

## Nola Reed Knouse

Too often I have heard members of the Moravian Church say, “The Moravians have no theology.” Too often I have heard this statement, or something very like it, spoken either with pride, as if this should be a welcoming feature of a church (“you can believe anything and be a member here”); or with shame, as if this were an indication of an endemic weakness of the Moravian Church. Whatever their intent in using this statement, however, the speakers seem certain that the Moravian Church has no theology and no doctrine.

However, I submit that any group of people professing any kind of faith in any kind of supreme being has a theology. Any individual who claims to be Moravian has a theology and a doctrine; for any one of us, there is at least one claim that is a “deal-breaker,” one statement the denial of which would make us question whether the denier was a Moravian at all. Whether or not we can clearly state our theology, our doctrine, it does exist.

Moreover, the theology of any individual and any group is discernable by others, at least in part. One’s individual life, and the life of persons in community, reveals one’s grounding principles. How one treats other people shows how one views them, and how one views another person is intrinsically related to how one views God and God’s saving work in Christ. The too-oft-repeated thesis that Moravians have “no theology” stems, not from a lack of theology, but rather from a reluctance, a shyness, to proclaim Christ with all our words and all our lives in an increasingly anti-Christian society.

This essay will briefly examine two documents which are widely accepted as of critical importance in the life of the Moravian Church in America today: the Easter Morning litany and *The Ground of the Unity*. The two statements have different purposes and roles in the life of the church; they differ significantly in structure and focus; yet they work together to help interpret, for Moravians and non-Moravians, what it is to be a Moravian Christian.

*The Ground of the Unity* is first and foremost a document of *unity*, a statement of “the unity of the Unity.” Reading *The Ground* provides a sense of where the “center” of the Moravian Church is. This document does not draw a circle which excludes those outside it; it rather defines a focus and a center seeking to draw people in. This is a specifically Moravian document intended for use within the church, as we seek to define how so many different provinces, regions, and cultures can claim to be part of one unity.

The Easter Morning litany is a very different sort of thing; it is a public confession of faith, intended for use in worship. It is written and designed to lead the believer, through an experience of corporate public worship, into a reaffirmation of the scope of Christian faith. While this litany has features that “feel Moravian,” it is broadly Christian. This document does indeed outline the faith of the church, in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in the efficacy of the sacraments; and

in the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of believers.

The two documents differ in structure as well as in purpose. *The Ground* begins and ends with Christ's call to the church. Between these two "book-end" statements are sections on belief; on unity; and on service. We read about the purpose of creeds and confessions. Reading between the lines, it becomes clear that doctrine is a tool, not a goal; it is a means to be used towards "ever clearer proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Written as it was following the devastating conflict of World War II, the document focuses on various "levels" of unity: unity among members and provinces of the worldwide *Unitas Fratrum*; the unity of the larger Christian church; unity of Christians as experienced in Holy Communion; and unity in outspoken opposition to any form of discrimination against persons. Moreover, *The Ground* makes clear that this unity is not for our own benefit. This unity is for service and mission, in following the example of Christ.

The Easter Morning litany, as an order of worship, falls into two sections. The first, to be used at the church, contains clear statements of the belief of the church and the life of the Church Militant. Following the greeting ("The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!") and opening hymn, there are sections proclaiming faith in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each concludes with a prayer. Statements of the significance of baptism and Holy Communion follow, and the entire first section concludes with a hymn. The second section, which may

be used on a graveyard, focuses on the Church Triumphant, on the resurrection from the dead: on the appropriation of the benefits of faith. This section of the litany is joyous, exultant, filled with praise for the risen Christ and the assurance of resurrection.

These two documents do, in fact, outline a powerful and effective theology. While the more "radical" elements of Zinzendorffian piety are not present here, there is nothing in either document that contradicts Zinzendorff's focus on the wounds of Christ, on the mystical marriage of Christ and the soul, on the example of Christ's life as an effective guide for day-to-day living. Christ is truly central in both documents; while both proclaim God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, both begin and end with Christ, and in every section of each document, Jesus Christ is proclaimed. It is through Jesus that God is revealed.

Both of these documents offer gifts to the Moravian Church today. *The Ground* offers an understanding of unity within the Body of Christ which is forgiving, loving, faithful, strong, yet humble enough to know that any part of the Body of Christ does not have the whole truth. The Easter Morning litany offers a clear exposition of the church's faith, expressed in worship which strengthens the individual believer and the entire worshiping congregation.

Neither statement of faith gives the individual believer a yardstick with which to measure the faith or orthodoxy of another. Neither allows us to determine who is the

“wheat” and who is the “weeds” (Matthew 13:24-30). This is one of the great strengths of the two documents: they leave the sorting and judging to Him who alone is worthy to do so. However, this very strength may be one of the reasons for many Moravians thinking that “we have no theology.” Our very humility and reluctance to judge, our “unobtrusiveness,” leads us to be too shy to proclaim what we do know.

Our contemporary society would have us commit ourselves beyond what we can rightly do. For instance, let us consider a possible interpretation of this statement from *The Ground*: “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 resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from him.”

Many would interpret this as meaning that all who do not confess Christ publicly during their earthly life are destined for eternal damnation; that has made too many Moravians reluctant to affirm that statement of faith, as they really do not want to believe that all the Jewish babies burned in the Holocaust could never be saved. Other Moravians, however, assert that this is exactly what that statement must mean. The statement itself, however, does not say this at all; it simply says, in the words of Rick Sides (personal conversation), “Where there is salvation, there is Christ.” Specifically how that salvation is effected is not our business; it’s God’s decision, and we need only trust him.

This is counter-cultural thinking indeed. Yet this is a peculiar gift of the Moravian Church, and one which I believe to be of inestimable value. There is a refreshing peace in knowing that we do not have to know “who’s in and who’s out.” I submit that the Moravian Church, because of this gift, is particularly well-equipped to face post-modern society’s search for meaning. We have a theology indeed, one which is based upon mission and service in the name of our crucified and risen Lord. We have acknowledged, in *The Ground of the Unity* and in the Easter Morning litany, that our Lord loves us and calls us together into a church to serve him, and that the determination of who is “saved” and who is not is His business. Today’s seekers after meaning, relevance, and authenticity should find these tenets refreshingly honest and appealing. It is time for the Moravian Church to stop disclaiming its own theology and to begin living it more boldly, proclaiming it more widely, and going forth in passionate service to the Christ proclaimed in both *The Ground of the Unity* and the Easter Morning litany.

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