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In the present context, the Moravian Church is not unlike other Christian denominations. The Church itself is imperfect, largely divorced from its rich historical roots, and struggling to interpret its place in an ever-evolving postmodern world. While the latter characteristics began to emerge within their communities and congregations long before the turn of the 21st century, Moravians have gradually become estranged from the more “radical” theological views of their past. This assertion is evidenced by the fact that, among other things, Moravian theology is no longer dictated by the type of unwavering commitment to pacifism of the Old Brethren, the intensely intimate and almost tangible relationship with Christ that Zinzendorf advanced, and the *Brüdergemeine*’s deeply ingrained appreciation for broad ecumenism.

Although one could argue that the group’s movement away from their more controversial and atypical views is attributable to general societal adjustments and the natural evolution that occurs in the theology of churches over time, it is undeniable that the Moravian Church now subscribes to a brand of Christianity that is broadly mainstream and uncontroversial. Despite the fact that there are certainly exceptions to the latter characterizations in the various Moravian congregations, it is clear from *The Ground of the Unity* that the Church has both consciously and unconsciously abandoned many facets of their powerful theological foundations for the sake of a

more normative and socially acceptable belief system. As a result, Moravians have failed to claim the inherent richness and uniqueness of their theological history and, therefore, have let their shame (or ignorance) of their group’s past beliefs inhibit them from expanding their religious perspectives. Thus, if the Moravian Church were to reclaim their past beliefs and faithfully meld them with their present views, the significance of their theology would readily rest in its potential to allow the group to represent a wholly radical and transformative witness in the world.

Given the aforementioned assertions, it is odd that the Moravian Church continuously refers to itself as the *Unitas Fratrum* in *The Ground of the Unity* since the document itself fails to advance any of the radical theological beliefs of the ancient Unity that would suggest any immediate ties between the Old Brethren and the present Moravian Church. Specifically, there are no overt references to Christ’s “Sermon on the Mount” as being central in the lives of all present-day Moravians. Due to the centrality of the “Law of Christ” among the original Unity, one would naturally expect a group bearing the Brethren’s name to fully claim this biblical passage in their theological approach to the world.

Additionally, though the document does state that the Moravian Church “recognizes the Word of the Cross as the center of Holy Scripture,” it does not firmly or clearly assert support for the beatitudes or Christ’s prohibitions against “non-violence and

non-participation in the structures of oppression and abuse.”¹ While there could be several factors contributing to these particular omissions, I think that it speaks to the fact that the intense commitment the original Unity had for following Christ’s commands in the “Sermon on the Mount” has been overlooked and lost in the Moravian Church of today. Hence, while Christ’s commandments throughout the gospels certainly remain powerful guiding forces for individual Moravians, it could be contended that, to genuinely claim the *Unitas Fratrum* in name, the Church should fully embrace the group’s core beliefs.

In considering the above points, it is intriguing to note that *The Ground of the Unity* does briefly allude to desires for peace in the world. It states: “The *Unitas Fratrum* challenges humanity 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.” This reference to peace in the document is significant when one considers that the ancient Unity literally interpreted Christ’s statement, “blessed are the peacemakers.”

As a result, the Old Brethren sought to live in a manner that embodied absolute pacifism, so that their lives could be testimonies to their love for the divine and all of humanity. Due to the fact that this theological basis for peacefulness was not widely accepted in 15th century Europe, the Unity was frequently persecuted for their refusals to bear arms and have any involvement in military affairs. With these acknowledgements, it is interesting that

the Moravian Church only devotes one line in *The Ground of the Unity* to discussing peace and the faith community.

It is also telling theologically that the latter part of the document does not assume any overt position on promoting peace in the world beyond general feelings of hope for its attainment. Even then, this desire is rather diluted given the fact that it is coupled with the statement that the Church wishes to seek “to attain what is best for the world.” This position appears to leave open the possibility that Moravians could theologically support war and various other forms of force if they were deemed as globally necessary. Thus, it is evident that the Moravian Church has generally abandoned the Brethren’s conceptions of unwavering peace for an image of peacefulness that is more conducive to and readily acceptable in an often difficult and hostile world.

The previous observation also underscores the fact that *The Ground of the Unity* fails to acknowledge that the original Brethren was a group that intentionally set itself apart from the societal and religious norms prevalent in their specific context. Their unique approaches to living out Christ’s commands in the “Sermon on the Mount,” including the pursuit of complete peacefulness, often resulted in them being branded as “heretics” by the Catholic Church and a range of Protestant groups. This particular label frequently exposed the group to the threat of intense hostilities and even execution. Hence, another odd addition to *The Ground of the Unity* is the suggestion

that the creeds and confessions of the Church assist in “marking the boundary of heresies” in Christianity.

The idea that the Moravian Church even acknowledges the existence of heresies in the faith today highlights the level of discontinuity between present Moravian theological positions and those of the Old Brethren. This assertion is rooted in the fact that, if Moravians were conscious of the many charges of heresy that the ancient Unity continuously faced and suffered under, the group would not likely use or recognize “heresy” as an official or legitimate term. Thus, it is quite telling, both theologically and historically, that the Moravian Church has used the term “heresy” in a discussion of the value inherent in creeds and confessions.

Despite these positions, it must be stated that *The Ground of the Unity* is not completely devoid of any vestiges of the Brethren’s theology. Throughout the document, the Moravian Church asserts its commitment to recognizing and overcoming the divisions amongst Christians in the world; a point that is powerful yet convoluted considering the group’s acknowledgement of heresy. The Church states, “We confess our share in the guilt which is manifest in the severed and divided state of Christendom... We recognize the danger of self-righteousness and judging others without love.” Theologically, this position is one that speaks to the seriousness that Moravians hold for humbly striving to love their brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of denominational and congregational disparities.

This pursuit is similar to the goals held by the members of the Old Brethren, who each sought to emphasize that the journey of faith is meant to be one that is grounded in mutuality and collegiality amongst those in the service of the Savior. In addition to this parallel, *The Ground of the Unity* also contends, “We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of ethnic origin, sex, or social standing.” Specifically, this statement indicates that the Moravian Church has retained, at least in print, the spirit behind the Brethren’s devotion to treating all citizens of the larger world as equal gifts from God to be unequivocally valued.

It is worth noting, however, that the Church’s position opposing acts of discrimination directed towards individuals based on ethnicity, sex, and social standing, though significant, is inherently limited. While the latter categories in which inequality and maltreatment are to be opposed are broad, the document does not clearly include one’s economic status or sexual orientation as aspects worth acknowledging or defending. Although one could posit that “social standing” covers both of these areas, it is difficult not to consider those terms as incredibly vague and noncommittal.

Hence, despite the fact that the Old Brethren would not have gone so far as to defend homosexuality in the late 1400s, I think it is theologically significant that the current Moravian Church feels that it must generalize some of the things that it supports and opposes. This tendency, likely based on a desire to not alienate the various beliefs of all Moravian

congregations, appears to readily exemplify the Church's loss of its radical roots. If Moravians claim the title of the *Unitas Fratrum*, is it not imperative that the Church clearly and radically oppose oppression and discrimination in all areas of existence? While I believe that the answer to this question is "yes," I think current Moravians must examine why they have lost many facets of their theological past that are inextricably tied to inclusion. Concurrently, the Church must consider if their radical witness in the world has diminished as a result of their overall desire in previous and present generations to be more fully acculturated in and accepted by secular and religious society.

In addition to some of the clear differences between the theology of the ancient Unity and the Moravian Church, *The Ground of the Unity* consists of several aspects that represent obvious shifts away from the theology of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf. In particular, Zinzendorf's theological views, upon which the Moravian Church was originally founded, were steeped in his perspective that Christians should seek to establish a deeper connection with Christ through the wounds he suffered during his crucifixion. This relatively unique theology maintained that, because Christ's wounds grant him a sense of vulnerability and humanness, the faithful can connect to him through those injuries in a manner that creates a profound sense of transcendence and a great degree of intimacy.

Hence, by consistently maintaining the latter beliefs in hymns, litanies, and general

teachings, Zinzendorf provided 18th century Moravians with a way of interweaving their daily lives with the life of Christ in an almost tangible and relevant manner. In examining *The Ground of the Unity*, however, there are little traces of the Count's "wounds theology." The document states that the Lord "joins us together mutually, so that knowing ourselves to be members of His body we become willing to serve each other." Although this position does center on a connection to Christ, the union it portrays is far less intimate and visual than the images of Christ as one's constant companion, friend, and bridegroom that Zinzendorf continuously advanced.

I think the aforementioned movement away from emphasizing living in and with Christ occurred in the Moravian Church largely because the group began to become more acculturated and influenced by less radical social conceptions of the Savior. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, for instance, Moravians started to more fully realize that many of Zinzendorf's perspectives of Christ and the rest of the Trinity were controversial and considered as "extreme" by other Christian groups. As a result, the Church distanced itself from the Count's views of the Holy Spirit as Mother, Christ as the Creator, and God as the Father. They also began to readily absorb more "normative" understandings of the Trinity as isolated Moravian communities disbanded and the members of the *Brüdergemeine* became more active citizens of the world. This assertion is furthered highlighted by the fact that the present version of *The Ground of the Unity*

only briefly mentions the Holy Spirit in a few places and focuses primarily on the embedded and more traditional patriarchal images of the divine, which have typically dominated understandings of the Trinity in Christianity.

In addition, there is even part of *The Ground of the Unity* that appears to subtly apologize for Zinzendorf's more controversial views of the nature of Christ and the other essential components of the Trinity. It maintains that the Unitas Fratrum "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." While one could claim that this position applies to all of the faithful and speaks against unnecessary theological arguments regarding the Trinity, I would not be surprised if it also acts as an implied admission of and justification for the Moravians' past connections to Zinzendorf's theology. Concurrently, regardless of whether or not the latter was intended, the fact still remains that the Moravian Church lost a valuable part of its theology when it opted to abandon Zinzendorf's relational views of the Trinity. This assertion is based on the idea that present constructs and conceptions of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit have been far too intellectualized and virtually all of them are inaccessible to the faithful. Hence, Zinzendorf's specific approach to the Trinity, though controversial, acted as an effective source of mediation and reconciliation between humanity and a distanced concept. Due to their movement away from this and other more radical theologically-based

ideas, however, the Moravian Church seems wholly disconnected from its significant and nonconformist Christian concepts.

Coupled with these positions, it is necessary to realize that *The Ground of the Unity* not only fails to openly claim Zinzendorf and his views, it also omits any references to Joseph Spangenberg and some of the other early leaders of the group. While one must acknowledge that the document is meant to primarily emphasize the Church's theology rather than its history, it still remains curious that the Church elected to mention the Old Brethren and not the beliefs of the more directly connected Moravian forbearers. The only allusion in the document to the latter group of individuals states, "Nor can we ever forget the powerful and unifying experience granted by the crucified and risen Lord to our forbearers in Herrnhut on the occasion of the Holy Communion of August 13, 1727, in Berthelsdorf."

This rather cursory and indirect mention of the main figures in the early Moravian Church underlines, again, the distance existent between *The Ground of the Unity* and the theological tenets on which the group was originally founded. Thus, I cannot help but feel that this failure of the document in faithfully bridging the divide between Moravian history and theology inhibits Moravians from reclaiming the significant aspects of their past beliefs that are so needed in our present context.

The aforementioned claim is particularly powerful given the fact that we live in a largely intolerant world, which is often defined by

judgmental attitudes/actions and general hostility in the religious realm. There is a sense of heightened suspicion between faiths, and conservative Christians, unfortunately, often have a tendency of trying to establish a monopoly on God's truth. It is because of these feelings that I believe that *The Ground of the Unity* is also limited because it fails to rightly claim Joseph Spangenberg's position in the *Idea Fidea Fratrum* that there is truth to be found in all denominations and that Christians have a responsibility to demonstrate a level of collegiality with other faith traditions. Though it must be acknowledged that he had obvious issues and frustrations with Judaism, the Moravian Church of today should consider Spangenberg's overall theological ideas of acceptance and tolerance as extremely relevant and valuable.

Hence, it is crucial to realize that *The Ground of the Unity* only focuses on the connections that are discernable between groups within the Christian faith. The document maintains, "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." While this is a significant statement of commonality within the faith, it can be seen as exclusive because it does not embody the type of love for all of one's neighbors that the Old Brethren, Zinzendorf, and Spangenberg all supported as dictated by Christ. Thus, it is not unfounded to claim that, by openly prompting an uncompromising love for

members of all faiths, the Moravian Church could simultaneously reconnect with one of the best aspects of their past theology and more effectively serve as witnesses for Christ in the world.

Though this paper has focused primarily on the theological beliefs that the Moravian Church no longer holds, it is important to realize that such an examination is meant to point out what the group is, at its core, and can more completely become in the future. Hence, it is important to underscore the fact that *The Ground of the Unity* is not wholly divorced from some of theological perspectives that characterized the Moravian Church in the past. The document clearly highlights the fact that Moravians continue to recognize themselves as imperfect believers who, through their deep love of the Christ, are committed to striving to continuously connect with the theological truths revealed by God over time. Additionally, the Church has retained a strong commitment to world missions and sees the pursuit as being grounded in the theological imperative of "confessing witness to God and His love in unselfish service."

Moravians also have remained relatively dedicated to fostering a type of ecumenical spirit in their relationships with other Christians, and have never wavered from asserting that Christ is the central mediator of humanity. Thus, these theological positions, and others, represent vestiges of the Moravian Church's past that should be maintained, enhanced, expanded, and celebrated. With this assertion, however,

Moravians must consider reclaiming some of their lost theologies as an appropriate and necessary way of deepening their understanding of their history. Similarly, the Church must find, absorb, and reapply the latter theological premises in a manner that would more faithfully meet the world's desperate needs and reflect the group's genuine identity.

On a personal note, I must state that I have tremendous respect for the Moravian Church. Hence, perhaps my criticism in this paper of the Church's theological shifts reflects the fact that, as a non-Moravian, I have a degree of perspective in this analysis. Although my particular viewpoint is by no means advanced or impervious to inherent imperfections, I think that it has allowed me to plainly see that the Moravian Church could be even more influential in religious life if it would remain true to its core theological beliefs and own its roots. I have been inspired by the theological basis for peace that defined the Old Brethren, the sense of intimacy that Zinzendorf sought to more fully unveil between Christ and the believer, and the Moravian Church's past recognition of the truth and goodness in other denominations and religions. As a result of the transformative power that could emerge if these theological views were openly advanced by Moravians, I desperately want every Christian to become aware of these perspectives and connect with them at some level.

While it is true that the Moravian Church's past is largely steeped in a type of radical theology that many present Christians are not used to, I

think we would all do well to remember that we serve a radical Christ whose claims and actions cannot be conformed, tempered, or silenced. Thus, if they could reconnect with the theologies of their forbearers, I think that Moravians could help infuse Christianity with the progressive and holistically loving spirit that we all are divinely charged to bear in this world.

Endnotes

¹ Craig Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (Penn State Press, 2009), 156 in manuscript.

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