

## Ginny Tobiassen

Picture this, Moravians of long standing: You are a teenager again, and it is a summer day, the last day of a week at Laurel Ridge. You and your friends are coming down the mountain, arms around each other's waists, laughing and crying and talking about the great week you've had. And one question comes up over and over: *Why can't church be more like camp?*

As I have reflected these last few days on the Moravian experience—life, *The Ground of the Unity*, and everything—I have concluded that a really good week at Laurel Ridge recaptures something of the experience of the Bethlehem community; and that the trip down the mountain to our home congregations recaptures the Moravians' gradual evolution from experiential and experimental community to mainstream Protestant church.

Naturally, compared to the ecstatic mountaintop community, the staid building in the Piedmont leaves much to be desired. For the space of a week, the campers have discovered how it feels to have a *lived theology*. What they fail to realize—because it has not been made obvious to them—is that somewhere under all the layers of organization, tradition, and social propriety, their home congregation was built on a foundation of that same lived theology. The Moravian Church in America can retain that foundation as long as it retains a commitment to its heritage of theological simplicity and “heart religion.” In the present era, some are calling for sharper theological lines; so far, the Moravian Church has resisted the temptation to draw them.

Every church with a Pietist heritage—which is at least to say, nearly every Protestant church in America—experiences some degree of struggle with similar issues. It is difficult to reconcile the Pietist insistence on individualistic, experiential religion with the organizational needs of a church. During the Reformation, when church still relied on the support of state, this reconciliation was effected by confessions of faith (the first being the Augsburg Confession) intended to demonstrate a church's legitimacy, setting uniform boundaries for belief. These confessions soon proved useful for church discipline as well, providing a sort of contract language that could be cited as grounds for ejection if a church member transgressed the boundaries of belief. Like all contract language, the confessions tended to become more complex over time.

Standing against this trend was the Ancient Unity of the Brethren, who felt that confessions should allow for change in the presence of new revelation. As long as today's Moravian Church claims an inheritance from the Unity, they must acknowledge, and honor, their ancestors' reluctance to bolt the theological shutters against the winds of change. This heritage is reflected in *The Ground of the Unity's* approach to creeds and confessions. Although a reference to creeds' “marking the boundaries of heresies” might well have disappointed the Ancient Unity (given that they suffered persecution as “heretics” themselves), the document at least acknowledges the Unity's stance with the assertion that “all creeds

formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of the Holy Scriptures.” Furthermore, *The Ground* refuses to specify one creed or confession for the Moravian Church and instead simply lists ten creeds that have “gained special importance” for the Moravians through their simplicity and clarity of expression. These creeds are not even *recommended* except by implication; they are simply offered in a list for the reader to consider or, presumably, ignore.

The Moravians’ other theological inheritance is the legacy of Zinzendorf, who argued for “Heart Religion,” an intuitive experience that did not lend itself to—in fact, would be enervated and destroyed by—detailed systematic theology. While he believed in the importance and authority of Scripture, he was not disposed to argue its finer points, believing that its *essential* truths—the knowledge required for salvation—were clear. He acknowledged that Scripture also contained “dark places” whose meaning was less clear; these might be the result of a particular author’s limited understanding—for God “let the authors speak according to their abilities and understanding” (Freeman, 129)—or they might be mysteries to which not all readers of Scripture have access. Regarding these mysteries, Zinzendorf felt it was not only unprofitable but dangerous to speculate, since one might draw the wrong conclusions and lead others astray.

In today’s Moravian Church in America, Zinzendorf’s feelings about theology and Scripture are most obviously reflected in *The Ground of the Unity’s* assertion that “just as the Holy Scripture does not contain any

doctrinal system, so the *Unitas Fratrum* 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 completely in any human statement.” Similarly, the *Moravian Covenant for Christian Living* states, “We decline to determine as binding what the Scriptures have left undetermined, or to argue about mysteries impenetrable to human reason.” These are remarkable assertions for church documents; after all, the very purpose of describing a church in writing is usually to draw boundaries around a church’s beliefs. This is the very thing the Moravians here refuse to do.

Nevertheless, *The Ground of the Unity* and the *Brotherly Agreement* are not without specific theological wording. Among the matters specified are faith in the Trinity, in the resurrection and in our redemption through Christ; belief in Christ’s presence in Word and Sacrament (though, characteristically, the specific nature of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament of Communion is not defined); and belief that through baptism we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. In these matters the Moravians are entirely in line with mainstream Protestantism. What is unique about the faith as described in these documents is the almost overwhelming emphasis on *community*.

Here, too, the Moravians draw on their heritage, which emphasizes Christianity as a *relational* faith. The Ancient Unity revered the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, which could hardly be lived in isolation (“Blessed are

the merciful” doesn’t mean much if there is no one around to whom one can show mercy); ethical treatment of one’s fellow humans was crucial. This ties in with the Unity’s insistence on openness to change, which left room for peaceful resolution of conflict within its membership. Preserving the Unity was more important than arguing fine points of doctrine, which they labeled “inessentials.”

As for Zinzendorf, he believed that community was itself the developing ground for theology. He wrote about “the miracle of community theology [*Gemeintheologie*]... a countless number of opinions can be under one hat and be brought into a system and still people, who have their origin in a particular understanding, do not therefore need to change all their opinions and styles of speaking.... We know from experience that all people whose ideas are gathered in their heart, think out of one principle and speak from one mouth” (quoted in Freeman, 96). For Zinzendorf, diversity contributed to a richer theology, so long as the diverse opinions were the speech of the heart. His concept of community voices blended into one is most fully realized in the Moravian liturgical tradition, which brings worshippers together in speech and song.

That these elements of the Ancient Church and Zinzendorf remain in the Moravian Church today is somewhat remarkable, considering the church’s history from the death of Zinzendorf till today. A series of synods after Zinzendorf’s death made a determined effort to codify church doctrine; one of the four cardinal doctrines introduced was the concept of universal depravity, very much a change from

Zinzendorf’s basically positive view of humanity. In fact, another cardinal doctrine emphasized Jesus’ divinity to the virtual exclusion of his humanity, whereas Zinzendorf had emphasized Jesus’ humanity as the source of our salvation. Meanwhile, Zinzendorf’s wariness of systematic theology was mistranslated into a growing anti-intellectualism that discouraged openness to scientific discovery.

In the nineteenth century, the American Moravians tried to shore up their crumbling community life by laying down tighter rules of discipline and clearly spelling out doctrine emphasizing duty, authority, and the wages of sin. The more they sought to codify doctrine and community life, the faster the community dissolved as rebellious young people took flight. The Moravian community life had been the Moravian theology. Now the generations to come would grapple with the problem of what happens to a lived theology when the life that created it is gone.

Hence it was in the nineteenth century that the Moravians seized on their historical roots as a means of establishing a new identity. Claiming Jan Hus and John Amos Comenius as their ancestors in faith gave Moravians historical grounding without resurrecting the theology of Zinzendorf, which at this point made Moravians nervous with what they perceived as excesses of emotionalism. Proclaiming 1457 as the founding date of the Ancient Unity, the Moravians celebrated their 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1957 by publishing *The Ground of the Unity*. The *Brotherly Agreement* of 1727 was revised and republished in 1966; this is the basis for today’s *Moravian Covenant for Christian*

*Living*. These two documents, then, are part of the church's effort to link its current theology with its proclaimed heritage.

What is remarkable about these published statements on Moravian doctrine is that despite their broad wording and their somewhat tenuous historical connections, they do appear to successfully shape a Moravian theological identity, one that is strong enough to withstand a recent onslaught of criticism from within the church. Specifically at issue was a controversy that erupted when one Moravian minister expressed doubt about whether "there is no salvation apart from [Christ]"—one of the few very specific theological statements that appears in *The Ground of the Unity*.

Through this apparent fissure in the faith burst the voices of numerous disaffected Moravians arguing that the church was no longer standing firm on essentials—especially when, after a year of discussion, the Provincial Elders' Conference overturned their original decision to remove the minister from his pastorate. At the 2002 Synod of the Southern Province, an attempt to pass a "resolution affirming salvation through Christ alone" was defeated, leading to remarks that "Jesus Christ is on trial again," this time at the hands of Moravian leadership. A website, *Moravians.org*, was launched as a forum for debate on the direction of Moravian theology and doctrine in the new century.

The emotional tone of the postings on that site shows that Moravian theology is not just an academic issue. Rumors of the death of the Moravian Church have, it appears, been

greatly exaggerated, judging by the passion that these posters express for their church and its heritage. But how well do they really know its heritage? When posters accuse church leaders of cowardice for refusing to take a stand on various issues, are they aware that the Moravian heritage keeps an ear open for new revelation and understanding, or that it emphasizes the importance of listening to diverse voices in the community? It takes enormous courage for leadership to stand firm on *that* heritage in the face of open rebellion among church members demanding that specifics of doctrine be written into the Moravian tradition.

At the same time that many Moravians are finding fault with the church's response to hot-button issues of the day, many are also turning away from the Moravian liturgical tradition—the principal ground of its theology. The liturgies are too long, the language too archaic, and, worst, the music isn't "relevant" or "user friendly." Congregations who once sang:

*To avert from men God's wrath  
Jesus suffered in our stead  
By an ignominious death  
He a full atonement made  
And by his most precious blood  
Brought us sinners nigh to God*

are now singing:

*Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
Your love makes me sing  
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah,  
Your love makes me sing...*

The song is pleasant and easy to sing, no doubt "user friendly"; but Zinzendorf would be hard pressed to find much theology in its lines.

Today, membership in all Protestant denominations is declining steeply, and Protestants who do attend church regularly often switch easily from one denomination to another, feeling that few have any particular identity. In this climate, many churches feel the urge to blend, to accommodate present religious fads in order to increase or at least retain members. Do the people want praise music? They shall have it. Do they want a forceful condemnation of homosexuality? So be it.

Yet it seems to me that the Moravians have a chance to survive more by standing apart than by blending—by offering the world what is truly unique about the Moravian church, namely its heritage in Zinzendorf's theology. Rather than trying to blend in or to lay down

specific doctrine, we might search the works of Zinzendorf—let's get more of them translated into English, first thing—for theological energy. Meanwhile, we should continue the effort to explain the position of *community* in our theology and to preserve the liturgical heritage that provides a worship experience no other Protestant church can offer. With energy, community, and music, church can be... well, more like camp.

See you on the mountain.

### **References:**

Freeman, Arthur. *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf*. Bethlehem PA: Moravian Church in America, 1998.

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