

Commentary on *The Ground of the Unity*

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Editor's Note: This presentation of *The Ground of the Unity* was created to portray the faith tradition of the Moravian Church to members of Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem, Pa. as part of an educational program. It has been adapted for use in *The Hinge* in the hope that it may be helpful in the theological debates which have been occurring within the Moravian Church. Your thoughts and responses are invited. This also appeared in *ITD*.

The Ground of the Unity is a Moravian statement of faith approved at the General (Unity) Synod of 1957. While other statements of faith are often called “creeds” or “confessions,” this one is called a “ground.” Moravians also accept such ancient creeds as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, both of which appear in some of our liturgies. While some statements of faith are understood to express unchangeable and unchallengeable truths, the Moravian approach recognizes that God is central and the source of all, but creeds are secondary attempts to explain. This statement is called *The Ground* because it is a foundation for our faith and companionship with God, a source which nourishes our life. *The Ground* is not the center of our lives nor is it an explanation of everything. Only the triune God is that (#4). And the Word of the Cross, the central theme of Scripture and preaching (#4), defines the way God is: unbelievably choosing to suffer and live the struggles of our existence. The Word of the Cross challenges triumphalist understandings which claim all the answers, and we “ask our Lord for power never to stray from this” Word (#4).

Sound doctrine is the result of a constant search and interpretation of Scripture (#4). But Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system. Scripture knows and expresses the mystery of Christ, which cannot be comprehended fully by any human mind or be expressed completely in any human statement (#4). Thus Moravians at various times have adhered to creeds and confessions of the church in the country where they lived, valuing the treasure in each tradition. Though every creed and confession stands in need of constant testing (#5), in the person of the Triune God, who is the source of all, there is the consistency of grace and love and the promise to Companion us in life.

Creeds and Confessions are statements or descriptions of the faith of religious communities which come from their lived experience, their debate about truth and analysis of Scripture. Some religious communities regard their creeds to be a final and lasting description of Christian faith; others regard statements of faith as attempts to understand and state that which is ultimately beyond systematic description. The latter would see creeds as always open to exploration and restatement: part of a living and dynamic process as we seek to describe the mystery of God. The primary example of this is the 1993-5 discussion of the wording of paragraph 4 of *The Ground* on “God’s Word and Doctrine,” described in detail in *The Moravian Understanding of Scripture* (by the author). Ultimately the international Moravian

Church, the “Unity,” which has responsibility for doctrine, approved this change.

Even though most Christians confess adherence to some creeds, each individual ultimately finds him or herself engaged in a personal process of believing and understanding, and the question then may develop as to how the faith of an individual fits within the context of the tradition of the religious community. It is difficult to find the answers to religion and life without drawing on the wisdom of others who may have reflected on our questions for centuries. In fact, Christianity clearly recognizes the significant role of community and tradition in the believer’s life. And yet, if we exclude the insights of individual journey we may lose significant insights which God would bring to us. Balancing the roles of individual and community is a significant task — for which we need the help and guidance of God. But as Paul points out in I Cor. 12, “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” And the body of the church consists of many members (I Cor. 12:4-6, 14). Paul even points out the limitations of knowledge (I Cor. 13) and the value of love when one explores the claims of knowledge (I Cor. 8:1-3).

The Moravian Church encourages your personal journey and exploration in the context of its tradition and communal witness, keeping in mind that this is in responsibility to Christ our Lord and Companion in life. Know that others before you have sought the Way and Truth of the Christian faith and have explored life, faith, and your concerns. The community of the Church and its wisdom is a wonderful place where you can pursue your personal journey, supported by its love and care. It is also here that you can hear the wisdom of its heritage of life and faith and test your insights.

History of the Ground of the Unity

The Ground of the Unity is one of many Moravian expressions of faith formulated over the 550 year history of the Moravian Church, a history which precedes the Reformation of the 16th century and which extends into our day. Expressions of faith were necessary to define the church’s life and faith, to deal with historical challenges, and to deal with the opposition and questions of other churches.

The Moravian Church began simply in Northern Bohemia as a semi-monastic group which accepted Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to give expression to their faith and life. Gradually it became necessary to develop creedal statements in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts, to respond more to the world in which they lived, and to respond to the developing 16th century Reformation. Such significant statements as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession provided models. Especially important in the thinking of the Moravian Church were the categories of:

- **THE ESSENTIAL:** relationship with the Triune God responded to in Faith, Love and Hope. Sometimes the word essential is in the plural because of the triune character of God and the triune character of the human response. I prefer to use the singular because the triune character of God (Father, Son, Spirit) and the triune character of the human response (Faith, Love and Hope) are all bound up in a singular and unique God–human relationship. They are parts of a whole. During the 18th century Count Zinzendorf defined the Essential as “the heart relationship with the Savior.” By being in relationship with

the Savior one experienced all of God and the heart (not the physical heart but a spiritual inner organ of perception) was understood as our capacity for knowing, perceiving and responding to God.

- MINISTERIALS: all that serve the ESSENTIAL (church, Bible, preaching, etc.)
- INCIDENTALS: the different ways things are done

The ESSENTIAL can never be compromised. On other matters there are often many differences allowable.

This has continued to be defining throughout the history of the Moravian Church.

The Ancient Moravian Church produced several confessions, especially that of 1535 for which Luther wrote a Preface in 1538. The last work on a Moravian confession was done by Bishop Comenius in 1662 as he sought to help the Moravian Church survive into the future following the 30 Years War when the Church lost its right to exist in its homeland.

In the Renewed Moravian Church (so called from 1722 on) persons from each territory carried with them the form of faith of their territory. For Zinzendorf this was Lutheran, and the Augsburg Confession expressed the faith for much of the Moravian Church and was even used in N. America until the 1840s. Zinzendorf's efforts to create an ecumenical church in the mid 18th century in N. America were carried over into Europe, and until the 1790's the members of the Moravian Church were listed according to three "Ways," (three "Ways" of being Christian) the Lutheran, Reformed and Moravian. Because of this, the Reformed Articles of the Synod of Bern were added to the confessions used by the Moravian Church. Please note under Creeds and Confessions in #5 of *The Ground* the many creeds to which the Moravian Church has been related.

Because down through the early 20th century it was difficult for European churches to create new creeds and they had to obey the creed of the Church of their territory, Moravians came to express their faith in doctrinal sections of the minutes of their international synods (previously called "General Synods" but now called "Unity Synods"). But with changing European freedom for religious expression and the need to define faith after the tragedy of the Second World War, a process was set in motion which resulted in the creation of the first Moravian statement of faith since the 17th century.

The Ground of the Unity came into being by an interesting process which I have been able to explore with the help of friends in Europe, England, and the U.S. As expressed by Bishop Steinberg: "Among the many tasks which confronted the General Synod as it came together on August 13, 1957, one of the most important was to find a new form for the 'Principles' of our Church. The strongly-felt need to attempt to give expression to its basic convictions concerning the Unity arose in large measure from the storm, earthquake, and fire through which some of the Provinces of the Unity, particularly Germany, had passed since 1931. The 'still small voice' was speaking to those with ears to hear. Attempts were made to express in words what the Spirit was saying to the Church at the Provincial Synods of Bad Boll in 1949 and 1951. The nearer the Quincentenary and the General Synod grew and the more loudly the Unity of tomorrow knocked at our door, the more urgently we saw the necessity of preparing the ground of the future. During 1955 and 1956 a group of brethren from the Continental Province (Europe) gathered to prepare a draft of a doctrinal

statement. It seemed a hazardous enterprise to put this statement before the General Synod of 1957 and its Committee on Doctrine because the other Provinces of the Unity had not experienced the same shattering and almost overwhelming years of the past two decades in Europe and particularly in Germany. But at General Synod it seemed that a miracle happened. The word of the Spirit spread amongst the members of the Doctrine Committee and they were led to understand what the Continental Province was trying to say of its 'dark night of the soul.' And the same word spread through the General Synod with all its variety of peoples, languages and backgrounds. And so it was that a Statement was adopted which attempts to say in the terms of our own day what the Lord's will is for the Church Universal and for the Unitas Fratrum. Synod gave to this Statement the title of 'The Ground of the Unity.' This name indicates the twofold meaning of the document. First, it points to the one unchanging ground upon which, by God's grace, our Unity has been founded. Second, it points to the living ground in which our Church is rooted and springs continually into fruit. It points to the very foundation and to the fertile groundspring at one and the same time." (H.G. Steinberg, "The Ground of the Unity," *The Moravian Messenger*, Dec. 1957, 3.)

In its very last session, the General Synod resolved that this Statement or Creed should be sent to all the Congregations of the world-wide Unity, to be read and considered in all the varied languages and in one spirit of adoration, or joy and dedication.

The number of creeds to which the Moravian Church has related helps us to understand that the rewording of creeds and redefinition of their statements is a normal process as the church confronts the need for defining faith for the sake of the needs and demands of the present. In the Moravian understanding, the Father, Son, and Spirit, and relationship with them, are the consistent center of our statements of faith. Our creeds serve both the triune God and our relationship with the triune God.

The dynamic nature of creeds is clearly illustrated in the discussion of 1993-5 when the Moravian Church made significant changes in the formulation of *The Ground's* statement on Scripture ("God's Word and Doctrine"), harmonizing it with important elements of Moravian tradition. The history of this can be examined in the unpublished book *The Moravian Understanding of Scripture* by Arthur Freeman. *The Ground* was originally accepted by the Unity Synod held in Bethlehem, PA, USA, Aug. 13- Sept. 10, 1957; was revised by the Unity Synod held on Antigua, West Indies, July 3-15, 1988; and then revised in its presentation of Scripture by the Unity Synod held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Aug. 13-25, 1995.

There is another Moravian document which has some creedal implications. It originated in 1727 during the process of forming the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut as a community of people with diverse backgrounds. Count Zinzendorf gave much attention to the pastoral needs of this community, gave them the rules for living on his property in the *Manorial Injunctions and Prohibitions*, but also worked with the community to develop a *Brotherly Agreement* expressing voluntary commitment to principles for living together based on conviction and not handed down by the authority of the Count. In the 20th century this was given an inclusive name, *Moravian Covenant for Christian Living*, and doctrinal statements were included which were not part of the original *Agreement*.

THE GROUND OF THE UNITY

#1. The Lord Jesus Christ calls His Church into being so that it may serve Him on earth until He comes. The *Unitas Fratrum* is, therefore, aware of its being called in faith to serve mankind by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It recognizes this call to be the source of its being and the inspiration of its service. As is the source, so is the aim and end of its being based upon the will of its Lord.

THE BELIEF OF THE CHURCH

#2. 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 mankind by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him. We believe that He is present with us in the Word and the Sacrament; that He directs and unites us through His Spirit and thus forms us into a Church. We hear Him summoning us to follow Him, and pray Him to use us in His service. He joins us together mutually, so that knowing ourselves to be members of His body we become willing to serve each other.

In the light of divine grace, we recognize ourselves to be a Church of sinners. We require forgiveness daily, and live only through the mercy of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He redeems us from our isolation and unites us into a living Church of Jesus Christ.

PERSONAL BELIEF

#3. The belief of the Church is effected and preserved through the testimony of Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

The Lord and his calling to the Church is the source of the Church's being and its inspiration. It does not create itself.

With the whole of Christendom we share faith in the Triune God who has once and for all revealed himself and redeemed humanity in his Son. God summons us and joins us together.

As humans who make mistakes and often fail we are daily enabled to find forgiveness and live by God's grace.

A phrase that has been much debated is "there is no salvation apart from him." Zinzendorf dealt with this by seeing Christ as Creator of the world (see John 1:1-18; note also Col. 1:15-20 and Heb. 1:1-3) and therefore as being in some sense in every religion which recognized a Creator, though it was the Christian responsibility to help other religions to understand their Creator. Especially important is the understanding of God's love, sharing life with us and suffering, something foreign to most understandings of God. Our many contacts with other religions today also call upon us to better understand them and learn how Christian truth relates to their perceptions of life and God.

That each person is a sinner and needs redemption was a perspective of Judaism and has within it the truth that we are all human and imperfect. Yet we must not focus on our sinfulness, but on the grace of God who not

This testimony calls each individual personally, and leads him to the recognition of sin and to the acceptance of the redemption achieved by Christ. In fellowship with Him the love of Christ becomes more and more the power of the new life, power which penetrates and shapes the entire person. As God's Spirit so effects living belief in the hearts of individuals, He grants them the privilege to share in the fruits of Christ's salvation and membership in His Body.

GOD'S WORD AND DOCTRINE

#4. 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 Scripture 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 and the wisdom of our Moravian forebears 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 because 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

only forgives us daily but dignifies us as God's children. We must always approach life from the perspective of God's grace and love. Then we are able to deal with our problems. If we approach life with primary focus on the problems, we cannot go beyond them. This is what Zinzendorf indicated.

The belief and life of the Church is effected and preserved by what Christ calls us to and what the Spirit brings about in us of faith and life. Both Christ and the Spirit are active in our lives. Both work in us in personal ways and bring us the power of new life.

Scripture is the sole standard of our doctrine and faith, but Scripture is not an end in itself. The Triune God is the source of our life and salvation. Thus we must always be open to the God whom Scripture describes for us and brings to us.

It has always been important to Moravians to understand the significance of the Cross both because it was so central to their experience of God and because it presented the reality of God over against the presuppositions of signs (power) and wisdom characteristic of Jewish and Gentile understandings. In the theology of the cross there is no denial of other realities such as the resurrection, but there is affirmation of a new way of viewing God who participates in the sufferings of existence to suffer for us and even to die for us. The cross also represents our redemption, God's freeing us from the difficulties and problems of life and the failures of our existence. For Moravians of the 18th century

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.

CREEDS AND CONFESSIONS

#5. 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. It acknowledges as such true professions of faith the early Christian witness: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" and also especially the ancient Christian creeds and the fundamental creeds of the Reformation.*

**Note: In the various Provinces of the Renewed Unitas Fratrum the following creeds in particular gained special importance, because in them the main doctrines of the Christian faith find clear and simple expression:*

The Apostles' Creed; The Athanasian Creed

The Nicene Creed

The Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren of 1662

The Twenty-One Articles of the unaltered Augsburg Confession

The Shorter Catechism of Martin Luther

The Synod of Berne of 1532

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England

The Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934

The Heidelberg Catechism

the cross most clearly indicated a God of love and compassion who is at the heart of Scripture's message, over against the understanding that God was a remote God of power and judgment. The meaning of the message of the cross is extensively treated in I Corinthians 1-2.

Although we must always think out as much as we can understand, it is important to always remember that Jesus Christ, though very real, is a mystery which cannot completely be comprehended by the human mind. That is why it is important to live with the person of Jesus Christ, for in his person and companionship we find all we need even though we cannot understand it all. Thus even a child can have religion even though he or she cannot yet understand. Though this mystery of God and Christ is real and cannot be completely comprehended or stated, God's desire to save and help humankind is clear and openly stated in the Bible.

Creeds help us to understand. They are formulated in differing contexts, but each Christian tradition has its unique treasure. The Moravian Church has created creeds, the latest being *The Ground of the Unity*, and has used the creeds of other church traditions, such as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. Up until modern times it was required that the Moravian Church accept the creeds of the countries in which it worked. Note the list of the creeds we have used. Moravians also accept the Apostles and Nicene creeds, as do most churches. We have also recognized that we continually need to examine the adequacy of our creeds to be sure that we, while recognizing our limits, sufficiently describe the mystery of

THE UNITAS FRATRUM AS A UNITY

#6. We believe in and confess the Unity of the Church given in the one Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. He died that He might unite the scattered children of God. As the living Lord and Shepherd, He is leading His flock toward such unity.

The Unitas Fratrum espoused such unity when it took over the name of the Old Bohemian Brethren's Church, "Unitas Fratrum" (Unity of Brethren). Nor can we ever forget the powerful unifying experience granted by the crucified and risen Lord to our fathers in Herrnhut on the occasion of the Holy Communion of August 13, 1727, in Berthelsdorf.

It is the Lord's will that Christendom should give evidence of and seek unity in Him with zeal and love. In our own midst we see how such unity has been promised us and laid upon us as a charge. We recognize that through the grace of Christ the different churches have received many gifts. It is our desire that we may learn from each other and rejoice together in the riches of the love of Christ and the manifold wisdom of God.

We confess our share in the guilt which is manifest in the severed and divided state of Christendom. By means of such divisions we ourselves hinder the message and power of the Gospel. We recognize the danger of self-righteousness and judging others without love.

Since we together with all Christendom are pilgrims on the way to meet our coming Lord, we welcome every step that brings us nearer the

God. We are one and confess the unity of the Church given in Christ who died that he might unite us and who continues to lead us towards unity. In fact the ancient name of the Moravian Church was Unitas Fratrum (Unity of the Brethren) and the international Moravian Church today is called "the Unity." Moravians always remember the spiritual experience of unity in the Berthelsdorf Lutheran Church on August 13, 1727, as they struggled for unity in the midst of differences. *For Moravians the greatest heresy is to break relationship, a relationship Christ created and which we do not have the power or right to break.*

We must also recognize our relationship with other Churches. In recent years we have entered into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and are in dialogue with the Episcopal Church and the Reformed tradition. In England we have completed dialogue with the Anglican Church and have long been in relationship with other churches in Europe and in our mission fields. One of the most significant missions of the Moravian Church was the creation of "Diaspora Societies" for the encouragement of new spiritual life in many countries and in many and varied churches, a movement which encouraged people to remain within their own churches.

Jesus leads us to the unity of the church which he has promised.

Our relationship with Jesus Christ constitutes our primary identity. There can be no distinction between those who are one in Christ. We oppose discrimination. In the 18th century communities founded by

goal of unity in Him. He Himself invites us to communion in His supper. Through it He leads the Church toward that union which He has promised. By means of His presence in the Holy Communion He makes our unity in Him evident and certain even today.

THE CHURCH AS A FELLOWSHIP

#7. The Church of Jesus Christ, despite all the distinctions between male and female, Jew and non-Jew, white and colored, poor and rich, is one in its Lord. The Unitas Fratrum recognizes no distinction between those who are one in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to testify that God in Jesus Christ brings His people out of “every race, kindred and tongue” into one body, pardons sinners beneath the Cross and brings them together. We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of race or standing, and we regard it as a commandment of the Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF SERVICE

#8. Jesus Christ came not to be served but to serve. From this, His Church receives its mission and its power for its service, to which each of its members is called. We believe that the Lord has called us particularly to mission service among the peoples of the world. In this, and in all other forms of service both at home and abroad, to which the Lord commits us, He expects us to confess Him and witness to His love in unselfish service.

SERVING OUR NEIGHBOR

#9. Our Lord Jesus entered into this world's

the Moravian Church there were extensive experiments in social equality.

As Christ came to serve, we are called to engage in the service to which Christ directs us. Each of us and all of us are called to service and ministry. It is in this service that the life and service of Christ is lived out in this world. We are the vehicles of this service.

Like Jesus, we are in the world to bear the world's misery and overcome it.

To the world we need to bring the love of God and the promotion of peace. In love we commit ourselves to this fallen world while

misery to bear it and to overcome it. We seek to follow Him in serving His brethren. Like the love of Jesus, this service knows no bounds. Therefore we pray the Lord ever anew to point out to us the way to reach our neighbor, opening our heart and hand to him in his need.

SERVING THE WORLD

#10. Jesus Christ maintains in love and faithfulness His commitment to this fallen world. Therefore we must remain concerned for this world. We may not withdraw from it through indifference, pride or fear. Together with the universal Christian Church, the Unitas Fratrum challenges mankind with the message of the love of God, striving to promote the peace of the world and seeking to attain what is best for all men. For the sake of this world, the Unitas Fratrum hopes for and looks to the day when the victory of Christ will be manifest over sin and death and the new world will appear.

CONCLUSION

#11. Jesus Christ is the one Lord and Head of His body, the Church. Because of this, the Church owes no allegiance to any authority whatsoever which opposes His dominion. The Unitas Fratrum treasures in its history the vital experience of the Headship of Christ of September 16 and November 13, 1741.

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes that it is called into being and has been sustained hitherto only by the incomprehensible grace of God. Thanksgiving and praise for this grace remains the keynote of its life and ministry.

In this spirit it awaits the appearing of Jesus Christ, goes forward to meet its Lord with joy, and prays to be found ready when He comes.

we await the coming of the new world and the victory of Christ. In the present time we can be the place of God's presence, where God's kingdom may come, if we open our lives and hearts to these possibilities.

Jesus is the One to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance and we recognize his Headship over us and the Church.

We are sustained by God's grace and live in thanksgiving.

Your Personal Creed

The Moravian Church encourages your personal journey and exploration *in the context of its tradition and statements of faith and the traditions of other Christian Churches*. It asks that you respect the wisdom of the centuries embodied in its creeds, while remaining open to the leading of Christ in your personal life. It respects your insights and stories and affirms the way Christ will companion you in the discovery of what you need to know, perhaps the discovery of some things others may not need to know. God works in a personal way. Please note your thoughts about the items below.

I. God as Father and Creator: What am I discovering about God and God's relationship with the world?

II. God as Son: What does all that Jesus did mean to and for me? What is Jesus leading me to discover as my Companion in life?

III. God as Spirit and other items of Article III of the Creed. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in my life and what does it mean to me that God sends the Spirit into my life?

What does the Church mean to me? What does Scripture mean to me?

Do I have any sense of life in God's spiritual world and the world to come?

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