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What is Moravian theology? This is the question I will address in this essay. We will find that getting an answer is only possible through some significant digging. The reason for required digging? Moravian theology seemed alive and well in the Ancient Unity and the Renewed Moravian Church until 1760. That was the year Zinzendorf died. The Ancient Unity had become what Comenius called “the hidden seed.” It was from the hidden seed that the Renewed Moravian Church was born in 1727 by an act of the Holy Spirit. Following Zinzendorf’s death, elements of the church were so worn down by the struggle of convincing others that Moravians were not heretics, that they dismantled Zinzendorf’s heart theology. Moravian theology was so linked and intertwined with Zinzendorf, that his theology of the heart was replaced with more orthodox Protestant theology; Moravian theology was diluted and weakened. What now exists is a theological concoction that is not nearly as “Moravian” as it was in the 18th century. Moravian theology does in fact exist even though veiled by current tradition and practice and not distinguishable as a distinct theology.

I continue to be fascinated at the unfolding of the spiritual journey. I am thinking of my own journey; however, groups, congregations, and denominations also have distinguishable journeys. The journeys seem to always be visible from the backside, after the path has been crossed. My concern with Moravian theology is that there is no guiding light forward and the

view toward the rear has been obscured with enculturation and syncretism. Going back to my “diluted” adjective, our theology is like weak tea, why bother? It seems that many do not bother!

The reason to bother is that theology is the fiber that binds the faith life together, particularly one that exists within a faith community (as if there is another way). I never expected to become a theologian by going to seminary. Someone should have warned me. There have been all the warning signs. I seem to be most close to my Moravian Theological Seminary (MTS) theology professor. How did that happen? I knew inside of my being that taking Moravian Theology at WFU Divinity School was a must, even if I could not explain why. Even if my wife could not understand why I would take another class that I did not need (graduating with 19 extra credits). And that pained questioning look on my mother-in-law’s face when she made the statement/question: “So doing a thesis is not required for graduation!?”

My declaration is that pastors **must** reflect theologically on all aspects of their ministry and congregational life! I have become a theological reflecting machine, albeit a very inefficient and untested one, but one nevertheless. Now that I have excised my random thoughts about theology—it seems this last seminary paper was the place to do it—I will move on to a more coherent path. The main thrust of this paper will be my reflections on a golden nugget that

I came across—one that we seemed to have missed this semester. It allows me to focus and reflect on my own theological birthing, reflect on the state of Moravian theology, and to unfold my own idea for a path forward. The nugget is “Faith, Love and Hope: the Moravian Theological Heritage” presented at the 2004 Moses Lectures by Craig D. Atwood. I consider it “golden” because it is a modern theological statement—we need more scholarly research and theological statements.

My own experience, as I noted above, certainly bears out the truth “that the pastor is first a theologian, second a preacher, and third a teacher.” I have learned from my own experience that the life of a pastor is filled with things to do. There always seems to be some “urgency” vying for the minister’s attention. Might we never then get to the “important” things? There are two most important things for the pastor that often get pushed aside: theological reflection and spiritual formation. They exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other. Merriam-Webster’s second definition is the one that fits “symbiotic:” “a cooperative relationship.” I believe this connection, in regard to Moravian theology, is ignored and/or broken. Somewhere in the past the spiritual/theological connection was purposely severed.

The connection of one’s spirit and theology is an essential that I experience in Zinzendorf’s heart theology. His own spiritual awakening occurred at ten years old. This conversion experience was able to bear fruit in his relationship with the exiles who gathered in

Herrnhut. That first light he gazed upon through the woods was more than a lamp on a cabin. It was a light into his future. In his sermons, writings, hymns, and liturgies, I find a clear connection between his conversion experience and his theological reflection; he is passionate and driven. Zinzendorf’s statement, upon his reading *Ration Disciplinae*, indicates that he was a person of deep theological reflection. He was looking into the history of the *Unitas Fratrum* and making a connection with his time period. Zinzendorf’s reflection: “I will, as far as I can, help to bring about this renewal. And though I have to sacrifice my earthly possessions, my honors, and my life, as long as I live, and as far as I will be able to provide, even after my death for such a consummation, this little company of the Lords’ disciples shall be preserved in Him until He comes.’”¹ As a Moravian, I pray that Zinzendorf’s passion and theology of the heart come alive, in appropriate rituals and structures within the *Unitas Fratrum* again. In our individualistic culture we are a people far removed from the spirit of sacrifice of which he speaks.

Arthur Freeman’s comments about those things ESSENTIAL seem a good jumping off point. Freeman says that “Zinzendorf defined the Essential as ‘the heart relationship with the Savior.’”² Freeman gives a great summary of Zinzendorf: “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.”³ What an awesome and

descriptive phrase “spiritual inner organ of perception.” Thinking back over this semester, maybe the one thing that we Moravians have lost contact with is our “spiritual inner organ of perception.” I have the distinct impression that the conservative movement that followed Zinzendorf’s death effectively hid the Moravian spiritual organ. In Zinzendorf’s language, might the “spiritual inner organ” be the Christ-center within us? Because denominations consist of communities of faith, the Christ-center takes on a communal nature. When the communal nature of the Unity was removed via conversion of the communal communities to secular economies, Moravians lost what I have called the “spiritual compass.”

Instead of a Moravian spiritual compass, the Moravians intentionally took on the look and feel of any old Protestant faith. Moravians have lost their true bearing which bore much fruit in the church’s history from the 15th to 18th centuries. Atwood’s statement draws the same conclusion: “One reason we are finding it difficult to confront the challenge posed by the current cultural changes is that we do not know what our church has taught or even how Moravians have done theology.”⁴ I concur with this assessment. Instead of a Christ-centered community, the Moravians have tended toward the North American ego-centric notion of individualism. In a conversation with a Moravian pastor, he expressed remorse at how frequently members are lost during a family crisis. The faith community is obviously not the safe, compassionate, and loving sanctuary that Moravian doctrine suggests.

Atwood says that Moravians “have defined doctrine through administrative fiat rather than sustained serious engagement with both our own theological heritage and the main currents of modern theological discussion.” I discovered this to be true when I was a student at Moravian Theological Seminary. Near the end of my first semester, we Moravians were discussing how to establish a structure to open up most substantive theological dialogue. We were very close to establishing a group for passionate theological discussion (something akin to the Order to the Grain of Mustard Seed) when my main cohort left seminary after his first year. My second attempt was to re-establish the Moravian Evangelism Circle as a weekly tabletop discussion. But alas, I came back to Winston-Salem after my second year and that project was not completed. Needless to say, even in the Moravian Seminary there is a need for improved theological discussion. If it is not happening at that institution, it is difficult for me to see it happening anywhere else. Atwood concludes: “The fact that we are not engaged in open discussion is itself both a symptom and a cause of our current crisis” (2). It is time for some open discussion.

I have seen signs of a lack of unity within the Moravian Church. This takes on personal as well as corporate dimensions. Atwood’s statement is too true: “It is easy to see evil in others and ignore the evil in ourselves.” Arthur Freeman states, when discussing the centrality of Moravian fellowship and resolving differences, The Moravian Church’s “ability to work in this way [finding resolution] indicates

that there is an implicit supposition that the sustaining of relationship is a divine imperative. *The greatest heresy in the Moravian Church is to break relationship.*⁵ My own experience confirms Atwood: “It is time for us all to pull back and think about who we are and what we stand for” (3).

Theological reflection can help God reveal to us our errors in judgment and behavior. A practical example is a tendency to avoid addressing our differences directly, tending toward the “parking lot meeting” and gossip to effect change. Often we avoid speaking with “prophetic clarity,” because “there is no security when justice is denied.”⁶ Prophets are not popular. “Speaking with slander and malice against each other” seems to have become a pastime. I did some research and the Israelites consider slander a more grievous sin than murder or adultery. Gossip and other forms of malice are an easy path forward and tear apart community. We do need to get back to the Essential of Moravian faith and move into a time of renewal.

Is there a theological basis to interpret specific contemporary issues such as gossip? That is, does the Word of God offer any guidance about gossip? Yes, in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the Hebrew Bible we learn how the Jewish people regarded the power of words. In an article “Sacred Speech Sacred Communities” Margaret Wenig explains the sinful nature of gossip. For “rabbits, gossip was a serious crime: ‘One who speaks lashon hara [gossip] ... denies the fundamental

principal of the existence and authority of God’ (B.T. Arachin 1 5b). ‘God does not accept the prayers of one who speaks lashon hara’ (Zohar, M’tzora).⁷ In Judaism gossip comes in several forms. There are no fewer than 31 biblical commandments violated by gossip and slander. The rabbinical witness is ripe with exposition. “The greater the number of people who hear one’s *lashon hara*, the greater the sin. Those who habitually gossip... are guilty of a much greater sin... One who continually speaks *lashon hara* commits a greater sin than idolatry, adultery, and murder.”⁸ From these interpretations one can understand the great emphasis the Hebrew Bible places on the power of one’s words and that slander and gossip are grievous sins. The extreme level of sin associated with gossip is hard for us in the 21st century to understand: however, the Hebrew Bible is clear: gossip is sinful and dangerous.

How can we apply these teachings to our own day and time? Wayne E. Oates, in a book about the systems of our interactions with one another, tells us that if we want to overcome gossip we must move “out of a ‘blame frame’ into a shared responsibility mode... [which] distributes the burden throughout the system [the system being the established forms of communication in organizations]; [Oates says that] no one is to blame but everyone is responsible.” He goes on to say that “withheld information creates damaging secrets, whether in the family or in the church; a free flow of information is needed for healthy relationships. When information is held back from one part of the system, conflict arises and troublesome

people surface as leaders of subsystems.”⁹ Oates’s work is tailored for the business world. Are there similar applications to congregational life?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the important aspects of Christian community in his book *Life Together*.¹⁰ Bonhoeffer explains the power of the spoken word, our human tendencies toward one another and how we must act. All persons will be drawn to compare themselves to others, which is to determine how they are greater than another. From Luke 9:46 “There arose a reasoning among them. Which of them should be the greatest.” “This is enough to destroy a fellowship. Hence it is vitally necessary that every Christian community from the very outset face this dangerous enemy squarely, and eradicate it” (90). “It is the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with other, in condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging go together, as grace and serving go together” (91). “Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words” (91). “Thus it must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him... to speak about a brother covertly is of forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will; for it is precisely in the guise that the spirit of hatred among brothers always creeps in when it is seeking to create mischief” (92). “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

Another practical application of theology: As Moravians shouldn’t we more fully rediscover our ecumenical and missionary spirit? During my trip to New York City with Dr. Bailey’s Urban Ministry Class, I attended worship at Metropolitan Community Church. It meets the needs of the LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transsexual) community. I thought of this when reading “Just when it is most vital that we offer the world the good news of redemption and reconciliation, we are gnawing on old fruitless debates about salvation.”¹¹ The LGBT congregation is a community that has been oppressed and marginalized. I so desperately pray that Moravians could be an inclusive denomination. If we are unable to come to terms with our doctrine of salvation, how can we advance to the next step and include those that Jesus ministered? With all the evidence of discord, it may be awhile.

Moravians have neglected their heritage. How it must have been to know theology within life itself, to live as Atwood says: “People did not study Moravian theology because they lived it” (4). Moravian theology is taught as one-half of a two-hour course at Moravian Seminary. I conclude that not only do we not live Moravian theology; we don’t teach it to our clergy. As more and more Moravian pastors obtain their M.Div. degrees from places other than MTS this problem will compound. I have been fortunate to have four credit hours of Moravian theology. I feel as though I am only scratching the surface. I have numerous books to reread and a thesis to write. Maybe then I will be getting closer. The thesis itself

is a theological topic. Now that a thesis is not required for graduation from the MTS, the amount of scholarly work must have dropped. I do not have any firm data on this; however, just looking at the thesis shelves in Reeves Library confirms my suspicion. If our seminary students are not creating new scholarship about Moravian theology, I believe the denomination is at a severe disadvantage. This disadvantage must translate into a lower level of theological knowledge in Moravian congregations.

I have wondered this semester about where Zinzendorfan theology and liturgy can be found. There is little evidence of it where I have worshiped. This is evidence of low practical knowledge about theology, traditional Moravian liturgy and worship, and history. Biblical knowledge is nearly absent and people do not seem interested in learning. In my first student ministry, the congregation of about 80 active members did not have an Adult Sunday School Class. Without the opportunity for Christian Education, people will become more and more like their Protestant neighbors and friends. Whatever distinctive qualities Moravians have will become diluted to the point of oblivion. Based on these observations it is true that “Moravian history [and worship practices have] become a matter of ancestor worship rather than a critical and fruitful engagement with the past” (5). If we are to climb out of this hole of ignorance, our seminary needs to be the first resource.

Yes indeed, “Theology is the life of the church.” Before going to seminary I had no

idea what theology really was. Now coming out of seminary, I have found that all of life requires theological reflection. We must reflect on our most foundational documents such as *The Ground of the Unity* and the *Moravian Covenant for Christians Living* as well as other mundane topics. A case in point: golfing. Before I went to seminary I played golf most every weekend and I practiced two or three times per week. As one who is theologically reflective I now ask the following questions: Is golf a proper use of a pastor’s time? Is it too expensive? Is it a proper activity for pastor’s self-care? Should I be a volunteer during the time I golf? Is it OK to do in the morning before my office hours? It is a great benefit to theologically reflect; it is also a burden as well because it may lead to modification of current practice. I suppose it was much easier in the communal towns of 18th century Moravians when all aspects of life (religion, social, economic) were interwoven. It is much easier to look at the secular world as the standard of comparison instead of Moravian history and tradition. Ultimately, more “God-inspired and God-directed discourse” (7) will have an impact of the lives of our clergy, families, congregations, denomination, and communities around the Moravian churches.

Moravian doctrine is selectively applied. I know this from my own experience and from the stories that “make the circuit.” I agree that “a doctrinal tradition [is needed] is order to function and carry out its mission” (8). However, I observe that doctrine has taken a back seat to maintaining the institutional church. I am

a newcomer and I have little experience as a minister, but faith, love, and hope need to make a comeback. Moravian practice does not match its doctrine. The crux is that Moravians have lost Christ as the central element. A healthy dose of Zinzendorf might get renewal started. Efforts at spiritual formation must become the focus of all congregations at the congregational level, not just the purview of a few people taking *Gemeinschaft*. Moravian theology needs to be recovered for this to happen. It will be a slow and difficult challenge. With many people only willing to spend one hour out of one-hundred and sixty-eight hours available per week in church life, any request for a deeper spiritual journey might fall on many deaf ears. The history of Moravian communal life is not recoverable or even desirable. The spirit and piety of Zinzendorf might be. How might the 21st century “sifting period” look? I think that we are in the middle of one.

Enumerating the theological challenges facing the Moravian Church indicates that the passion and piety of Zinzendorf’s heart religion has been lost. However, with challenge and adversity we might expect renewal and restoration. I believe Moravians should re-establish some Pietist ideals in a new format within a community structure that provides an opportunity for worship, fellowship, spiritual formation, Christian Education, historical studies, theological reflection, service (to the faith community), and mission (primarily to the local community but also to the world). Community, appropriate to the 21st century, must be discovered, planned, and implemented.

I favor a small group model similar to the *banden*, the precursor to the choir system. All members of the congregation could be associated with a small group. Within the small groups, theological discussions could take place. The groups could be a place for specialization of worship, spiritual formation, Christian Education, service to the congregation, and mission work. Mission work should be balanced (80/20) on the local community and the world. When I read *The Moravian* there are many articles on overseas mission. These efforts seem to downplay mission in North America. Local mission could be a training field for renewing world-wide mission activity. Within the groups we could retell the history of the Ancient Unity and the early Renewed Moravian Church. Appropriate forms of theological expression from Zinzendorf’s heart religion could be taught and revisioned for the 21st century. For this plan or any other to take place, a significant time of prayer and discernment would be necessary. By reorienting toward Christ as Chief Elder, the Holy Spirit might better renew the Moravian Church. With patience, humility and devotion, the church would prepare for the Holy Spirit to work according to God’s timetable. I pray that the Moravian spiritual inner organ of perception is brought back to life by and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes

- ¹ Edmund De Schweinitz, *The History of the Church Known as the Unitas Fratrum or the Unity of the Brethren*, 2 ed. (Bethlehem, PA: The Moravian Publication Concern, 1901), 605.
- ² Arthur Freeman, ed., *Commentary on The Ground of the Unity*, vol. 12, No. 2, *The Hinge* (Moravian Theological Seminary: Summer 2005), 3.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- ⁴ Atwood, "Faith, Love, and Hope: The Moravian Theological Heritage," 1.
- ⁵ Arthur J. Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig Von Zinzendorf* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Moravian Church in America, 1998), 8.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁷ Margaret Moers Wenig, "Sacred Speech--Sacred Communities," *Reconstructionist* 67, no. 1 (2002): 43.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Wayne E. Oates, *The Care of Troublesome People* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1994), x.
- ¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, English Translation of *Gemeinsames Leben* ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 90.
- ¹¹ Atwood, "Faith, Love, and Hope: The Moravian Theological Heritage," 4.

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