

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

How to Avoid Winning the Argument and Losing Your Soul

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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 A search for truth has been replaced by a search for influence and power, with the primary goal being to “win” and silence the other side.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.