

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