament texts. Before considering those texts, however, I have a few observations about the context of this debate.

The Current Theological Context

The dissension among North American Moravians seems less about doctrinal clarity and more about how to live together as a diverse community of faith. People on both sides of a sharp theological divide have linked the two questions mentioned above. For each side, the key to answering both questions lies in the relationship between the Bible, theology, and practice. However, each side bases its understanding of that relationship on different, even opposing, assumptions. One side fears that the desire to change traditional teaching and practice is fueled by a disregard for scripture and indifference to God’s enduring truth. The other

side fears that the desire to preserve traditional teaching and practice is fueled by stubborn resistance to change and lack of openness to God’s ongoing revelation.

Somehow—and I am not sure how this happened—a climate of fear, suspicion, and hostility has developed between the two sides to the point that there is little actual debate at all. A search for truth has been replaced by a search for influence and power, with the primary goal being to “win” and silence the other side. The discord between competing theological perspectives has narrowed the focus of discussion to the point that the twin issues of homosexuality and the uniqueness of Christian salvation dominate current life in the Church. For many they have become litmus tests—“If I know what you think about these questions, I know everything I need to know about you. And, if you’re on the other side, I don’t have to talk, work, worship, or even share the Lord’s Supper with you.” The roles of fear, suspicion, and hostility should not be underestimated, both as causes of conflict and obstacles to conflict resolution.

The level of discord represents a departure from an important Moravian norm. Over time, part of the genius of the Moravian Church has been the ability of its members to acknowledge vastly different theological positions while avoiding the attempt to impose one theology

on the rest of the body of Christ. When faced with two competing positions, Moravians have tended to seek ways to maintain community while searching for truth. The tendency not to choose one of two competing positions until we “have to” is itself a third position, a refusal to let an egotistical desire to be right dominate community life.

One reason the current conflict is so bitter lies in the fact that strong voices on both ends of the theological spectrum have forsaken that norm and subjected that Moravian tendency to sustained mockery and attack. The desire to maintain community while searching for truth is derided as a weak and cowardly avoidance of conflict. The oft-cited idea that “Moravians will do anything to avoid a fight” mis-characterizes the essential genius of the Moravian approach to life and faith, which could be better stated, “Moravians will go a long way to avoid a reckless, stupid, or unnecessary fight.” Other denominations have admired our ability to keep relationships intact while seeking consensus on contentious questions, while we, recently, have drastically underestimated one of our most important contributions to the larger Christian Church. This third position calls for one to live under the call of God, engage in the ministries and debates most relevant to one’s age, take a stand of conscience, and embrace the possibility that God might, freely and with love, sustain a saving relationship with people holding diametrically opposing views.

This third position conforms well to two admonitions from the apostle Paul. First, he says, “Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (I Thess. 5:21, NIV). The admonition to test everything lies close to the heart of Moravian theology. *The Ground of the Unity* holds doctrine,

practice, and even creeds to the test. “The *Unitas Fratrum* recognizes in the creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the Body of Christ. 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. The *Unitas Fratrum* maintains that all creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of the Holy Scriptures.” (§ 5, see also § 4).

One might assume that an admonition that extends even to the creeds of the Church would also extend to one’s personal theological starting points, even those most deeply and passionately held. Far from being weak or cowardly, the fundamental Moravian approach to life and faith represents a fearless faith in the leading of the Spirit and a willingness to undo even the most precious of traditions, beliefs, and practices in light of God’s leading.

Second, a desire to maintain community while searching for truth and avoiding reckless or unnecessary fights flows from Paul’s reminder of human fallibility:

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (I Cor. 13:8-12).

In the current conflict among North American Moravians, the loudest voices on each side of the theological divide sound very different from this voice of Paul. Acknowledging our own fallibility would allow each side to exercise appropriate humility, have good reason to listen to opposing points of view, and, thereby, keep community intact even while disagreeing on certain issues.

This does not deny that some issues call for division, allowing no middle ground. The primary purpose of this essay, however, is to explore whether the question, “Is Jesus the only way?” stands as one of them. The fact that some people would answer, “of course,” while others would answer, “of course not,” underscores the need for a third position approach. As our study unfolds, it will become clear that the question itself is flawed. The way it is stated assumes that the question can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” That assumption further fuels the discord in the Church—back to the litmus test again. Give the wrong answer, and you will be judged, found wanting, and permanently labeled by the other side as a person who completely lacks understanding. Factions have emerged and become entrenched before the Church has even begun to work through this issue as a community of faith, testing both old and new ways of understanding and trusting God to lead us in the ways that we should go. Perhaps this essay can make a contribution to our discernment on this question.

The Search for Sound Doctrine

Let us turn now to the part of *The Ground of the Unity* that has fueled much of this conflict:

With the whole of Christendom we share faith in God the Father, the Son,

and the Holy Spirit. We believe and confess that God has revealed Himself once and for all in His son Jesus Christ, that our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him.” (§ 2)

On the floor of the Southern Province Synod of 2002, this was offered by at least one person in support of a belief in exclusively Christian salvation (“there is no salvation apart from Him”) and by at least one other person as possible support for a belief in universal salvation (“our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity”). Another part of *The Ground of the Unity* offers a starting point for finding a third point of view:

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 Scriptures 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 in the wisdom of our Moravian forebearers 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. 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. (§ 4)

Three things can be said immediately regarding the first two paragraphs of this part of the ground of our unity. First, it is inherently Trinitarian. Second, it upholds the importance of scripture. Third, it sets the Word of the Cross at the center of the Church's proclamation and at least raises the possibility that divisive disputes over human sexuality and doctrines of salvation represent a straying from our primary mission and witness. Again, this is not to say that the debates do not matter. It does, however, raise the question of how much they matter.

The third paragraph cited above addresses the search for sound doctrine. Three elements of that search come to the fore. First, the search for sound doctrine is a task for the Unity as a whole. It is not the purview of any individual, group, or even province alone. At times, a look at issues occupying other provinces puts a perspective on the energy given to issues in our own. In April, 2003, at a conference of Moravian educators from

around the world held at Moravian Theological Seminary, I asked the Rev. Jackson Kasalama, Principal of the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, Tanzania, "What would you say is the biggest issue facing the Moravian Church in Tanzania?" While I wondered whether it would be "homosexuality" or "is Jesus the only way?" he replied, "I think that it would be ... poverty."

One might doubt whether the current North American obsession over homosexuality and christology measures up to the ministry challenges and the magnitude of human suffering faced by other provinces within the Unity. We battle over one statement in *The Ground of the Unity*—"that our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him" while we forget an equally important statement found just three sentences away—" [The Lord] joins us together mutually, so that knowing ourselves to be members of His body we become willing to serve each other." (§ 2)

The second element of the search for sound doctrine involves listening to the witness of "two millennia of ecumenical Christian tradition." This expands the horizon of concern beyond the worldwide Moravian Church to encompass the Christian Church in its broadest sense, not limited to denominational entities. From that perspective, we see the same questions creating controversy in other Christian communities. The fact that some communities are holding fast to traditional views and others are moving in new directions says, well, says what? Some communities are holding to traditional views. They might be preserving the faith from the influence of godless teaching and sinful practices.

Other communities are exploring non-traditional views. They might be seeing new paths laid out for the Church under the leading of the Spirit. Our dilemma is that we want to know which approach is true. The stakes are heightened by the fact that truth often becomes clear only in the long run, while we are called to act in the short run.

The stakes are further heightened by biblical stories such as the aftermath of the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41). In that story, Jesus' actions, particularly healing on the Sabbath, violated long-accepted practices and beliefs. Onlookers debated the extent to which the healing represented an act of God or an act of a godless man. "Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided" (v. 16). The church finds itself in a similar situation of discernment at this time, and we would do well to heed Jesus' admonition at the story's end, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see," your sin remains.'" (vv. 39-41).

The story of the healing of the man born blind makes clear that whenever traditional beliefs and practices are challenged, there is no way to predict in advance which approach—holding to tradition or moving in new directions—represents the approach of those who correctly see the ways of God. The onlookers face a genuine dilemma. Jesus' actions fit no known categories

and are so thoroughly unprecedented that long-established, traditional interpretation calls for an obvious rejection of what is obviously wrong. The understandable instinct to cling to proven ways of God should, of course, guide our actions, except, of course, when it guides us down the wrong paths and closes our minds to new insights. Further, the story makes clear that the depth of one's theological certainty bears no relation to one's actual insight. In this case, theological certainty made some blind to the work of God and impeded the search for truth.

The third component of *The Ground of the Unity's* perspective on the search for sound doctrine involves the rejection of any approach that holds theological systems above the testimony of scripture. "But just as the Holy Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, so the *Unitas Fratrum* also has not developed any of its own. 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."

The "mystery of Jesus Christ" supersedes all our doctrines about Christ. It is tempting to let theological presuppositions so drive our reading of scripture that nothing can alter our direction. Openness to the voice of God is tested by the extent to which we allow scripture to challenge and change our perspective. So, we turn to scripture to discern its witness on the question at hand.

Starting Points for Scriptural Debate

For some, the question of Jesus as the only way to salvation can be simply and irrefutably answered by quoting John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and

the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.” At first glance, the text seems straightforward. “No one comes to the Father but through me” seems like as much answer as anyone would ever need. At second glance, however, a question of interpretation comes into play. What does “but through me” mean? The text, for example, does not say, “no one comes to the Father but through Christianity.” Nor does it say, “no one comes to the Father but through accepting Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.” It says, “no one comes to the Father but through me.” Much of the debate over whether Jesus is the only way gets confused with a debate over whether Christianity is the only way. One might argue that it is, but that would be an interpretation of the text, not what the text itself says.

In a similar way, much of the debate over whether Jesus is the only way gets confused with a debate over whether an intentional, explicit acknowledgement of Jesus as Savior is the only way. (The complexities of holding such a position become clear when considering the situation of infants or people who, for reasons of mental illness, disability, or incapacity, cannot formulate an explicit, cognitive statement of faith.) Again, one might argue that such an acknowledgement is the only way, but that would be an interpretation of the text, not what the text itself says.

Thus, the debate would proceed more constructively with an acknowledgment of the difference between text and interpretation. The interpretations mentioned above might be right, but they are interpretations, and they must be shown to be correct—and shown on other grounds than “this is what we have long believed” (see the discussion of John 9 above). The distinction

between saying “Jesus is the only way” and “Christianity is the only way” must be kept clear until the second statement’s validity has been demonstrated—if it can be demonstrated. The same can be said for the role in salvation of personal confessions of faith. Both interpretations significantly change the emphasis of John 14:6. One interpretation emphasizes the role of a particular religious faith (Christianity) and the other emphasizes the role of a personal confession of faith. The verse itself emphasizes the role of Christ. “No one comes to the Father but through me” focuses on Christ as the agent of salvation. What we do is not even mentioned here.

One might argue, “Yes, but it is mentioned elsewhere” (e.g. John 3:16 or Roman 10:9). This brings us to a second important starting point. When seeking to discern the voice of God in scripture, one can seldom depend on only one text. Discernment proceeds best with the consideration of all relevant texts. Search the scriptures. If more than one text addresses a question, a full answer requires contemplation of them all.

Further, the task calls for openness to unexpected connections between texts. The unexpected, inspired connection stands as a hallmark of the biblical search for truth. When the Gospel of Matthew connected stories of Jesus’ childhood time in Egypt with Hosea’s words on behalf of God—“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1)—how many people, at the time, would have thought, “yes, of course”?

Paul made part of his case against circumcision by connecting the story of Sarah and Hagar with Exodus’ account of the covenant

at Mt. Sinai and with a verse from Isaiah that speaks of return from Exile (Gal. 4:24-5:1). Paul's connection of these texts, in conjunction with other scriptural arguments, is all the more impressive in that it overturned the arguments of his opponents who, by all counts, had a slam-dunk case in favor of circumcision simply by quoting Genesis 17:10-14, which clearly requires circumcision as a sign of the people of God. How one comes to terms with differing biblical texts constitutes a central place in theological debate.

Not long ago, the Moravian Church weighed the relative importance of different scriptural texts when it decided to ordain women. Forty years ago, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent" (I Timothy 2:12) was the status quo position for most of the worldwide Christian Church. What was left to say after reading that one verse? Then people searched for other texts, noting, additionally, the statement that "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says" (I Cor. 14:34). Those two verses reflected the long-standing tradition of most of the church. End of discussion.

Eventually, however, other texts were brought to bear—"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Priscilla (a woman) and Aquila, are both mentioned as teaching and correcting the teaching of Apollos (a man) (Acts 18:1-3, 18-28). Paul greets Phoebe the deacon; Junias, a woman called an apostle; and other women leaders in Romans 16:1-7. Emphases in interpretations changed as well—the admonition that women shouldn't pray and

prophesy with their head uncovered (I Cor. 11:1-12) was recognized as an acknowledgment of the fact that women in that day were praying and prophesying—taking leading roles in worship and the life of the church.

It was no easy thing to persuade some people that these were relevant texts. In some parts of the Church, they are still not acknowledged as relevant for considering the ordination of women. But, once they enter the discussion, they must be weighed against each other, with defensible arguments given for choosing one set of texts over another. A case had to be made that explained why the Moravian Church considers "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" to exercise more authority when it comes to the ordination of women than does I Timothy 2:12. Similarly, when exploring the range of texts that apply to the question of Christ and salvation, the criteria by which the "governing texts" are discerned must be made clear.

Mary Ann Tolbert helpfully describes a typical way that Christians have proof-texted their way to a particular theological conclusion. Typically, a group will gather a collection of verses or passages, take them out of context, and string them together in order to buttress their argument. As just discussed, this has been done by both sides with respect to the ordination of women. Tolbert notes that this constitutes an attempt to apply the special status of all of Scripture to a collection of individual texts. She views this as an illegitimate use of scripture, since texts are recombined in ways that disregard their context. "Indeed, it could be argued that this practice of stringing together disparate quotations is actually a process of creating an altogether new text."¹

Her point is well-taken in one respect. No one wants to be accused of “just proof-texting.” At the same time, one could argue that whenever new insights have taken hold in the life of the Church, a process much like what she describes has played a central role. As noted above, Paul’s arguments in Galatians depend to a large degree on such a process—disparate texts taken out of context and recombined to form a new narrative. The new narrative then competes with a traditional narrative made up of its own recombined texts. In that respect, proof-texting—in a good sense of the term—is a time-honored tradition in the life of the Church.

If scripture provides the norms of faith, then the institution of new norms and the displacement of old norms calls for understanding old texts in a new way, or, more properly, calls for recombining old texts in a new way. The acceptance of the new understanding and its supporting narrative depends on the extent to which the larger community is convinced that the new narrative more deeply connects with the enduring truths of scripture and the leading of the Spirit than prevailing beliefs.

Again, this is not to say that a new understanding is right just because it is new. This is to say that every understanding—new and old—has to make its case and hold its own in light of the totality of scripture as the Church seeks to move in the ways it should go.

Discerning the Relevant Texts

Attention turns now to other texts that address the question of Christ and salvation. The goal will not be to offer an exhaustive study of all the relevant texts (there is not enough space

in this essay) but to explore the extent to which a particular collection of texts challenges both ends of the theological divide.

The earlier discussion of John 14:6 offers such a challenge. In the first place, Christ is clearly the agent of salvation, clearly identified as the “only” way—in support of a traditional view. At the same time, how Christ acts as the agent of salvation remains undefined by this text—a fact that might work in favor of non-traditional views. People come to the Father through Christ, but this verse does not define exactly *how* that happens. This does not constitute an argument against the idea that Christ is the only way. It does argue, however, that these texts of scripture do not describe *how* Christ is the only way. To quote *The Ground of the Unity*, some “mystery of Jesus Christ” remains.

The Gospel of John, in this passage, says “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but through me.” In that same gospel, in the prologue, one reads that “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (John 1:9, NIV) (NRSV—“the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world”). The gospel does not explain what it means to give light to everyone. It would seem, at least, to say that God stands in relationship with every person, that Christ is in some way connected with every human life—Christian and non-Christian (unless, that is, “everyone” means something besides “everyone”). Further, that relationship is stated as an unconditional present reality.² It is not something that “can” happen or “might” happen. It is something that does happen, to all people. How that enlightenment happens and on what terms remains undefined,

part of the mystery of Christ.

So, what is the point of the argument? Nothing more than this, offering a third position in relation to John 14:6. Speaking to one side of the theological divide, those who use John 14:6 to argue for the superiority of *Christianity* over all the world's religions find no explicit support in the verse itself. If one interprets the verse literally, he or she must interpret it literally all the way. The verse is about Christ. Speaking to the other side of the divide, one might argue that the verse does not support Christianity as the unique and single pathway to God, but it does attribute that role to Christ.

The same can be said for another verse often cited in support of the uniqueness of Christian salvation—"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Taken out of context, this verse seems more absolute and exclusive than it does in context. The verse provides the conclusion to a healing story. In Acts 3, Peter (accompanied by John) had healed a man in the name of Christ (Acts 3:1-8). They were arrested. When it came time for their defense, Peter said:

"Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was **healed**, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the

capstone.' **Salvation** is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be **saved**." (Acts 4:8-12)

The English translation obscures the ambiguities of the Greek. In Greek, the same word, *swzw*, can mean "save" and "heal." More specifically, it can mean to heal in the sense of saving someone from a physical affliction.³ The words in boldface type in the quotation above all have that same Greek root.⁴ The same verb translated as "healed" in verse nine is translated as "saved" in verse twelve. When taken out of context and separated from the healing story that precedes it, the use of "salvation" and "saved" in the last sentence implies a broader theological significance than is warranted by the underlying Greek. The statement refers to the power of Christ to heal, and Peter says it in the midst of a conflict between early disciples and religious leaders in Jerusalem. They are on trial for a healing, not for a doctrinal dispute over salvation—although, admittedly, it does not take a far stretch to extend the dispute to that arena.

However, even if one stretches to make this a doctrinal statement about exclusive salvation in Christ, the same arguments come into play that were applied to John 14:6. The focus of the dispute and the verse lies on what has happened in the name of Christ. The healing/saving power resides in the person of Christ, not in the religion of his followers. The verse cannot be used to argue for the exclusiveness of Christianity. At the same time, it clearly asserts a unique place for Christ in the grand scheme of things. A third position—one that does not confuse Christ with

Christianity—more accurately interprets the significance of the verse.

Concluding Reflections

At this point, one could engage in a Bible-quoting free-for-all. Texts that support a traditional, faith-based view of salvation (by far the most common teaching of the New Testament) could be stacked up in opposition to texts quoted by those who advocate non-traditional views of salvation (who have what might be to some people a surprising number of texts to which they can point).⁵ That approach, however, would simply buy into one theological extreme or another, approaching the issue as if there were, in fact, one possibility that excludes all other possibilities, perpetuating an “either/or, my way or the highway” approach to the question. Instead, let us review an earlier purpose statement for this article: “This does not to deny that some issues call for division, allowing no middle ground. The primary purpose of this article, however, is to explore whether the question, ‘Is Jesus the only way?’ stands as one of them” (p. 3).

Based on the discussion so far, I would argue that the question “Is Jesus the only way?” should not be confused with the question, “Is Christianity the only way?” Based on scripture, we should not confuse salvation by Christ with salvation by Christianity. At the same time, based on the discussion so far and on scripture, I would argue—in accord with remarks by The Rev. Virginia Goodman—that we are called first and foremost to “Preach Christ.”⁶

As Christians, that constitutes the beginning point and the end point of our proclamation. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have

seen” (John 3:11). If we know Christ and have seen God through Christ, are we called to invite others into relationship with Christ? Yes. Are we called to invite them to deepen that relationship in the context of Christian communities of faith? Yes. Are we called as judges of all the earth, qualified to tell God that only Christians can be saved? No. The apostle Paul drives that point home in his letter to the Romans:

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Romans 2:13-16, NRSV)⁷

Paul’s assertion undermines any smug sense of privilege we might feel as Christians, as if a visible commitment on our part ensures us an eternal place in relationship with God and the lack of a similarly visible commitment on the part of others excludes them from that relationship.⁸ Paul, that preeminent preacher and missionary, does not recommend as a strategy of life that we count on the possibility that our actions and conflicting thoughts will excuse us from judgment. However, he does contend that judgment ultimately belongs to God, on God’s own terms, and according to God’s own

judgments of our secret heart of hearts.

Paul notes a possibility that some people, surprisingly, wish to deny—the possibility that human beings, created by God, belonging to God, enlightened by God, without knowing the Law (or the gospel) might, with some innate clarity, see through to the heart of God and so join their actions to the divine will that God welcomes them on the Last Day. Karl Barth, in his commentary on Romans, muses that to God “there rises up a testimony on behalf of men which can be uttered before no human judge. God knows what we do not know. Hence emerges the incomprehensible possibility that lawless men are brought to judgment, and yet pass through it into freedom.”⁹

One might also call to mind the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46), in which the invitation to enter into the joy of one’s master follows, not from proof of doctrinal correctness, but from acts of love and compassion. Such a reading of these two passages does not undermine faith in Christ nor salvation by grace, rather it confirms them. In both passages, God, in Christ, deems one worthy of eternal life. One has not earned it but received it as a gift. Both passages, however, do underscore the precept that God calls not for faith characterized by certain beliefs but faith characterized by certain ways of life. In the end, God does not consider our conscious statements of doctrine as much as God considers the “secret thoughts of all.”

Those who wish to assert doctrinally inscribed boundaries that bestow a unique status on Christianity must defend their position against the sovereignty and freedom of God (and a number of scripture passages that speak otherwise).¹⁰ On

the other hand, those who wish to minimize the role of Christ in redemption must defend their understanding in light of the primary witness of the New Testament, which places Christ at the center of creation and redemption.

The third position for which this essay argues agrees in part with each side, disagrees in part with each side, and offers a position that makes room for both within the Moravian Church. It maintains that the New Testament consistently upholds Christ as the source of life and salvation, yet the New Testament does not, with completeness or without variation, describe how Christ carries out that role for all of humanity. It calls on us to invite others into relationship with Christ in the context of Christian community, yet it does not exceed the witness of Scripture to say that God only stands in relationship to Christians. It knows the assurance of God’s saving grace through Christ, yet it does not pretend to know God’s judgment of all the inhabitants of the earth. It acknowledges the Triune God as creator and redeemer, yet acknowledges God’s freedom to be in relationship with whomever God chooses in whatever ways God chooses. It holds itself to the standard of scripture and, in accord with *The Ground of the Unity*, calls on the Church to examine all beliefs—traditional, unconventional, widely accepted, and barely known—in the light of the total biblical witness. It does not mock the desire to maintain community while searching for truth, but sees that as an ongoing call from God to the Moravian Church in service to the larger Church.

To return to the opening reflections on the current discord in the North American Moravian Church: We will serve ourselves and others well if

we (1) remember that all our knowledge is partial and we all are fallible, (2) call on each other, even across theological divides, to search the scriptures, not to prove who is right and who is wrong, but to discern our common ministry in a world that waits with eager longing for what we, as people of God, can bring, and (3) remember that some disagreements provide a creative stimulus for new insights, while others drain the life and soul out of the community of faith. While we test creeds, doctrines, and practices in light of the Holy Scriptures, are we remembering that the Holy Scripture and the Holy Spirit are also testing us?

(Footnotes)

¹ Mary Ann Tolbert, “A New Teaching with Authority: A Re-evaluation of the Authority of the Bible,” *Teaching the Bible: The Discourse and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, ed. Fernando Segovia and Mar Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998) pp. 168-189, here p. 180. While I do not agree with her article’s conclusions, I found this to be an insightful description of how people use Scripture as authority.

² The verb *fwitzei* is 3rd person singular present active indicative.

³ The ambiguity can be even more readily seen in translations of passages in the gospels in which Jesus says (in the NRSV) either, “your faith has saved you” (Matt. 9:22; Mk. 5:34; 10:52; Lk. 8:48; 17:19) or “your faith has made you well” (Lk. 7:50, 18:42). The two different English sentences, for no apparent reason, translate an identical sentence in Greek.

⁴ The other appearance of the word “healed” in the passage, at the end of verse 10 (“...this man stands before you healed”), translates a different Greek word, *ugihs*, which means healthy or sound (and is the source for the English word, hygiene).

⁵ In support of a traditional view, for example: Mark 1:15; John 3:3, 16-21; 5:24-29; 6:28-29; 11:25-26; Acts 2:38-39; Romans 1:16; 10:9; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:1-10; I Timothy 1:15-17; Hebrews 7:25; I Peter 1:3-9; Revelation 3:20. In support of a non-traditional view, for example: Matthew 25:31-46; John 1:4, 9; 12:37-41; Acts 5:27-41; Romans 2:13-16; 5:18-21; 11:32-36; I Corinthians 15:20-24; II Corinthians 5:15-19; Ephesians 4:4-6; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20; I Timothy 4:10; Titus 2:11-13; Hebrews 11:13-16; I John 4:7.

⁶ The Rev. Virginia Goodman cited that as the primary task of ministers of the gospel when she spoke at Moravian Theological Seminary on May 16, 2003, on the occasion of receiving an honorary doctoral degree.

⁷ NIV translation: “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”

⁸ One might also remember Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel of Matthew, “Not everyone who says to

me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23). One might say, again, that strength of conviction or visible leadership in the Christian community do not reserve us any places within the reign of God.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th. ed. Trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (London: Oxford

University Press, 1976) pp. 68-69. (Barth's statement is quoted here with no change regarding inclusive language.)

¹⁰ The prophet Amos similarly skewers an overconfidence in the exclusively elect status of Israel: "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the LORD. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). See footnote 5.

Responses

David Fischler

I want to begin by expressing my appreciation to Dr. Crouch for his calm, reasonable approach to a subject that has at times generated more heat than light among Moravians. He certainly has pointed us in the proper direction if we are to resolve the issue, and that is by returning to the Scriptures that, for Moravians, are our sole source of doctrine and practice.

I'll begin my response by addressing a couple of items from the first section on theological context. First, whether intentionally or not, Dr. Crouch's use of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 implies that everything is continually up for grabs.¹ Certainly if we are willing to "undo even the most precious of traditions, beliefs, and practices," we're going to find ourselves, not just re-appropriating the truth of the gospel anew in every age, but trying to figure out what the gospel is and whether it is still true in every age. I, for one, don't see this as the Moravian approach to theology. Rather, I see a historic willingness to live with a wide variety of theological opinion with regard to secondary issues, while at the same time being grounded on a solid foundation, namely Jesus Christ and His gospel.²

Second, I certainly agree with Dr. Crouch's belief that we should be able to maintain relationships while debating the issues we disagree on. I would welcome a reduction of tensions and temperature within the denomination. But in order for that to happen, it is necessary for personalities to be removed, and our focus placed squarely on the issues. Not only should we refrain

from dragging personalities into the debate, but we should also refrain from seeing disagreement over the issue as a cover for personal attack.

The next section, on the search for sound doctrine, properly reminds us that it is the Unity, rather than individuals, congregations, or provinces, that is the locus for our theologizing. That raises the question of why provinces in Europe and North America have chosen to take action on issues, especially that of homosexuality, that put us out of sync with the rest of the Unity. Plainly the rest of the Unity was not ready to say that gays should be ordained or that congregations should celebrate gay relationships, yet two of our provinces have gone ahead and taken action that suggests a "go-it-alone" approach that contradicts the spirit of *The Ground of the Unity* as Dr. Crouch has accurately described it. Perhaps the proper approach, when questions such as homosexuality, or baptism, or charismatic gifts, or salvation, vex our provinces, they should defer to the Unity Synod to decide controversial questions before plunging ahead on their own.

An important issue this section raises is illustrated by Dr. Crouch's use of the story of the man born blind. That issue is, does Jesus' treatment of the Law, and Jewish tradition, warrant our treating Scripture as similarly correctable? There is no question that Jesus challenged—corrected—traditional interpretations of the Law as well as age-old practices (in at least some instances, such as that of divorce, by returning to a stricter, rather than more liberal standard).

We, however, are not Jesus, nor do we live prior to Easter. Without suggesting that the Church is infallible in its interpretations and applications of Scripture, I would contend that we need to tread very carefully in setting aside the wisdom of the past.

The last century has seen an increasingly rapid pace of change in almost all walks of life, often with disastrous results. God help us if in our rush to incorporate the latest received wisdom or assured results of the world we should lose the truth that sets us free.³ This does not mean that any and all new insights should be rejected out of hand—far from it. Rather, it means all possible innovations need to be weighed by the standard of Scripture, with Scripture, rather than the spirit of the age or the pragmatic needs of the Church, being the final arbiter.

In the next section, in which Dr. Crouch goes to the biblical text, I agree wholeheartedly with his treatment of John 14:6 and that the sloppy way in which it is sometimes approached demonstrates the need for careful exegesis that takes into account context within the entirety of Scripture. Proof-texting is a universally rejected and much practiced art by people on each side of almost every issue in the Church's life. We need to be constantly on guard against it (though there may be times when, for the sake of short-handing a much more elaborate argument, it may be acceptable, if the proper work of exegesis lies behind it).

I also agree completely with Dr. Crouch's contention that the texts that speak of the role of Christ in salvation (John 14:6 and Acts 4:12, in particular) refer to Christ, not to Christianity (which in any event is more of a sociological

concept than anything else), nor to the Church, nor to the Christian individual or his/her faith. Contrary to the typically anthropological orientation of much modern theology and church life, the New Testament is unequivocally Christ-centered. We are not saved by faith; we are saved by Christ, and our faith is the grace-enabled response to what Christ has done for us (Ephesians 2:8).

This was the meaning of the original proclamation of the Reformation, that we are justified by grace through faith, an expression which has been truncated to justified by faith, resulting in misunderstandings of the biblical message such as the ones Dr. Crouch describes. The point, of course, and I believe the one our brother was making, is that the answer to the essay's question, Is Jesus the only way to salvation? Is yes, beyond which things start to get tricky.

Finally, I applaud the notion that the beginning and end of the Christian vocation is to Preach Christ. It is not for us to try to figure out who is in, who is out. The ultimate fate of those who have never heard of Christ, or who practice another religion, is far less our concern than that we afford every person the opportunity to know the Lord, what he has done of their behalf, and respond to him in faith, love, and hope. I expect that when we stand before the judgment seat, we aren't going to be asked what our doctrine of salvation was. We'll be asked, "were you faithful to my command to make disciples of all nations?" If we answer, "I didn't think that was necessary, because..." our Lord will not be pleased. The only answer he wants to hear from us is, "with God's help, yes."

(Footnotes)

¹ A bit of context here might help. Paul writes, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22) Clearly what we are to test are prophecies, to see if they are from God or the adversary. Creeds, certainly, don’t fit the category of prophecy. That doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be periodically reexamined to see if they still proclaim the gospel in a way that is understandable to contemporary people. But to suggest, for instance, that we need to continually look at the Nicene Creed’s declaration that Christ rose from the dead to see if it comports with Scripture seems to be a way of asking whether we still believe the gospel, not what it is.

² “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11) This was the favorite verse of Mennonite founder Menno Simons, who placed this verse on the title page of his every publication. It makes a nice complement to “in essentials, unity.”

³ The debate over homosexuality is instructive here. Many in the Church treat the notion of genetically fixed sexual orientation as though it were as definitive as Newtonian gravity. In fact, there are few generally accepted scientific studies to support the idea, and the recent research by Dr. Robert Spitzer of Columbia University (who led the fight to have homosexuality removed from the list of mental illness recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973) indicates that sexual orientation may be more malleable than political activists wish to acknowledge. In fact, there is a growing body of thought in the gay community that disputes the strictly inborn approach to sexuality, claiming that sexual orientation is actually a social

construct that can be challenged and changed by the individual determined to throw off the tyranny of heterosexism. All of which is to say, when it comes to changing historic understandings, teachings, and practices on the basis of new insights: not so fast.

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Amy Gohdes-Luhman

A few years back the Moravian Church of America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American entered into full communion. In preparation for this move, pastors were encouraged to lead discussions between Lutherans and Moravians throughout the province. Living in the Lutheran Mecca of Northfield, Minn., this was not a difficult thing to arrange. I met with Lutheran pastors and lay people from Northfield. Most of the meetings were held in Lutheran Churches—they are bigger. At one particular meeting the group began to engage in the theological underpinnings of some worship practice. It had been a while since the coffee pot had been around. They continued to chat, each of the various ELCA Lutheran churches being represented.

I noticed that no one had a bar or a cookie. Although it was not my church, I thought perhaps I should get the pot of coffee and the plate of bars and send them around again. Just as I was getting up to perform this important task, one of the pastors piped up: “Well, Amy what do the Moravians think about this important issue?” Unfortunately, the topic had not registered as that

important to my Moravian ears, so I was a bit stuck. “Um well, to be honest, I was just getting up to refresh the coffee and bars...and come to think of it, this is exactly the position where many Moravians would be in this argument. We would be more worried that everyone was comfortable and had enough to eat than about this particularly interesting issue—not that it isn’t important, of course.” The group laughed, and a few indicated that their coffee cups were empty.

Hospitality. Vacancy. Free Space. In his book, *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen includes an essay entitled, “On Hospitality.” In this essay Nouwen concludes that hospitality is the creation of a “free space.” In this free space people come together as friends, fully other. It is a space that does not try to convince, but comfort. It is a space in which one does not diminish or shy from one’s own beliefs, and yet in which one does not require those beliefs to be shared. It is a space without dividing lines. It is a vacancy. There is room in this inn.

The “third way” that Dr. Crouch describes is one that embodies this sort of free space, this hospitality. And interestingly he cites Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, as a biblical confirmation of the fact that how we act rather than how we believe is the very bottom line. I note in this text that the Hebrew ethic of hospitality is made to be salvific in Christ’s parable. It matters if you have cared for those brought into relationship with you. This would be imitating Christ. Christ did not have as much time for the Pharisees and their religious questions as he did for the bleeding woman or the blind man. But he did make some time and he did answer some of their questions. So let’s keep thinking seriously about what we believe.

I believe the “third way” as describe by Dr. Crouch is the right way and the more difficult way. It means I need to shut up on some things and listen more. It means I have to be less arrogant—this is quite difficult (readers who know me are agreeing with this). It means I have to figure out how to create a free space with people I totally disagree with. How do I do that? I don’t have a clue. But the imperative is there. It is Moravian, it may be why our denomination is still here. Hospitality. Creating a vacancy. There is room in this inn. And strangely I would like to argue that no-one is allowed to leave, but I suppose that would be unfair.

But here is the rub, if it is one. In my free space, Jesus Christ is Lord. That is what I believe. I believe that Jesus is God made fully human and fully divine. I believe that he died on the cross and that he rose on the third day. I believe he is the Son of God and that he left for us the Holy Spirit. This I truly believe. So everyone who enters my free space will know this about me, because how can I keep quiet on that one?

The very few times I have been able to have some learning interaction with people of other faiths, I have come away with this almost overwhelming gratitude for Christ. It is not a matter of whether or not that other person is saved; that is for God to decide and act on. Christ said he came to save all people; I’ll take him at his Word. Rather, it is a gratitude for the level of revelation I feel I know through Jesus Christ. It is that I will share in the free space. I will not require there to be any sort of consensus, but I will not shy from proclaiming it as a certain kind of wholeness in my being.

See. I would not want to limit God. I won’t crucify Christ again by requiring the rules of

Christianity to be shared by all as the only way to be saved. Christ is more powerful than the language we have created for speaking of him. But am I thankful for knowing Christ in the way that I do. Yes. Thankful doesn't even begin to describe it.

So whatever mishmash I have come up with here on this question, take it for what it is. I think the coffee is running low and no one seems to have a bar. There is room at this inn.

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Wally Yarbrough

First I thank Br. Craig Atwood for the invitation to respond to my brother's article. I was honored to be asked. Br. Frank Crouch has been, and is, both my teacher and my friend. He ministered to me and my wife, Linda, while we were in Pennsylvania, and continued to minister to us even after we left Pennsylvania to return home to North Carolina. I love him and have nothing but the highest respect for him, his scholarship, and his ministry to the Moravian Church and Moravian Theological Seminary. We have always discussed our differing viewpoints in a climate of mutual respect and love. I pray and believe that nothing will change that, and it is with that understanding that I offer this response.

I say these things because I must respectfully disagree with much of what my brother has written. I agree with him concerning the

profoundly disturbing context of our present exchange. Scripture has become, for some, no longer a source of the Truth, but only a part of the battlefield, or a source of ammunition. Some among us have abandoned any effort at community with one another. The Body of Christ has been wounded and real injuries (loss of income, community, status and homes) suffered by persons we know and love. The painful truth is that the North American Moravian Church is now, like most other mainline denominations, a house bitterly divided against itself.

Those who work in conflict resolution know that a principal rule for any who seek healing is to do no further harm, meaning to avoid actions or language that escalate the conflict. For that reason, given our emotionally and politically charged atmosphere, I must confess that after reading my brother's article I struggled with whether or not to be faithful to my acceptance of Br. Craig's invitation. There were two reasons. The first is that I substantially differ with Br. Frank on many things said in his article. Selfishly, I do not want this very public exchange to harm us or our relationship. But more than this, I suspect that this magazine, the public email discussion group, Unitas, and the exchanges that have occurred in the press and elsewhere have so far contributed more to driving us apart than to bringing us together.

Most of us know that as a conflict grows the debate quickly becomes personalized. The antagonists can then rarely even agree on what divides them. The defining of our issues, instead of giving clarity to our struggle, becomes part of the battleground. Issues are defined and re-defined in terms viewed more favorable to one

or the other. And here is the first place I must differ with my brother. He characterizes two of the issues (there are others) that divide us as. First is the conflict over “what place gays and lesbians are to have in the church.” He then addresses in more detail the Scriptures with regard to whether “Jesus is the only way to Salvation?”

I would not define either issue the way he does. Indeed the identity politics implicit in his definition of the first issue, and which lies at the heart of Resolution 6 from the Northern Provincial Synod, leads inexorably to the kind of conflict that now wounds us. My brother and I both grieve that for some it is no longer necessary to know more than one’s response to some “litmus test” to discern one’s “place” as a brother or a sister in the Church. However this is inevitable with the politics now widely practiced. In a politics of identity one need only know whether a person is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, black or white, feminist or traditionalist, ad nauseum, to determine their righteousness, and what role or place they can or should have.

This inevitably leads to much mean-spirited commentary. Epithets such as “homophobe” and “antichrist” are exchanged. We accuse each other of acting out of fear, suspicion or distrust rather than from honest conviction or a concern for those without a voice. We ignore, denigrate or dismiss the pain inflicted. There was a day when our community discerned a person’s fitness for membership and ministry from its knowledge of the individual and how their lives witness to their faith. Apparently those days are now over.

I differ with my brother over his definition of the main issue as well. I confess I’m confused over an apparent change in his definition. In the

beginning he states the issue as whether Jesus is the only way, but then quickly speaks of whether Christ or Christianity is the only way. It seems again we differ on the issue. I understood his earlier statement. I’m not sure I understand what he said later. He affirms that the Scriptures teach Christ as our only source of salvation but then argues that this gives no support to the superiority of Christianity. This raises serious ecclesiological issues well beyond our present discussion. Is it possible to remove Christ from Christianity and have anything meaningful left? Can one follow Jesus and not be Christian?

My brother says seems to suggest that this is so, but I doubt this is what he intends. I believe he and I agree that it is one thing to teach and preach that the Holy Spirit is the One who enables souls to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, leaving Him to decide of their fate; and something else entirely to teach and preach, as do some bishops in other denominations and their disciples in the Moravian Church, that Jesus is a “non-essential.” This seems where we are most deeply divided. From the beginning Moravians placed faith in Jesus Christ at the center of what it means to be Christian. Quoting Rican, “Faith in Jesus Christ was for the Brethren the heart of the Christian profession, and because of this, Christology was the center of all of theology” (emphasis supplied).¹ Sadly I question if this is any longer true.

My brother raises important issues concerning what the Scriptures say to us. I fully agree with him concerning the need to read and interpret Scripture in the light of Scripture. I also fully agree that our doctrines, dogmas, and behavior are to be tested constantly against the witness of Scripture. But we differ substantively in how we

understand the texts. He says Jesus' healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41) "violated long-accepted practices and beliefs". He states that the text "makes clear that whenever traditional beliefs and practices are challenged, there is no way to predict which approach correctly see[s] the ways of God."

My response, briefly stated, is that the Gospels do not suggest His actions transgressed any widely accepted Sabbath tradition. His disciples and followers, though questioning other acts, never questioned His Sabbath healings. The crowds never responded negatively, as they did in other situations (Luke 4:28-30, John 6:60-66), rather much the opposite (John 7:31-32; Luke 13:17). Indeed in one case (Luke 13:14), the Synagogue ruler had to admonish people against coming to the Synagogue on the Sabbath for the purpose of healing. The Gospels uniformly attest that this was an issue only for some of the Pharisees who made it an issue to find a way to accuse Jesus (e.g. Matthew 12:10, Mark 3:2, Luke 6:7, Luke 11:54, John 8:6). They very likely disagreed even among themselves as to what was lawful on the Sabbath.²

A second substantive disagreement between us arises with Brother Frank's exegesis of Peter's proclamation (Acts 4:8-12) of grace through faith in Jesus. He argues this is ambiguous because the Greek word used can be translated either as "healed" or "saved". He also says that Peter and John were tried for a healing, not for proclaiming salvation through Jesus. However this is not what the text says. Peter and John were arrested on a complaint of the Sadducees, not for healing, but for preaching the Resurrection (Acts 4:1-3). Further, any ambiguity between "saving" and

"healing" lies with Enlightenment rationalism. Our post-Enlightenment minds habitually divorce the spiritual from the physical, if we admit of the spiritual at all. In the ancient Hebrew mind physical healing was only by the grace of God. Peter's healing of the paralytic would have been seen as an irrefutable sign of God's grace. This was the reason for the consternation of the Sanhedrin at the man's presence (vss. 14-16). They could not denounce Peter and have him stoned, as they afterward did with Stephen, because the man's healing couldn't be denied. The earlier text cited by my brother (John 9:1-41) even begins with the disciples' question, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (NIV) Sin was assumed to be the cause of his blindness. Their only question was whose sin was it.

Finally, I argue that my brother is mistaken in the way he links our struggle over the ordination of women with our present issues. He seems to see this as a new thing that came from recombining texts to create a new narrative, or by seeing some texts more relevant than others. In contrast, many of us saw the decision to remove gender as a bar to ordination as a correction of the errors of the synods of 1764, 1775 and later that restricted our sisters' roles. He agrees that the early Church gave some who were women a prominent place in its ministry.

I argue that our return to ordaining sisters in the Church was based not on a denial of the relevance of Scripture, as others have done with respect to the issues that divide us now, but rather an affirmation of its witness. According to Scripture the first person ordained (i.e., set apart) to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus and His Resurrection was Mary Magdalene. And this was

not because of any change in cultural politics. The Synods that restricted the roles and activities of our sisters did so to accommodate Moravian practice to the politics and cultural norms of their day. This is precisely what many of us see happening in the Church today.

While much is left to be said, it seems we have already reached an impasse. It appears my brother and I cannot even agree on what divides us, let alone on how to understand the relevant texts. So where do we go from here? Is the love I have for him, and that he has shown to me, enough? Is the life and the love that Jesus Christ gives us both sufficient? Or must we part company, each of us seeking politically and culturally more compatible communions?

I pray this is not so. I don't believe it needs to be. However there are two things I believe must happen and happen very soon. The first is we must agree to cease doing things that offend and wound one another. The victory we are given in Christ is not a victory of one of us over the other. The second is that we must recognize that unity is possible only in our Chief Elder. With apologies to Peter, there is no other name given us by which we can be healed/saved, save the Name of Jesus. May Christ and Him crucified remain our confession of faith.

(Footnotes)

¹ Rudolf Rican, *The History of the Unity of the Brethren*, trans. C. Daniel Crews, (Bethlehem: The Moravian Church in America, 1992), p. 364.

² A discussion of the Pharisees and their attempts to enforce "traditions" concerning the Law can be found in E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 44-46. Sanders also argues on p. 215 that it is improbable

that anyone would have considered Jesus' healing, at least in the case of the man with the withered hand, Mark 3:1-6, a violation of the Sabbath law.

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Hartmut Beck

With appreciation I do comply with the editor's invitation to respond with about 1000 words to Dr. Crouch's initial article of 6500 words on a subject for which one would like to write a book. The issue is important and controversial, not only within the Moravian Church. The German Protestant Churches (EKD – Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland) have recently issued a paper (*Denkschrift*) with the title "Christian Faith and other Religions."¹ These are no longer only in the "regions beyond" but right in our midst. We must reconsider our relationship to them.

For the Old Testament Israel is the "chosen people" (Isaiah 43:20,21, *passim*) amongst all peoples (Hebrew: the *goyim*)—not because of its own merits but for love's sake by the Grace of God (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). In the New Testament the followers of Christ (*ecclesia* — those who are called) are the chosen priestly people of God (1 Peter 2:9, 2 Peter 1:10, *passim*). The biblical texts reflect this self-understanding. After Christianity had become official religion in the Roman Empire people of other forms of religion were considered as "pagani" (uneducated rural people) or in English "pagans". The Enlightenment, Romanticism and Secularisation changed this perspective. In the 18th Century when Moravian missions got on their way, there was a growing appreciation (by Jean Jacque Rousseau and others) for the so-called "primitive"

people and their human and cultural qualities.

Wilhelm Schmidt promoted the theory of an original idea of a Supreme God (Hochgott) that deteriorated into a great number of distorted false religions.² Karl Barth was uncompromising on this issue of the legitimacy of other religions.³ Besides the only one real God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and Jesus Christ, Karl Barth, at least in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, saw no room for real tolerance and recognition of other religions.⁴ Prof. Peter Beyerhaus (missiology, Tübingen) mitigated this evaluation considering foreign religions as systems which possibly helped to protect life in the human society in which otherwise without recognition of some transcendent authority there might have been limitless mutual killing and fraud.

The present age of dialogue has done much to equalize other religions with Christianity in popular understanding. In the comparative science of religion Christianity is only considered as one of the many possible forms of religion each of which has its own standing and right. From there the idea of a “pluralistic theology of religion”⁵ continued to develop, in which even theologians, such as the Roman-Catholic Hubert Halbfass suggested that Christian Missions should not aim at the conversion of people to formal Christianity.⁶ He proposed that the Church should encourage people to become more faithful in their own religions because these all ultimately lead men to God like the spokes of a wheel directed towards the same center. In such a perspective, any idea of uniqueness of Christ might seem arrogant. But in accepting this perspective, the Christian faith would deny its essential core.

In the New Testament the final understanding of Christ as he was revealed (not just conceived by human ideas) is that of the Savior for mankind. This is how the early Christian Church looked at him. This should not be considered only as traditional and conventional but as essential and lasting. What the NT bears witness to as salvation (Greek *soteria*) aims not essentially at physical healing but rather to eternal blessedness of man in spirit and soul. With regard to the healing of the body (blindness, paralysis, deafness, numbness etc.) it must be remembered, that Christ healed physically only a few individuals. Many continued to be sick and handicapped. He did not initiate a new general health scheme. He rather opened the way of temporal and eternal salvation for all people, although not all people knew this or know this now.

The woman who was divorced (John 8:1-11) was finally told not to sin any more. The healing of the paralytic man (Mark 2:1-12) ends up with the forgiveness of his sins. In John 9 (vs. 1-41) the healing of the blind man does not end with his restored sight but with the comment that now he knew that “this man (Jesus) really is from God” (vs. 33), and he said “Lord, I believe” and bowed before him (vs. 38).⁷ In Acts 4:12 the most essential thing is not that here a man was restored to renewed physical health but that to him the message of Christ who died on the cross and was raised from the dead was preached (vs. 11).

In John 2 with the miraculous conversion of water into wine Jesus, did not only help a man out of his prevailing plight nor did he initiate an age where now water with the right method can be turned into wine. The evangelist commented: This was the first sign (*semeion*) by which Jesus

revealed his glory (John 2:11). And all the further miracles (semeia) which St. John does report serve the same purpose. Most important is not miracle itself and the fact of healing but the revelation of Christ as Savior.

The question whether women should speak in the congregation or have their head covered (and so of women's ordination) however is of different kind and does not pertain to salvation but to the cultural environment only and can be adapted accordingly.

In John 14:6 the self-understanding of Jesus and that of the early Christian believers indicate clearly that Jesus Christ (here I do consciously speak of Christ and not of Christianity) is seen as essential for the way to God-Father and to salvation, for which he should be known and accepted. Preaching salvation in Christ, however, does not mean we condemn others, who were born and live in very different situations, as if by no means whatsoever they never could be saved. Who could dare to say that people of all other forms of faith, especially beginning with the Jewish faith and tradition, would be "lost for ever"? Nevertheless after Christ has appeared we cannot consider all other religions as equally good and valid for salvation.

This belongs to what sometimes appears as paradox in Christian faith and doctrine. When we are saved, we are saved through grace only, not for our merits' sake. But if we are not be saved it would be because of our sins, not because God's grace has failed upon us. This sounds illogical but it is essential in Christian dogmatics. We do believe in Christ as the only way and source of salvation, but we respect and try to understand

people of other religions. In the way in which God has led us to see Him with Christ as Savior for all mankind (Matthew 28:18-20) however we shall be faithful to His word and revelation and to His calling as we know it.

With the whole dispute which now is underway in our Moravian Church I wonder whether this aspect (also a kind of third way) can satisfy both contradicting parties, although for slightly different arguments than what Dr. Crouch (with whom I here have my dialogue although without permanent quotations) suggests.

I add two important perspectives on this matter. One is from a Greek Orthodox Professor from Athens who once, in a two-hour lecture, developed the whole Orthodox theology under the governing aspect of "filia" (divine love).⁸ A second one is from the former Bavarian Lutheran Bishop Chr. Dietzfelbinger,⁹ who stated that nothing which does not constitute separation from Christ should be qualified as heresy and be a reason for separation from the church. Therefore I think and hope very much that on this ground of divine love and union in Christ, we will and can stand together.

(Footnotes)

¹ EKD Texte 77, *Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen*, 25 pages, published August 2003. Hannover, Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD).

² Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954), *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (12 Vol., 1912-1955) and *Handbuch der vergleichenden Religionsgeschichte* (3 Vol., 1930) developed the idea of a Supreme God (*Hochgottglaube, Urmonotheismus*) which was thought originally to be held by all mankind.

³ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, KD II/1, pg. 636: the religions of the heathen people are false religions; KD IV/1, pg. 537: “religion” is a deed of sinful man, *passim*

⁴ KD III/4, pg.549: dull tolerance only reduces certainties to some unsatisfactory relativistic quality.

⁵ Paul Wess, *Sind alle Religionen gleich wahr? Eine Antwort auf die Pluralistische Religionstheologie*, in “Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft”, EOS Verlag St.Ottilien, 1996, Heft 1, pg.26-43.

⁶ H.Halfas, *Fundamental Katechetik*, Grünewald/Patmos Publishers, 1973, 236 pages.

⁷ All Bible quotations are taken from the NEB (New English Bible) 1972.

⁸ Lecture by Prof. Elias Voulgarakis (University of Athens) in the Greek Orthodox Academy at Moni Gonia in Crete on 29.06.1983 which I happened to attend.

⁹ Chr. Dietzfelbinger, *Was ist Irrlehre?*, Series “Theologische Existenz Heute” No.143, Chr. Kaiser Verlag München, 1967, 64 pages.

The Rev. Dr. Hartmut Beck, now living in Karlsruhe, Germany, is a retired pastor of the Moravian Church with service in the Moravian Church in East Africa. He is also the European editor of the periodical, “Transatlantic Moravian Dialogue Correspondence”, which is now called “ITD” (International Theological Dialogue—in the Moravian Church).

Worth Green

The Rev. Dr. Frank Crouch has given us a powerful demonstration of scholarship in the service of the church. I am particularly thankful that he has taken care to root his own method of interpreting the Scriptures in the method he sees in the New Testament itself.

More importantly, the Dean of Moravian Seminary has successfully identified the theological presuppositions underlying our current debate. When Frank says that one side fears “a disregard for Scripture” and the other side fears “a lack of openness to God’s ongoing revelation”, it is easy to think not just in terms of individuals who might fall into one camp or another, but in terms of our two North American provinces.

I found Frank’s hermeneutic, exegesis, and conclusions in dealing with this question quite satisfying. I would differ in one primary point. I would not assign to the debate over “salvation through Christ alone,” the same level of conflict as I would assign to other issues we are debating, especially the issue of homosexuality. I am aware of many Christians, living and dead, who have gladly professed their allegiance to *Sola Scriptura*, while handily agreeing with Frank. These persons would insist on two mutually inclusive truths: 1) “Jesus died for the sins of the world” and “all who saved will be saved through him,” and 2) God is a just and merciful God who may, “acting in sovereign freedom,” save whomsoever God wills. “There is wideness in God’s mercy,” they say.

Frank argues along similar lines, making a distinction between “salvation through Christ,” and “salvation through Christianity.” The position that Frank puts before us is not only

good exegesis, it is thoroughly Moravian. Leading Moravian theologians have always argued for the essential harmony between “salvation through Christ alone,” and “the wideness in God’s mercy,” while at the same time, avoiding sweeping statements about universalism that cannot be backed up by a balanced reading of the Scriptures. Frank’s position is in harmony with that expressed by Spangenberg in his *Idea Fidei Fratrum*,¹ and that taken by Augustus Schultze in his 1914 book entitled, *Christian Doctrine*. (*Christian Doctrine*, Bethlehem, Pa., 1914, p. 248f.)

I am grateful for Frank’s wisdom, as I believe it is imperative that we have clear thinking on this subject. Let me illustrate. Not long ago I had a woman in my congregation approach me with a difficult question. She said, “Pastor, Hitler killed all those Jewish children in the ovens. Did God just let them continue to burn?” How would you, dear reader, answer that question? Does one forfeit one’s Evangelical credentials when one admits that one trusts that God is more merciful than one of the most heinous dictators of modern times? I think that Frank would say not.

Frank has called upon us to exercise the twin-virtues of *confidence* and *humility*. I agree. We need *confidence* that the *special revelation* that God gave in Christ is the apex of God’s self-revelation, period. This does not mean that we have God in a box. It does mean we believe that all future revelations of God will be Christ-like. We need not fear that new knowledge of other world religions and more frequent contact with people of other faith orientations, including agnosticism and atheism, will change the *special revelation* God gave in Christ. If there is a *revelation in nature*, as the Scriptures insist, then people of the

other faiths must of necessity have at least some access to religious truth. Yet, because this truth stops short of God’s special revelation in Christ, we are still compelled to “preach the gospel.” Surely, many of the world’s best, brightest, and most devout, still hunger for the Word of grace and hope that is ours in Christ!

The Great Commission has not been revoked. We can no longer afford to act as if we were somehow culturally superior, but we can certainly continue to share our faith, “...like beggars who have found bread with other beggars who are hungry still.” At the same time, it may behoove us to defer questions about the salvation of those who have not heard, etc. to “the hopes” of the New Testament.

The “hopes” of the New Testament? Yes, as Br. Frank has so ably pointed out, the New Testament has a measure of hope, even for those who have not heard. A number of New Testament authors explore the wideness in God’s mercy. Frank has mentioned Romans 2:13f. I would mention 1st Corinthians 15 where Paul permits baptism for the dead. Why baptize for the dead? Quite possibly because Christians were concerned for beloved parents, grandparents and friends who died before they heard the message of the Gospel. I would also mention Karl Barth’s exegesis of Romans 5, and the “*how much more of grace*.” (*Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956.) One need not draw the same conclusion as Barth to see how he reaches it.

So, too, I would mention passages like 1st Timothy 2:4 where we read that God, “...*would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*,” and 1st Timothy 4:10

where we read that God “*is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.*” Finally, I would mention 1st Peter 3:19 where we read that the crucified Christ is said to have “*preached to the spirits in prison.*” All these passages hold out at least some hope of salvation for those who have never heard the gospel, or perhaps, never heard it *adequately*.

In dealing with the hopes of the New Testament, we must, none the less, practice *humility*. We must remind ourselves that we are not God, and we are not called upon to be the judges of the earth. We do not possess God’s sovereign freedom to have mercy on whomsoever we will and harden our hearts against whomsoever we will. In the final analysis, both those who preach Christian universal-ism (as opposed to an unlimited atonement) and those who preach Christian exclusive-ism (as opposed to Christ being the ultimate revelation of God) have fallen into the same trap, a lack of humility.

E. Stanley Jones had the kind of humility to which we might aspire. A well known Methodist missionary and evangelist, Jones once called Gandhi “a deeply Christianized Hindu, more Christianized than most Christians.” (*A Song of Ascents*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968, p. 132). He was referring not to Gandhi’s doctrine, but to his character. When Gandhi was martyred, some Christians of South India asked Jones if he had gone to heaven. Jones replied:

“I am glad I don’t have to decide the destiny of men. I am not the judge of all the earth. It is my business to preach the gospel and leave judgment to God. He is wise enough and good enough for that responsibility—I am not. All I can say is that, if Mahatma Gandhi didn’t go to

heaven, then heaven would be poorer without him, as it will be poorer without you.” (Ibid., p. 135,136)

I find Jones’s answer to a difficult question to be a marvelous balance between confidence in the gospel and humility before the world. I find the same kind of balance in Br. Frank’s paper. I can see Christ in both. I only hope that the world can see Christ just as clearly in me. In the final analysis, it will not be just what we believe and preach that conveys the gospel to a lost and dying world; it will be the quality of the lives we live, as Ambassadors of Christ. God is, after all, *making his appeal through us* (II Cor. 5:20).

(Footnotes)

¹ See especially pages 63, 64-65, 57, 60, 85, 86 and 471. Many thanks to our Archivist, the Rev. Dr. C. Daniel Crews, for these references.

The Rev. Dr. Worth Green is the pastor of New Philadelphia Moravian Church in Winston-Salem.

The Author Responds

I found the responses to be interesting, helpful and constructive. I am glad for the opportunity to learn from brothers and sisters in ministry and to clarify some of my positions. And, I believe it's safe to say that we all affirm the saving work of Christ, not just as words to repeat but as the basis of our life together.

I will begin by quoting Amy's important reminder that "it matters if you have cared for those brought into relationship with you." Her response serves as a reminder that *how* we decide these questions cannot be separated from what we decide (and, thus, the subtitle of the essay). Our fellowship is not something we have chosen for ourselves, but something into which we have been called by Christ (and is, therefore, not to be treated unadvisedly or lightly).

Worth, Hartmut, and David helpfully point out some of the tensions inherent in our current debates—upholding the saving work of Christ while not usurping God's more omniscient capacity for making final judgments; discerning when scripture offers a final word and when the Spirit at work behind scripture offers new understanding in our own time; embodying both a confident profession of faith and a humble willingness to learn new things from God, and so on. The responses demonstrate that these tensions are not problems to be solved but are inescapable and potentially constructive tensions in the life of faith, both for individuals and for communities.

I share David's wariness with regard to

moving too quickly or easily toward change, and I agree that it's not the case that everything is up for grabs all the time. At the same time, the Church has always had to live through the conflicts created while discerning what to hold onto and what to let go under the guidance of the Spirit. Adding to the complexity of the situation is the widely varying perception of what "rapid change" means in a congregational or denominational setting. When it came to "setting aside" admonitions of scripture—dietary laws, circumcision, the day on which we observe Sabbath, and so on—the early churches moved with great care. Even the huge shifts required for full inclusion of Gentiles—well, was that decades-long discernment process fast or slow? One's answer at the time of that conflict would probably depend on one's initial view of how good or bad it was to be "Gentile." I think of the admonition in the epistle of James, "let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4). We need more than a little endurance for the days ahead.

Let me express appreciation for Wally's kind personal words, noting that he omitted mention of the depth of ministry received from him and from Linda. I regret that my focus on the role of fear and suspicion in these conflicts might lead one to believe that I see those as the only motives at work. People on all sides act from a genuine desire to see the ways of God emerge. When working through issues this hotly contested, however, it can be difficult to maintain enough

self-awareness and humility to remember that the intensity of one's beliefs says nothing about one's conformity to the ways of God.

As for a change from discussing whether Jesus is the only way, to discussing whether Christianity is the only way, that shift constitutes one of the essay's main points. Wally questions whether it is possible "to remove Christ from Christianity and have anything meaningful left." I agree. Our relationship with the risen Christ, in my view, constitutes the core of our life and faith. My brother's next question, however, touches a different concern, "Can one follow Jesus and not be Christian?"—well, maybe. I say that based on certain passages of scripture (discussed in the essay and listed in footnote 5), not based on what has been said by "bishops in other denominations and their disciples in the Moravian Church." One purpose of my essay was to offer a third possibility that makes the following point, crudely stated: there are other choices besides "Bishop Spong" or "traditional beliefs." As Wally, Worth, and David all note, issues have become personalized and politicized, so that certain people's names have become entangled with other issues, animosities, and allegiances. It seems to me that all the respondents share a desire for the Church to move beyond the coalitional stumbling blocks that stand in the way of truth and reconciliation ("I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.'" (I Cor 1:12))

Our differences over the interpretation of John 9 and Acts 4 would take too much space to explore in detail. I agree with Wally's point that Jesus' followers did not question his Sabbath healings. My point had a different emphasis. The people's reaction in John 9 ("He can't be from

God because he broke the Sabbath," versus "No one could do this unless he came from God") seems to me to say that our preconceptions of how God acts can blind us to the actual actions of God. I'm most interested in what enabled people to recognize that he came from God.

Both Wally's and Hartmut's discussions of Acts 4 are better than mine in upholding the union of the spiritual and the physical, an understanding of human life that I agree with. Their discussions point more effectively to the larger significance of the healing and the story's emphasis on Christ and salvation. At the same time, I would still argue that the union of "healing" and "saving" and the context of healing that surrounds the statement under question ("there is no other name ...") calls for a deeper exploration of what "salvation" means. I agree that my discussion does not begin to explore the ecclesiological concerns that might be raised. Briefly, though, I suspect that we would have vast areas of agreement on what the church should do in carrying out its mission. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life—not the Church—and it is by Christ's name that we are saved—not the name of the Church. Sometimes our battles make it look as if we think that God belongs to us rather than that we belong to God.

I agree with Wally's assessment of the scriptural grounding for the ordination of women. My point was not to deny "the relevance of Scripture" but to note that when people make scriptural texts compete for authority, the Church has always searched for combinations of texts that connect with the purposes of God. I fundamentally agree with *the Ground of the Unity* on this point. And, I believe that my brother

would agree that there is more than one way to understand the authority of Scripture while still being faithful to its testimony.

David makes a significant point about provincial synods “defer[ring] to Unity Synod to decide controversial questions before plunging ahead on their own.” This is worthy of sustained consideration, which can’t be undertaken in this setting. How the Church might decide in advance what qualifies as controversial enough, well, that’s not easy to do. And, we haven’t been able to discern the best process for legislating an issue as controversial as homosexuality. It was apparent to me at the Northern Province Synod that a “Robert’s Rules of Order/simple majority vote” approach constitutes exactly the wrong way to discern the ways of God on this matter. But, that’s another

discussion. Unity Synod has given (mandated) breathing room on legislating this question. The larger Church still has the obligation before God and each other to work through this as a Unity.

Wally concludes his comments saying, “It appears my brother and I cannot even agree on what divides us, let alone on how to understand the relevant texts.” I have no doubt that if we keep engaging one another with respect and love and focusing on the Church’s mission to a world in travail, we will see where we differ and understand what matters to us most and why. I’m not yet sure if we agree on what divides us, but reading Wally’s final paragraph and reading each of the responses assures me that we agree on what unites us—the saving love of Christ who calls us to life together in service to others.

Letters

*Many thanks to all who wrote this autumn!
Please send letters by email to: zinzendorf2002@yahoo.com.*

Today we did receive *The Hinge* Summer 2003 mailed from Bethlehem September 17th and arrived here 22nd. Thank you for all arrangements. After taking it out of the envelop I read as first matter of major interest (!) the whole text of your grand review on John Granger’s book on Harry Potter. My wife Erika was as I was myself enthusiastic about this reviewed book and your review. Thank you. We will communicate this text to our four children for them and for our twelve grandchildren many of whom do read Harry Potter as my wife does in order to communicate with them. She also finds Harry Potter quite interesting. I have not spent so much time on these books. But if we have room to spare I consider to take a German translation of your text as appended matter into our Continental *TMDK* November issue. I think all this is quite intriguing and in Christmas time many of these books will again be a present if youngsters can bridle their impatience and will not have already read everything of it beforehand. It was refreshing to read this whilst at present there are still so many difficult theological issues in the air.

— Hartmut Beck, Karlsruhe, Germany

Reading through the pages of this Summer 2003 issue I was pleased to note so many names of people I know; Morgan, Sommers, Volpe, Castello, Wilde, Couch, Graf, and Weinlick. Why do I know so many? I’ve had the privilege of meeting them at Synods or working with them in various programs of the Church. “Working

with them” is one form of dialog that is often neglected in any discussion of reconciliation, but it is a powerful way to break down walls of prejudice. Coming from an all white background to an integrated high school didn't faze me because I hadn't been exposed to racial hatred, and so I could relate to those of different culture and race without any real prejudice. I also learned that others couldn't do that because of family intolerance or cultural disdain for those who weren't “good enough” because they were “different.”

Being different reminds me that Bro. Gordon made reference to the issue of homosexuality that is confronting our Church today. Sorry, I should have said God's Church since it seems to be a universal issue. The question is where to start, with the “fundamentalists” or with the homosexuals. Probably with the fundamentalists who consider the issue to be one of the essentials. We seem to have drifted away from study and applying what is taught in the scriptures. The same might be said about our reaction to race relations. Bro. Costello expressed the belief that “love should extend beyond our own walls.” Sometimes we must work at being loving to others.

Bro. Rodney stated that, “Most members focus on their own congregations and they aren't interested on other congregations. You can't hold that against them.” I disagree that we can't hold that against them. I have been encouraging fellow Moravians to visit other congregations and to take part in ecumenical opportunities. One thing that I have noted in visiting other Moravian congregations is that there is a warmth and friendliness when they learn that I am a fellow Moravian.

I've already said much more than I expected to so maybe I better stop here with the thought that we must become more Christ-like in our thinking whatever is being considered.

— Bill Mitchell, Lititz Moravian

I just got through reading the September *Hinge*. It's most excellent! Kat is raising excellent issues. Of course, her material is well-written and she has touched on a wealth of resources and viewpoints, but then after all she is a professional I rejoice in the topic. We need to make more progress on this topic, and this is one channel. I hope some practical face-to-face dialogues (the white community's way of making progress, by talking) and cooperative projects (the black community's way of making progress, by doing things) will take place.

I laughed at your end-note, about no mail except bank statements. One of my favorite small books is “Whobody There?” It was written 30 years ago (seems like yesterday) for parents and children to read together. The author divides people into several categories. Whobodies are those who love and care for us, like grandparents and the people who pick children up and toss them into the air. There are other categories, one of which is really insincere people (the salesgirl who mutters “haveaniceday” without meaning it) and people who don't care yet but who might someday. One of the lines I remember comes when the child in the book helps Mom look at the mail. “Whobodies don't send mail in envelopes with transparent windows.” I recall that all too often when I look in my own mailbox. May your mail contain more interesting items henceforth, Craig!

— Al Reynolds, Maryland

Pop quiz! Who is the paradigm of all racists? Who flashes immediately to mind? I will not say his name, as that might lend an increment of power to his being, which still reigns among certain of our species. In 1924 he wrote his defining intellectual autobiography while in prison in the Fortress of Landberg am Lech, having been sentenced there by the People's Court of Munich. One chapter in that intellectual autobiography is title, “Race and People.” It is thirty-nine tightly printed pages long in my edition (*Mein Kampf*, Jaico Publishing House, 1988). His logic is pretty good; however, it is based on a lot of false premises and leaps of knowledge and faith.

Isn't that the foundation of sand that the house of racism is built on?

The author postulates a theory of human history that is almost religious. His god is nature and the forces of evolution. A devotee would be willing to die and more to further its Ideal. The Ideal goes something like this, "The greatness of the Aryan is not based on his intellectual powers, but rather on his willingness to devote all his faculties to the service of the community...and when necessity calls he will sacrifice his own life for the community."

In his own sense, the author was a firm proponent of family values, extended and risen to the level of the community. The author points to nature to show that species always reproduce within their own kind. Foxes with foxes, rabbits with rabbits. Otherwise the hybrids produced are inferior to the superior mate, thus degrading the evolution of the species of the superior mate. The same principle, according to the author, applies to races of human beings as to species of animals. ... So, racism benefits nature. Hmm...

Well, what can I say? "Vital sap"? "Precious bodily fluids"? (Dr. Strangelove, the movie.) Conquer the world? "We had to destroy a village in order to save it." Good thing the superior races won World War II. Phew! Sin? Eternal Creator? The Ideal? Will you join me in pronouncing this man's nature-worship a religion? Racism at its ugliest is a religion. It is a deeply rooted in our psyches as is fundamentalist religious faiths. Maybe we will always – in the kingdom of the world.

We Moravians, we Christians, we religious faiths of love and compassion do not function according to this world. We are different. As Peter wrote, "Come to him, a living stone...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter 2:4-9)

— John Scepanski, Christian Faith Moravian Church, DeForest, Wisconsin

*Editor's note: Because of our word limit on letters to the editor, some of John's letter was edited out, with apologies to the writer. **The Hinge** is appreciative of the letters we receive, but we will have to limit the number we publish from any one person. You can read more from John on the *Unitas* listserv.*

The suggestion has been made that there be dialogue between "old Moravians" and "new Moravians." I assume "old Moravians" are those with some earlier family connection with the Moravian Church and "new Moravians" are those who have more recently joined a Moravian congregation. Dr. Fred Bahnson and Paul Couch could be considered "old Moravians" but their opinions and not necessarily those that some would expect to be from "old Moravians." Let us have dialogue but do not classify those taking part.

— William A. Cranford, Retired Moravian pastor

Recently I was deeply impressed by this sermon delivered at Fairview last month by Hermann Weinlick. It strikes me as being a very fine statement of where the Moravian Church stands. In view of the current turmoil in the Province, it is a message that should reach a larger audience. I don't know whether or not it might have a place in *The Hinge* but I thought I would bring it to your attention in case you had not seen it. I thought the last issue of *The Hinge* was of unusual interest. Katherine succeeded in approaching the racial issue in a different and fresh way which I thought was stimulating and well done.

— Herbert Weber, Retired Moravian pastor

*Editor's note: Yes, Herbert, such sermons do have a place in **The Hinge**. Read on!*

Guest Sermon

LAW AND GOSPEL

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Hermann Weinlick

In these two passages we see one of the tensions of the Christian life. We may think of it as Old Testament versus New Testament, or Jew versus Christian, but it is really a tension within the Christian life and faith. Deuteronomy, from the Bible that Jesus knew, what we call the Old Testament, talks about keeping the commands of God, making sure we do what is right and good, teaching our children and grandchildren what is right and good. That is a big part of what religion, what Christian faith means to us, one aspect of the life of the Spirit. But we often experience that this side of faith does not work. We find it hard to keep the commandments. And we find our children do not hear, or do not learn, or do not follow. And we feel frustration, guilt, failure.

Alongside Deuteronomy is today's Gospel, about Jesus and his disciples not following the Jewish customs about washing hands before meals, Jewish customs rooted in the Old Testament. (This is not about hygiene, washing away germs, but about religious ritual, comparable to saying grace before we eat.) Jesus seems to throw out the commands, the rules of right and wrong that the Jews lived by. But he really is asking his followers to be concerned about purity and cleanness in another dimension: not what is outside but what is inside.

Is Jesus really throwing out the idea of keeping the law, the commands of God? Is he telling us to do as we please? Jesus himself kept most the customs of his days. He went to the temple, he celebrated the Jewish holy days, he preached in village synagogues, he knew the Old Testament through and through. So what was Jesus up to in today's story from the Gospel of Mark? Why does Mark tell us this story from the life of Jesus?

First, Jesus is telling his disciples—and us—that we need to sort out what is important and what is not, what is most essential to live and pass on to our children. Mainline churches like Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and, to a lesser extent, Moravian, have seen significant losses in membership in the last thirty years. Robert Wuthnow, a leading American sociologist says that this is because we have “failed to teach a clear, compelling set of religious beliefs.” In the first quarter of this century one of the leading concerns of the churches was observance of the Sabbath, or, more properly, Sunday. Now I believe the Sabbath has much to teach us today. (The heart of Sabbath is the conviction of the Jews that they were no longer slaves in Egypt, whose value was only the work they could do for their Egyptian taskmasters. They were people who were valuable because God considered them valuable. In a society where some people die soon after they retire because their life is all work; people who lose their jobs find their lives falling apart; and people who cannot support themselves financially are often viewed as inferior, we need the message of the Sabbath.) But if today the church made the keeping of the Sabbath the heart of our message, we would be driving people away.

When we ask what is the center of our message, we need to remember that it is Jesus Christ. The Bible before me is a big, thick book, but the heart of it is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the story of Jesus. In many churches, like the Lutheran and Catholic, the congregation stands when the Gospel lesson is read, a sign of its importance for us. We are neither Unitarians, who believe we can believe whatever we feel like, nor more conservative Christians who think that they can neatly box up what to believe or do. Rather, we believe in a way of life that centers in Jesus Christ.

Especially in the days since September 11, many voices in our culture are saying that religion is the cause of the world's conflicts and that we need to downplay the distinctive elements of religious tradition, like Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha, and stress what we have in common, like a vague belief in God. Without in any way denying the value of working with other faiths for peace and the common good, I believe that in Jesus we have a special, unique message about God and our relationship to God that the world needs to hear. In Jesus we see a God who does not try to overpower humanity but who give up power to live alongside us; a God who shows himself as a servant; a God who lets himself be crucified to show his love for us. This is a story of God the world needs to hear.

Some eighty-five years ago a longtime leader of the Southern Province, J. Kenneth Pfohl, later elected a bishop, wrote this: To the Moravian Church "*Christ is all.*" We speak of the church as "a Christ-centered church," a church which centers *all* on him. And we mean it very literally. We mean it with a positiveness difficult to sufficiently make clear. We mean it so certainly that we make Christ and Christ alone our creed. We are not a creedless church, but we are a church of a single creed—"Christ and him crucified remain our confession of faith." We seek to make him our all in all, the one great essential, the one thing needful...

It has never been the desire of the Moravian Church to add another creed to the many creeds of Christendom. We have considered that there were too many already. Our effort has been to unify them around the one essential fact of Christian faith, that is, a crucified Savior. So we have become a church of a single faith. If, for example, a brother comes to us saying, "Your forms of worship, your liturgies, your hymns and music are not like others," we answer, "That is not material. To be found in faith in Jesus Christ is the essential thing..."

Or let it be question of the mode of baptism, the view of the Holy Communion, the right or wrong of some social practice or individual form of amusement. The Moravian Church would say, "Makes Jesus Christ your Lord and Master, seek the guidance of the Word and his Spirit, and we shall have no differences with you. We offer you in all sincerity our Christian fellowship. We call you ['sister'] and 'brother.'"

Jesus is telling his disciples—and us—to determine what is most important, most essential in our message. Secondly, he is preparing his disciples to go to people who are Gentiles, not Jews, people who are different from them. In the first verse after our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus goes on his only trip—as an adult; we are not counting his flight as an infant to Egypt—out of Israel, to what is now southern Lebanon. Here the message will be a little different. Here the keeping of the Sabbath will not be important, indeed, may stand in the way of their mission work.

In the Gospels, Jesus is usually called Messiah or Son of Man, terms from Jewish tradition and the Old Testament. But the rest of the New Testament shows Christians talking about Jesus in other ways to people who are not Jews and do not know the Jewish scriptures we call the Old Testament. In Athens Paul sees an altar to an unknown God and says, “I’m here to tell you about this unknown God.” To Ephesians he writes that the central message of Jesus is that Jews and Gentiles are now together as God’s chosen people, that the wall between them has been torn down by Jesus. In Revelation we read that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of (shown here on the flower stands at Fairview), the A and Z, the beginning and the end. The history of Christian faith is a history of taking the story of Jesus to different cultures, confident that he has a message for every culture. Muslims believe the Quran can be really understood only in Arabic. Christians have worked to translate the Bible into every language people speak, because Christians are always reaching out to those who are different from themselves.

So we have the Southern Province calling Robert Wolfe to do prison ministry here in Winston-Salem. We have Sunnyside Ministry helping those in Winston-Salem with financial limitations. We have the beginnings of ministry among Spanish-speaking persons in Winston-Salem—all different groups with whom God calls us to share the gospel.

May Fairview be a community that knows Jesus Christ is the most important thing, the essential, that asks what tasks Jesus wants us to be about, and that is always seeking to reach new people with the wonderful message of Jesus.

Editorial

“*The Hobbits of Christianity*”

Sometimes you make an off-hand remark that strikes such a chord with people that you find that you are compelled to follow-up on what you yourself suggested in jest. So it is with this brief essay on Moravian identity and theology. When I was asked what the title would be for the 2004 Moses Lectures at Moravian Theological Seminary, I glibly replied, “Moravians as the Hobbits of Christianity” and was taken seriously. I told this to my class on Moravian theology at Home Church and several people asked for copies of the lecture that I never planned to write.

Clearly something about Moravians and hobbits resonated with people and deserved deeper thought. As it turned out, the Moses Lectures proved far too serious for such a bit of fun, so I discussed it with the editor of *The Hinge* over a cup of coffee during the holidays, and I agreed to publish what I wrote while folks could still watch hobbits on the big screen.

Those of you who have never heard of hobbits, read about them, or seen the new Lord of the Rings movies are probably no longer reading this essay. But just in case you are, a word of explanation might be in order. Hobbits, like many things far more threatening to the peace of the world, are fictional. Tolkien, who later claimed to be a hobbit himself, invented them to entertain and teach his children (and us) about what is most important in the world. The lessons eventually grew into the great epic of the modern age. Unfortunately, few have learned his lesson that evil cannot be defeated by its own weapons.

Hobbits represent a time “long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green.” The hobbits help preserve some of the goodness of that time as the world changes even though they are small and easily overlooked. They do not appear in the long lists of all living things. No names of Hobbit heroes

were sung in the songs of great deeds of conquest and war, at least not until the day when two small hobbits named Frodo and Sam left their comfortable homes and journeyed alone into the darkest realm of evil and threw down the dark lord by renouncing and destroying his ring of power.

So, you see, hobbits could become heroes. In general, though, they preferred gardening, giving gifts to each other, playing with children, laughing, and eating. They produced few books, little wealth, no magic, and no wars, but they did make faithful friends. And the Shire where they lived was worth preserving, not because it was perfect, but because it was good. Those raised in the Shire also knew that when you are sitting on the ruin of the world, you can still have a picnic and remember what the world can be like again. What better time to have a lovefeast than when all the world seems to be falling down around you?

What has this got to do with Moravians, you are no doubt asking yourself, assuming that you haven't already angrily thrown away this issue of *The Hinge* and are ready to plunge back into the theological controversies of this third age of the church. Before you pick up the weapons of ecclesiastical combat, though, take a moment to think about Moravians and hobbits. It is true that we are often overlooked in the great histories of Christianity and even in the church today. We are small, and have always been small. There are far more Moravians in the world today than at any time in our history, but that still hardly registers for the list makers. We prefer food and good cheer to hoarded gold, heroic deeds, or grand theologies. We love children and know how to laugh and be merry.

For over five hundred years, Moravian theology has focused on the everyday rather than wasting time speculating about the end time, conjuring up visions

of the afterlife, or seeking mystical revelations. We have sent our missionaries to the remotest corners of the world without soldiers or imperialist plans in order to bring people the simple message that the Creator is benevolent and is reconciling all peoples, races, and tongues. We have also tried to live by the simple truth that though this world is not our final destination, we are stewards of what God has made good. If creation is good, we know we are called both to enjoy it and to protect it from evil. Unlike many other Christians in the long years of pilgrimage and struggle, Moravians have generally understood that moderation and consideration make it possible to enjoy what God has given.

What some of the hobbits learn in the Tolkien epic is that hobbits can go without food or comfort when there is need. They find they can endure suffering and face death bravely, just as many Moravians have been called upon to do through the ages. They are not so bound to food and home that they became greedy and selfish. They know the secret that cheerfulness is a matter of the heart, not the stomach. In the grimmest times, a hobbit has hope in what is good and right and true. And even when hopes fade and the end comes, Frodo and Sam find they can continue their journey because they carry the Shire in their hearts. Most of all, they know that no one should face the trials of this world without a good friend and a wise counselor.

Moravians have also known what it is to “hope against hope” and carry on in the face of certain defeat. There have been times when this small, overlooked church has been entrusted with the task of preserving something good and right and true in Christianity in the midst of oppression and war. It happened when Moravians risked death in order to give the chalice back to the laity. It happened when Comenius offered the whole world the Moravian vision of peace and simple faith. It happened when Moravian refugees inspired Zinzendorf with their faith and courage. It happened when Moravians were massacred a two different Gnadenhuttens in America, but did not give

up their quest to preach the reconciling love of God to all races. It happened when the simple Moravian Daily Texts helped inspire Bonhoeffer to return to Nazi Germany to try to preserve what is good and beautiful and true. It happened when Moravians in South Africa opposed apartheid by uniting their black and colored provinces. It may be happening today if we have eyes to see.

The strength of the Moravian Church is different from other churches that dominate the skylines and airwaves. Our strength is the fact that we have usually resisted the temptation to become great in the things the world values. We have not sought growth in numbers for the sake of becoming large. We do not have grand cathedrals or universities or television networks. No government fears opposition from the Moravians or even notices there are Moravians. No best sellers, no appearances on talk shows. Often misunderstood and misinterpreted, the Moravians have still tried to preserve something green and life giving in a world bent on domination and destruction. Sometimes, we have even had to preserve what is green and life giving in a Christianity bent on self-destruction and malicious oppression.

This is not written to make us proud, because pride in a hobbit or a Moravian is a silly thing. Rather, it is my attempt to restore some “plain hobbit sense” to our discussions about our future. There are things in the Moravian Church that are admired and desired by many in Christendom. We owe it the greater kingdom of God to preserve them, enjoy them, and share them without being tempted by the desire of becoming great.

In thinking about Moravian doctrine and theology, it might be wise to paraphrase Tolkien. Our church is not a nasty, dark, scary church, filled with the end of the world and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy church with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it is a hobbit-church, and that means comfort (Isaiah 40:1).

— Craig D. Atwood

Book Reviews

The Moravian Church and the Missionary

Awakening in England: 1760-1800. By **John C.S. Mason.** A Royal Historical Society Publication. Studies in History New Series. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press and Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell and Brewer Inc., 2002. XV + 229 pp. \$85.00 cloth.

Reviewed by the Rev. Dr. David A. Schattschneider

In addition to all the Millennium hoop-la in 2000, many Moravians also observed the 300th anniversary of Zinzendorf's birthday. Celebratory conferences, new publications, and even a souvenir tote bag all helped mark the occasion. These were fitting ways to remember the contributions of this pivotal figure in Moravian history. But the historians, at least, also remember that things began to unravel in some parts of the Moravian world even before the Count's death in 1760. This was certainly the case in England.

The "first chapter" of the Moravian story in England is told in Colin Podmore's excellent book, *The Moravian Church in England: 1728-1760* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Podmore tells the story from the arrival of the Moravians through to the Parliamentary Act of 1749, recognizing the Moravian Church as 'An Ancient Protestant Episcopal Church.' The passage of this Act marked the epitome of Moravian influence in England in the early years. Within a short time after that, because of what Podmore terms "The Crisis of 1753," the reputation and influence of the Moravians would be thoroughly discredited. The Church was soon regarded as "fraudulent, immoral, unorthodox, and dangerous." (289). His book ends, in a sense, on a pessimistic note. There was some complaint among contemporary British Moravians when the book appeared because of this. Yet, at several points, Podmore refers to a 'forthcoming' study by John Mason that will take up the story and document the restoration of the reputation of the Moravians.

Although both authors insist that their books were not necessarily planned as a two-volume set about the Moravians, Mason does begin acknowledging the earlier work of Podmore. But he has to begin his

telling of "chapter two" of the Moravians in England with the situation 1753. As he describes it, "Reckless [financial] expenditure at home [Germany] and a period of baroque religious enthusiasm, 'the time of sifting,' during the 1740s led ... to the inevitable: ... a spectacular crash in credit and reputation." (9). By the end of the century the situation was completely reversed and there emerged a completely new image for the Moravian Church, in part due to a rejection of some favorite Zinzendorffian ideas.

A number of new strategies were employed in this endeavor. The lead was often taken by the first British born Moravian leaders: James Hutton, and Benjamin La Trobe and son Christian Ignatius (a family to which Mason acknowledges a distant relationship). Efforts were made to publish English translations of books related to mission history and Moravian theology (e.g. David Cranz, *History of Greenland*). The Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel among the Heathen (founded originally by Spangenberg) was revived and used as a vehicle to attract interest in Moravian missions and financial support for them. In 1790 the Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren Established Among the Heathen was launched as an advertising piece for the good work.

Mason uses two 'case studies' to illustrate how these activities came together: the Labrador mission (1771) and the Moravian role in the 1788 Parliamentary Enquiry into the slave trade. The Labrador story finds Moravians moving into lengthy discussions with government officials and the recognition by the government that Moravian missions "complemented British policy for the coast." (29). This approach marked a drastic departure from the advice of Zinzendorf who did not favor such close church-government relations in mission activity. Mason also discusses in detail the controversial issue of the land grants obtained by the Church for the sites of the first mission stations. He provides valuable background for those in the Labrador Province who continue to struggle today with the legalities of those grants.

The Enquiry into the slave trade found Moravians in the awkward position of having their missions

among slaves in the Caribbean held up as a supporting example by those who endorsed slavery as well as those who opposed it. The work of C.I. La Trobe was crucial in steering the Church's middle course through this debate. (Some would say a typically Moravian approach!). This discussion provides useful background for understanding the origins of the contemporary Eastern West Indies Province.

In dealing with the second part of his title "...the Missionary Awakening in England ...," Mason describes the impact of all this Moravian activity upon the wider British religious scene. This discussion is a healthy reminder for contemporary Moravians that at one time, at least, Moravians did have an extensive influence far beyond their modest numbers. Thus Mason traces the Moravian influence upon William Carey, John Newton, and other evangelical leaders and the societies they formed, including the 'big three' of the Awakening: the Baptist Missionary Society, the evangelical London Missionary Society and the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society.

So it came to pass that by 1800 the Moravians had completely overcome the 'crisis of 1753.' Through many positive activities, (and by 'moving beyond' some of Zinzendorf's ideas) their good reputation had been restored in the opinion of British Protestants and the British government. The missions in Greenland, Labrador, the Danish West Indies, and the British colony of Antigua were lauded as models. Their influence upon the emerging modern British missionary movement was assured.

Mason's book (as well as Podmore's) is based upon extensive archival research utilizing Moravian material but also British government records as well as a host of other collections, public and private. His study weaves a rich contextual description of 18th century British life into which he skillfully fits the Moravian story. This approach provides a full understanding of his topic and reflects a depth of scholarship not often seen in studies of the Moravians. The book contains a full description of the sources consulted and an extensive bibliography.

The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters. By **Luke Timothy Johnson.** New York: Doubleday, 2003. 324 pages.
Reviewed by Craig Atwood

Luke Timothy Johnson is a name familiar to those who followed the controversy surrounding the Jesus Seminar in the 1990s. In *The Creed*, he continues his mission of promoting traditional Christian teaching against attacks from skeptics and over-zealous believers alike. This is one of those books that seems certain to both delight and offend almost all readers at some point, but in doing so it should provoke all readers to greater examination of their beliefs. "My aim," he writes, "is to make the creed controversial for those Christians who say it but do not understand it and therefore do not grasp what a radical and offensive act they perform when they declare these words" (p. 7). I think he succeeds admirably in this task. This is a work that Christians of all persuasions should be able to discuss, debate, and learn from.

It is odd that so many New Testament scholars are now writing about the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed since it was written over 200 years later than the New Testament. But Johnson demonstrates that there is a benefit in having a biblical scholar offer an *interpretation* of the creed and its significance. He provides a wealth of evidence to show that the creed does flow out of the doctrine of the early church presented in the canon; however, the diversity of the Christology of canonical Christianity is not adequately discussed.

Johnson argues that both skeptics and Christian reactionaries make the same mistake of basing religious truth on notions of historicity that are no longer considered valid even by historians. He embraces the awareness that humans actively construct the world in which we live by a process of interpretation. History itself is a hermeneutical process. Not all readers will accept his understanding of myth as a form of truth, but his assertion that all people must make fundamental claims about the world in order to live in the world is important. When Christians recite the creed, "they affirm that the world as imagined by Scripture and constructed by the creed is the world

in which they choose to live” (p. 61). In choosing this perspective, though, Christians also commit themselves to certain ways of being in the world.

One of the strengths in the creed frequently noted by Johnson is its brevity, especially compared to Protestant confessions of faith and the canons of the Catholic Church. By confining themselves to what was deemed most essential, the bishops at Nicea and Constantinople allowed much room for theological development and imagination. Because so many areas of the Christian life were intentionally left undefined, the creed should help divided Christians become more tolerant of other expressions of Christianity. Theoretically, that is. History has shown that the creed has been as divisive as it has proved unifying.

Johnson’s brief account of the writing and dissemination of the creed is a helpful corrective to the popular image of the creed being merely a tool of oppression by powerful bishops in league with the emperor. The real story is much more complicated; however, in defending the creed, Johnson downplays the fact that it has always been a source of controversy. It was intended to bring doctrinal order to the rapidly expanding Christian church in the early days of Constantine’s reign, but in doing so changed the nature of the church. It was the first creed to declare other beliefs as condemned. For the next century, there would be a power struggle between the Arians and the Nicenes

until the Arians were either converted or exiled. It left the church a legacy of anathema instead of affirmation. Johnson’s book is unlikely to convince those in non-creedal churches to adopt “Constantine’s Creed.”

Johnson’s book should give creedal churches much to think about and discuss. In light of the current Christological controversies in the Moravian Church, Johnson’s book would make an excellent study in congregations and among clergy. It is written for the educated lay-person rather than for theologians. For me, the strongest argument of the book is that this ancient creed, like Scripture itself, presents a strong challenge to the idolatry of the modern, consumer world.

As Johnson puts it, “It is idolatry when much of the world is constructed on the basis of economic and political systems that foster radical individualism, that make competition the supreme value in life, that reward greed, that enslave families to endless work without meaningful rest or spiritual growth, that camouflage such slavery by an endless round of entertainment diverting attention from the deadening boredom of a life dedicated exclusively to acquisition of meaningless things, and that, through its control of the media, progressively convinces all the enslaved that this pattern is ‘natural’ and ‘good’ and ‘free’” (p. 71). If the repetition and study of the Nicene Creed can help us assert freedom in the face of the totalitarianism of the marketplace, then I’m all for it.

The Comenius Forum:

A Discussion Group for Moravian Clergy

2nd Thursday of the Month – 11:00 a.m. – Beginning February 12, 2004

Home Moravian Church, CE Building, room 101

Topic: *The Creed* by Luke Timothy Johnson

Many clergy have expressed a desire to engage in theological discussion in a spirit of mutual trust that bridges the gap between conservatives, liberals, moderates, evangelicals, and just plain Moravians. You are invited to engage in lively discussion with brothers and sisters in ministry, honoring the ordination vow to study. There will be no leader, only participants gathered in the spirit of Jan Amos Comenius. We’ll start with the Nicene Creed, which touches on many of our pressing issues, using Luke Timothy Johnson’s book as a guide for conversation. Call 336-722-6171 for details.

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