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*In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty;
in all things, love.*

The Moravian Church in America champions this brief statement as a motto of sorts (the website for the Southern Province displays it proudly on its homepage). The statement has been used and abused in countless Christian denominations and groups by persons seeking resolution of disputes, a smoothing over of hurt feelings, a false middle ground from which to attack, or just a cool slogan to put on a T-shirt. Despite its potential for misuse, I do believe that Moravians believe it wholeheartedly when they affirm this simple statement.

While it is a beautiful statement to make about the universal Church as a whole, I wonder how well this motto works as a credo for Moravians. Can the Moravian Church achieve such unity while retaining its uniqueness? What distinctiveness does it have to give up? Zinzendorf's theology was radical and bloody; this theology did not live for long after his death. Does this mean that Moravian theology has been lost—that it is no longer relevant in our day?

On the contrary, Moravian theology remains relevant today precisely because of the Zinzendorffian theology that remains a part of Moravian confessional life. In *The Ground of the Unity*, the current Moravian confession of faith, we can see evidence of doctrines that have been tamed since Zinzendorf (such as Zinzendorf's wounds theology) and doctrines

that have been retained (like the emphasis on community). Side by side, these unchanged doctrines and revamped doctrines reveal the real strength of the Moravian Church: rooted in history, yet contemporary; cutting-edge, yet traditional; unifying, yet distinctive.

Few church doctrines do last for 250 years without some sort of modification. This is especially true for controversial doctrines and teachings, such as Zinzendorf's blood mysticism and wounds theology. *The Ground of the Unity* makes no mention of the side wound of Jesus, the "narrow door, the portal to paradise, the means of entry into the body of Christ"¹ and the focal point of much devotion during Zinzendorf's day. Nor does the blood of Christ—the source of life and the means by which the Spirit is poured out on all creation²—appear in this document. Such a focus on the blood and wounds of Christ was deemed too controversial, too shockingly literal, by many other Protestant groups in the eighteenth century. Thus, references to the blood and wounds were removed from hymns and litanies; the *Litany of the Wounds*, beloved in Zinzendorf's day, fell out of use as well.

However, the cross image remains in *The Ground of the Unity*: "We are called to testify that God in Jesus Christ...pardons sinners beneath the Cross and brings them together." The cross—a more sanitized offense—is an acceptable focus where the wounds are not. The literal gory wounds of Christ become a more metaphorical image of suffering on the

cross, an image that is more appropriately scandalous. The intended emphasis remains in part: Christ the Savior's death has saving power. Yet the wounded Savior of Zinzendorf stirs the emotions more than an image of the cross. The blood and wounds of the Savior are grotesque, to be sure. In changing the focal point from that of blood and wounds to that of a cross, though, the Moravians lost rich imagery and vitality. For the sake of unity in the Church universal, this doctrine shifted from controversial to more traditional. The blood and wounds are not a unifying doctrine; the cross is.

Several doctrines have remained more or less the same from Zinzendorf to the present day. Of these, I will discuss two: the place of Scripture and their focus on unity. Zinzendorf placed great value on Scripture, as does *The Ground of the Unity*, which states that "Scripture is the sole standard of the doctrine and faith of the Unitas Fratrum and therefore shapes our life." And, like Zinzendorf, *The Ground of the Unity* affirms the "continual search for sound doctrine." The Gospel is mysterious—Jesus is mysterious—and cannot be narrowed down to one simple declaration. The Moravian Church, then, is open to a fuller understanding of doctrines which they have held for ages.

The dynamic nature of proclamation and understanding of the text remains grounded in experience and ongoing revelation, for the Moravian Church now as it was during the ministry of Zinzendorf. Given the rise of fundamentalism in Christianity, especially in

America, it is noteworthy that *The Ground of the Unity* includes no statement about the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture in its section on "God's Word and Doctrine." Zinzendorf admits and accepts errors in the Bible, finding in them "unassailable proof for [the Bible's] divinity."³ While the writers of *The Ground of the Unity* did not necessarily make this last leap with Zinzendorf, they also left the interpretation question open.

Their statement on Scripture affirms the Bible as authoritative without making any claims regarding infallibility or inerrancy. In doing so (or not doing so), the Moravians again extend the bounds of unity to a wide range of persons and groups within the church.

The Moravian Church would not be a Unity without its unending concern for community and unity within the Church. Throughout *The Ground of the Unity*, a pervasive theme is unity—unity with Christ, unity among Christians, and unity as a Christian community, the Church. In fact, Jesus' death was to bring about unity: "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."

"[We] welcome every step that brings us nearer the goal of unity in Him." Everything the Moravian Church does, then, is done toward this goal, including the ecumenical efforts of Moravians. Earlier in this confession of faith are listed ten different creeds from various

Christian traditions, all of which have been used by Moravians at different times and in different locations around the globe. This serves as a further example of the diversity of people brought together—people who all consider themselves to be Moravians. Clearly, the aim of the Moravian Church, as stated in *The Ground of the Unity*, is to bring together the Church, unified under its head, Christ. Unity is so ingrained in who they are that the term appears everywhere—in their alternate name (Unitas Fratrum, or “Unity of the Brethren”), in their confession of faith (*The Ground of the Unity*), and in their motto (“In essentials, unity...”), just to name a few uses.

In their unquenchable desire for unity, the Moravians who wrote *The Ground of the Unity* have simply taken up Zinzendorf’s mantle. Zinzendorf’s original vision was to create the *Brüdergemeine*, or “Community of the Brethren,” which would be an “international, interdenominational religious fellowship”⁴ of Christians. Indeed, it was. In the eighteenth century, the *Brüdergemeine* was a diverse community, consisting of Lutherans, Reformed, and Moravians. Ethnically speaking, most were from Germany, but a sizable number were Czech, Bohemian, and Moravian. Today, the Moravian Church (as the *Brüdergemeine* is now known), remains diverse but united, thanks to the mission efforts initiated by Zinzendorf.⁵ Through evangelism and partnership with other Christian denominations, the Moravian Church is making Zinzendorf’s vision of unity a reality. To this end, they have altered very little of Zinzendorf doctrine on the matter.

It is easy to critique the Moravian Church’s changes of doctrine over time when one has the benefit of hindsight. However, time has shown these changes to be based in a desire to build up a unified universal church. Such a church will certainly not lack in diversity, ideally; instead, it will welcome all who claim Christ as Savior and Redeemer of this broken world. The vision is a powerful one, and one that demands that the Moravian Church live out its motto: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” May the Church universal learn from their example and live this motto as well, thereby bringing about the very unity for which Zinzendorf wished and labored.

Endnotes

¹ Craig D. Atwood, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 107.

² Ibid, 101.

³ Zinzendorf, quoted in Atwood, 72.

⁴ Atwood, 3.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

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