

# The Hinge

International Theological Dialog for the Moravian Church

## Restoring Forgiveness in Moravian Life and Worship

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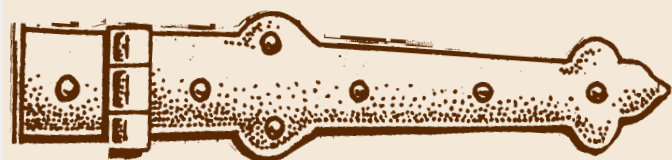
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# *The Hinge*

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One of the early offices of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pa. was that of the Hinge: “*The office of the Hinge requires that the brother who holds it look after everything and bring troublesome factors within the congregation into mutual accord without their first having to be taken up publicly in the congregation council.*”

— September 1742, *The Bethlehem Diary*, vol. 1, tr. by Kenneth Hamilton, p. 80.

*The Hinge* journal is intended also to be a mainspring in the life of the contemporary Moravian Church, causing us to move, think, and grow. Above all, it is to open doors in our church.

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## Notes from the Editor

This issue of *The Hinge* is my last as editor, and I am happy to hand the reins over to the new editorial team of Ginny Tobiassen, Janel Rice, and Christian Rice. In July I assumed new duties as Director of Admissions at the School of Divinity of Wake Forest University, where I have been teaching theology and Moravian studies for the past four years. I am confident that *The Hinge* will continue to play its unique role in the Moravian Church. *The Hinge* was established nearly two decades ago as a way for Moravians to discuss controversial issues in the hopes of coming to better understanding and work toward reconciliation.

In this issue Margaret Wilde addresses the core mission of *The Hinge* directly. She draws on biblical exegesis and her long experience in peace and justice advocacy to develop strategies for reconciliation and forgiveness in the Moravian Church. Like almost every church in the world today, the Moravian Church has been riven by numerous conflicts such as homosexuality, abortion, church governance, charismatic gifts, the sacraments, the AIDS epidemic, and the role of women in the church. Every seven years Unity Synod spends much of its time on conflict resolution and proper exercise of church discipline.

Many of these conflicts involve common themes, such as how to interpret the Bible, but each conflict has its unique history and context. For instance, Moravians in Central America are dealing with the aftermath of the Sandinista war and the corrosive effect of the drug trade while Moravians in Europe are still trying to heal the wounds caused by years of Communist oppression and the Cold War. One of the things that make reconciliation difficult in Christian communities is that spiritual language often masks political, social, and historical realities. Genuine reconciliation requires honest appraisal of the conflict.

Some of these conflicts are so bitter and entrenched that it is tempting to give up and simply let the church split asunder. The history of Christianity demonstrates that divisions are much easier to create than to resolve. Ecumenical efforts have often been successful in resolving old doctrinal disputes, but it is much harder to overcome the memory of past wrongs. Our identities are often forged in opposition to others, and it is tempting simply to ignore the biblical mandate for reconciliation and forgiveness. But we cannot do so and remain true to the Gospel. Running throughout the New Testament is the message that Christ reconciles humanity to God and that those who are in Christ should be reconciled to each other.

This issue of *The Hinge* includes voices from around the Moravian world, including South Africa and Ireland. Many of the authors have been involved in conflict resolution, and they represent a variety of theological perspectives, but they share a common belief in the ability of Christ to break down the walls of division that we build through pride, fear, greed, selfishness, self-righteousness, idolatry, and ignorance. Perhaps one day Christians will learn how to make real our prayer that we forgive those who trespass against us just as we have been forgiven of our sins.

# Restoring Forgiveness in Moravian Life and Worship

Margaret D. Wilde

Christian churches, including the Moravian Church, have been increasingly divided over religious and social issues in recent years. The debates are widespread in modern American religious culture—some of them are called “culture war” issues—but they are also affecting the traditional beliefs and practices that have made our church a leader in worldwide mission and ecumenical cooperation. For example:

- With *The Ground of the Unity* we affirm that there is no salvation apart from Christ, but we disagree on the scope of his saving power (can he save people outside the church?) and on the conditions for salvation (how must repentance and belief be expressed?).
- We affirm Holy Scripture as the sole standard of doctrine and faith, but disagree on its interpretation and application in everyday life (especially in personal morality), and on the value of other sources of wisdom (such as personal experience, church and cultural tradition, and modern science).
- With the *Moravian Covenant for Christian Living* we “decline to determine as binding what the Scriptures have left undetermined,”

and hold to the principle “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.” But we disagree on what is or is not essential, and on a charitable process for working out our disagreements.

- And we agree to “faithfully attend the worship services of the Church,” but sometimes withhold participation or financial support as a way of expressing disagreement over its preaching, music, liturgical language, educational programs, and organizational leadership.

## A New “Sifting Time”?

Delegates to the 2002 Synod of the Moravian Church (Southern Province) summed up the situation with a resolution that began as follows:

Whereas, the body of Christ present in the Moravian Church suffers anguished brokenness because of division over matters of doctrine and faith;

Whereas, the brokenness and divisions injure our common witness in a time of great opportunity and open doors for ministry in a world that is itself broken....<sup>1</sup>

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In 2004, Moravian theologian Craig Atwood compared the recent controversies to the “Sifting Times” of the 18th-century church in Germany and America:

The term Sifting Time in Moravian theology is used to describe times when the community struggles to make sense of itself. It is “sifted” or tested by God. In the process of sifting, some leave the community and others join.... For instance, the first period of Sifting was in the months prior to the August 13, 1727 experience that we continue to celebrate as the rebirth of the *Unitas Fratrum*.<sup>2</sup>

We remember August 13 as a miracle of forgiveness. The refugee community led by Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf on his estate at Herrnhut, Germany, had gotten off to a rocky start with the internal conflicts that Brother Atwood calls the first Sifting Time. But on that day in 1727, the people came together in a communion service that was quickly recognized as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Estranged members began embracing one another on the way to the church and, as historian Allan W. Schattschneider tells the story:

After the service closed members of the congregation stood around outside talking about the blessing they had received and renewing broken friendships. Zinzendorf suddenly had an inspiration. He sent up to the manor house and had food sent to six or seven homes in the community. In these homes members of the congregation gathered and had simple meals together.<sup>3</sup>

That event, and the spiritual awakening that attended it, gave rise to a wave of missionary zeal in Herrnhut. Over the next decade, mission outposts were established in the Caribbean, North America, and Africa. The simple meals provided that day by Count Zinzendorf became the seed of a Moravian liturgical tradition known as Love Feast.

A look at the months prior to August 13 suggests that Zinzendorf was engaged in conflict resolution, with forgiveness as a spontaneous, Spirit-led outcome. He had seen the feuding as a threat to the community and to his own standing with the Lutheran and Saxon authorities, and systematically laid the groundwork for civil and spiritual reunification. Besides the original Bohemian Hussites there were Lutherans, Calvinists, and members of several dissident sects in the young settlement. The Count intensely disapproved of sectarian division, and hoped eventually to bring them all into the Lutheran fold.<sup>4</sup> In May he reminded them

in kindly but firm tones that they were living on his land. He did not intend, he said, to permit quarreling to break up the settlement. He had therefore, he added, drawn up a set of rules.... Throughout the summer of 1727 he went from house to house, praying with and for each family. He learned at first hand the religious views of the people and tried to show them how important it was that all who professed to love the Savior should love one another also.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the happy outcome was at least partly due to the Count’s administrative and pastoral

work over several months. And its staying power was limited: the Sifting Times lasted into the 1750s, and came to include controversies over devotional imagery and theological language as well as church leadership.<sup>6</sup> Yet that moment was also clearly a work of the Holy Spirit, which not only crowned Zinzendorf's effort with a wave of forgiveness, but also bore fruit in the ensuing missionary movement. So, if we are now living in another Sifting Time, can we do something—not only to resolve the conflicts, but to establish the human conditions in which the Holy Spirit can do its work of forgiveness and inspiration to mission?

### **Conflict Resolution and Forgiveness**

In recent years many of us have felt led, as Count Zinzendorf was, to undertake a ministry of reconciliation. There is growing appreciation in today's churches that conflict resolution methods can be helpful in such a ministry. These methods come partly from the fields of diplomacy, public policy, labor negotiation, and psychological counseling, but some also have biblical roots (e.g., Jesus' instruction on dealing with conflict in the church, Matthew 18:15-17).

The Moravian Church (Southern Province) is now studying a process developed in Mennonite churches, based on Matthew 18 and other scriptures, and designed for use as a congregational covenant. Called *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love: Commitments in Times of Disagreement*,<sup>7</sup> it is a very good model for church-based conflict resolution. I strongly advocate its use at the congregational and denominational level.

I am coming to believe, however, that conflict resolution is only a partial answer to the challenge we face. As Catholic theologian Robert Schreier points out, "reconciliation is not a skill to be mastered, but rather, something discovered—the power of God's grace welling up in one's life."<sup>8</sup> Conflict resolution is fundamentally a pragmatic, solution-driven process in which the parties come to recognize each other's goals and interests, and negotiate an agreement that meets each one's most important needs. Forgiveness may occur in the process, as either a desired outcome or an unforeseen consequence. But it is not always a priority goal; sometimes the pressure for a negotiated agreement may leave underlying grievances unaddressed, and thereby work against forgiveness and full reconciliation.

Awareness of that drawback has led to a surge of research and action on forgiveness, much of it led by spiritually motivated and theologically informed Christians. In the rest of this article I shall focus on that theme, not as a competing alternative, but as a priority to be upheld in the process of conflict resolution. "The wind blows where it chooses," Jesus said in John 3:8; the Holy Spirit has a logic and a process of its own. By taking care not to close any doors to forgiveness—or maybe calling attention to them when they blow open—I believe we can bring our efforts more in line with the work of God's grace.

### **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Let us look first at the meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation in today's world. The two words have different but overlapping meanings;

the authors quoted in this paper sometimes use them interchangeably. Theologian Lewis Smedes summarizes some of the differences:

- Forgiveness is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for reconciliation....
- Forgiving is individual; reconciliation is social.
- Forgiving takes only one person; reconciliation takes two.
- Forgiving is unconditional; reconciliation is conditioned by the offender's response to the forgiver.
- Forgiving can happen without reconciliation; reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness.<sup>9</sup>

In theology and the social sciences, reconciliation is described as a combination of justice and peace, or the restoration of right relationships. Justice, peace, and right relationships mean different things to different people, and so does reconciliation. As Schreier observes, "Who needs to be involved, what needs to be overcome or undone, what will count for truth and justice in the new situation, and what is deemed to be the end of the process: all of these affect what reconciliation means."<sup>10</sup>

Forgiveness is a necessary step toward reconciliation, but it is also a moral value in its own right. In the words of Mennonite theologian Howard Zehr:

Forgiveness is letting go of the power the offense and the offender have over a person. It means no longer letting that offense and offender dominate.... Real forgiveness, then, is an act of empowerment and healing. It allows one to move from victim to survivor.<sup>11</sup>

Philosopher Joanna North describes forgiveness as "the overcoming of negative feelings (anger, hatred, resentment, desire for revenge) and their replacement with positive emotions (compassion, benevolence, even love)." One stage in that process—often called "reframing"—is to distinguish the wrongdoer from the wrong committed, which "allows us to regard the wrongdoer in a more complete, more detailed, more rounded way."<sup>12</sup>

Even in this secular framework, many questions remain about the conditions for authentic forgiveness (see Insert 1). Defining it theologically is even harder, for it requires us to combine human moral analysis with our understanding of God's will. And we cannot draw a sharp line between the secular and theological frameworks: forgiveness and reconciliation both have deep roots in Judeo-Christian tradition, and much of the recent secular research has been done by Christians.

### **Forgiveness in Scripture**

The ancient Israelites knew God, paradoxically, as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness ... forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty..." (Exodus 34:6-7). They established a system of sacrifice for the atonement of sins; "thus, more than a thousand years before the Christian era, theology and liturgy were in place for repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation."<sup>13</sup> The prophets later insisted on justice rather than sacrifice as the proper means of atonement (Amos 5:21-24, Isaiah 1:10-17, Hosea 6:6), but the principle of reliance on God's forgiveness did not change.

### **Insert 1: Commonly Debated Questions about Forgiveness**

- **Can we forgive unilaterally, in the absence of repentance?** Most writers agree that since forgiving also helps the forgiver, it should not be ruled out when the wrongdoer is absent, dead, or unrepentant. However, only the wrongdoer's *acceptance* of forgiveness makes *reconciliation* possible. Joanna North reflects a general consensus in saying that acceptance, "if it is to be genuine and of moral value, must involve [one's] being sorry for what [one] has done and determining to reform" (North, 29).
- **Do we have to replace our negative feelings with positive ones, or is it enough to give up the desire for vengeance?** The latter option is often called *forbearance*. David Augsburger places it beside forgiveness and reconciliation on a spectrum of deepening ethical implications: "Where forbearance requires only tolerance and indulgence in a virtual suspension of ethical issues, forgiveness demands the facing of justice, love, mercy, and the uncomfortable behavior we call repentance. Reconciliation must struggle with deeper levels of all these and the complexities of restitution and restoration" (Augsburger, 115).
- **Can nations or groups forgive, or only individuals?** "Collective forgiveness" is an increasingly popular idea, although some ethicists say that only individuals can be moral agents. Some do support a process of "secondary forgiveness," in which a community apologizes for or forgives injustices committed by earlier generations; this is "an alternative that has power to heal old wounds" (McCullough et al., 222).
- **Does forgiving require us to forget the offense?** Since we cannot forget by choice—and repressing a memory can be harmful—most writers agree that we should not aspire or pretend to forget it completely. As Christopher Marshall describes it, "Forgiveness enables a healing of memories, which is experienced as a type of forgetting. But even here, the memory of the offense does not vanish magically into oblivion but rather is integrated into one's life experience" (Marshall, 273).

From Joanna North, "The 'Ideal' of Forgiveness," in Robert D. Enright and Joanna North, eds., *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 15-24; David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); Michael E. McCullough, Steven J. Sandage, and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); Christopher Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

That principle took on new meaning in the life and teaching of Jesus. He lived forgiveness in two ways: by joining in table fellowship with sinners (a sign of the Kingdom of God), and by his acts of healing (a sign of God's forgiveness). In both cases he symbolically reversed the order between repentance and forgiveness, which scandalized the religious leaders of his time. New Testament scholar Walter Wink calls this "God's unexpected and unaccountable forgiveness":

[Jesus] audaciously bursts upon these sinners with the declaration that their sins have been forgiven, prior to their repentance, prior to any acts of restitution or reconciliation. Everything is reversed: You are forgiven; now you can repent!<sup>14</sup>

In his teaching, too, Jesus radically recast the meaning of forgiveness. That awesome power, traditionally reserved to God and the temple priests, was now accessible to and even required of Jesus' followers: "if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15). He made it a condition of participation in worship:

So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift [Matthew 5:23-24].

Forgiveness is the key feature in several appearances of the risen Jesus, says Schreier. In the upper room (John 20:19-23), and again after breakfast at the seashore (John 21:9-19), Jesus renews his commission to the disciples who

abandoned him at his trial. In the first case he again gives them the power to forgive sins; in the second he tells Simon Peter to "feed my sheep." In that exchange Jesus has not only reconnected Peter to himself and the community, says Schreier; "he has given him a special charge and task within that community."<sup>15</sup>

Jesus' most dramatic appearance—and commissioning—was to Saul of Tarsus, in the midst of Saul's campaign against his followers (Acts 9:1-9). That appearance led Saul (now the Apostle Paul) to two discoveries that would shape the church's theology and ministry. First he saw what Jesus had already made clear, that God takes the first step: "while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). Like Jesus, Paul reverses the sequence. In Schreier's words, "We discover and experience God's forgiveness of our trespasses, and this prompts us to repentance."<sup>16</sup>

Second, as Miroslav Volf has noted, for Paul the "horizontal" (social) dimension of forgiveness and reconciliation is as important as the "vertical"; he is not only reconciled to God but also to the Christians he was persecuting, and later to the Gentiles as well. Says Volf:

Though reconciliation of human beings to God has primacy, reconciliation between human beings is intrinsic to their reconciliation to God.... Reconciliation involves a turning away from enmity toward people, not just from enmity toward God, and it entails a movement toward a human community, precisely that community which was the object of enmity.<sup>17</sup>

Thus forgiveness requires both God's grace and a human response; Insert 2 identifies some of the differences between the two. With these in

mind, let us look next at what it would mean to begin laying the conditions for forgiveness, and therefore reconciliation, to well up in our midst.

### **Insert 2: God's Forgiveness, Human Forgiveness**

- Human forgiveness is modeled upon divine forgiveness, says Robert Schreiter, but there are differences between them. God is the forgiver of sin, because God has infinite power and love. "Human forgiveness ... starts from a different point. It is about not being controlled by the past. It is the possibility of having a future different from the one that seems to be dictated by past wrongdoings. Forgiveness is an act of freedom.... For the Christian, divine and human forgiveness intersect at the point of the decision to forgive.... If we acknowledge the pain that wrongdoing has caused ... we must find concrete ways to enter the process and engage God's forgiveness within our own" (Schreiter, 57-58).
- God's forgiveness deals with sin and evil at its worst, says L. Gregory Jones. "In the midst of such brokenness, God's forgiveness aims at healing people's lives and re-creating communion in God's eschatological Kingdom. Even so, such healing and re-creating is not God acting wholly without us. They also invite, and require, our practices, which—by the guiding, judging, and consoling work of the Holy Spirit—enable us to witness to God's forgiving, re-creating work and to be transformed into holy people" (Jones, 163).
- In Matthew 18:12-14, "a man with a flock of 100 sheep goes in search of one sheep that has 'strayed.' Members of the community must be as diligent in seeking to recover to full membership one of their number who has strayed" (Shriver, 42).
- "The doctor does not heal bodies but rather creates conditions under which healing can occur," says Ronald Kraybill. "Similarly, the Christian peacemaker does not 'make peace,' but rather helps to create those conditions" (Kraybill, 18).
- "We are not so much bridge builders as bridge crossers.... The Bridge is already there—our Lord ... the bridge over which we cross to each other, again and again" (South African Klaus Nürnberger, quoted by Wink, 16).

From Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998); L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ronald S. Kraybill, *Repairing the Breach: Ministering in Community Conflict* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1980); Walter Wink, *When the Powers Fall: Reconciliation in the Healing of Nations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

## **Seeking and Offering Forgiveness in Today's Church**

For Christians, says L. Gregory Jones, forgiveness is a habit that must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community ... the horizons of which are (at least potentially) the whole world. It is in this sense that Christian life calls us to practice forgiveness.<sup>18</sup>

It is not hard to find occasions for practicing forgiveness in the Christian community. The church is a crucible of ideals, motivations, and beliefs, which often create conflict because they are so important.

Schreiter observes that polarization happens “when both sides care deeply about issues, and those issues touch upon our very identity. We do not engage in conflict or stay entrenched in polarization over things we consider trivial.”<sup>19</sup>

A church that is faithful to its mission in the world will be especially exposed to conflict. “The world is a messy, violent, and broken place,” says Mennonite peace theologian John Paul Lederach. “We choose to journey toward and with those who have experienced the deepest division and separation, because this is God’s mission and Christ’s example.”<sup>20</sup> Alan and Eleanor Kreider and Paulus Widjaja add that when we pass on reconciliation to others in this troubled world, some of these other people, by God’s grace, may join us in the reconciled community. This is why the early Christians developed the rite of the “kiss of peace.” It was a means, within their worship, of celebrating the peace of God, and where there

were broken relationships of restoring them, so that the church, as a reconciled body, could offer reconciliation to others.<sup>21</sup>

In ancient eucharistic liturgies the kiss of peace is followed by a plea for divine forgiveness: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world; have mercy on us.... Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Speak but the word and my soul shall be healed.” According to Robert Browning and Roy Reed, in Protestant practice these rites have become perfunctory; “we have tamed [them] to the point of dysfunction.”<sup>22</sup>

A remnant of that tradition still appears in Moravian liturgies. Our communion service begins and ends with a “right hand of fellowship,” and the *Moravian Book of Worship* explains (in fine print) how the one at the beginning differs from the one at the end. The first signifies “oneness in Christ and the desire to be at peace with one another”; the second, “renewed dedication and unity of purpose in the service of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> There is a meaningful symmetry here: one is about forgiveness, the other about mission. For worshippers who may not readily notice the difference, the pastor of my congregation makes a point of explaining it at each communion service.

In a more modern expression of penitence, “General Liturgy 2: Reconciliation” calls attention to our need for mutual forgiveness: “Our world is filled with pain and alienation.... We have become strangers to our relatives, and foreigners to our own families.... we humbly confess that we walk in the way of the indifferent.”<sup>24</sup> The modern language may help worshippers reflect on what they are reading, but here again, a few

words from the pastor or liturgist at the start of the service can draw attention to its relevance in day-to-day church life.

Of course being “at peace with one another” cannot be achieved with ritual alone; it means, as L. Gregory Jones insists, “learning to live in community as forgiven and forgiving people.”<sup>25</sup> We have mentioned Jesus’ admonition to reconcile with a brother or sister before offering your gift at the altar. In Moravian tradition that discipline entailed a private “speaking” with the pastor a few days before each communion service, and members were expected to decline communion if they had a grievance with another member. Most American churches have abandoned that tradition, partly for good pastoral reasons, but the spirit it reflects is still worth practicing.

The admonition to “go ... be reconciled to your brother or sister” (Matthew 5:23-24) is different from Jesus’ instructions about conflict

resolution in the church: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (Matthew 18:15-17). Going to point out a fault is an exercise of authority, even when done lovingly, and usually works against mutual forgiveness: it assumes a confrontational approach, and seems to permit an adversary’s exclusion from the community. Going to be reconciled is about seeking and offering forgiveness. Both are appropriate in different circumstances, but if forgiveness is a priority in our conflict resolution efforts, the two texts should be kept separate—holding Matthew 18:15-17 in reserve for situations where Matthew 5:23-24 has been conscientiously tried and cannot (not just “probably wouldn’t”) work.

Michael McCullough and his colleagues have outlined ways to seek and offer forgiveness in marriages and families; here I have adapted and paraphrased them for use in the church family (Insert 3).<sup>26</sup>

### **Insert 3: Techniques for Forgiving in Marriages and Families (and in the Church)**

- Examine your conscience. Putting yourself in the others’ shoes can help you understand their viewpoint, forgive, and seek forgiveness for the ways you have wronged them.
- Confess first, rather than waiting for others to ask you for forgiveness. Asking first can warm their hearts, and encourage them to examine their conscience and ask for forgiveness in return.
- Don’t make backhanded confessions, dropping hints about the things they should be confessing to you. Acknowledge your own part in the problem, and express your own sorrow; let them figure out what they did wrong.
- If others sincerely confess to you, accept the confession (no matter how imperfect); if you receive a backhanded confession, accept the sincere part. Don’t make them confess twice, and don’t critique the confession; you know how hard it is to do! Use the opportunity to listen, with empathy, to the one who has hurt you.

Mennonite mediator Ron Kraybill often tells church leaders: “If you want to avoid conflict, invite disagreement.” That is, by dealing with small arguments as they arise, we can keep them from corroding the relationships that sustain the community in the more difficult issues of church life and mission. Indeed those relationships can be strengthened by the experience of working together on our day-to-day differences—and learning to seek and offer forgiveness when we have handled them badly. If forgiveness “must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community,” as Jones says, the small hurts of church life are a providential source of exercises with which to practice it.

When it is not an habitual practice, seeking or offering forgiveness can be scary. What if she turns her back on my forgiveness? What if my apology reignites his anger? And why should I go first, if we were both wrong? Our protective instincts against injustice and humiliation, even embarrassment, are deeply rooted. In a moving reflection on Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25-33), Lederach points out that although Jacob makes the journey home in response to God’s direction (31:3), “God does not promise that he will take care of everything and level the road for Jacob. God promises to accompany him, to be present.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Teaching Forgiveness**

“We know from Scripture that we have not been left solely to our own devices to forgive,” say Everett Worthington and his colleagues:

We have divine and human resources that can help us forgive. We have the Comforter, the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:3). We have

Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27b). We have the mind of Christ (Romans 12:2). We also have a supportive community (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).<sup>28</sup>

Those resources are important, but attention is needed also to the human skills that can lay the conditions for forgiveness. Some psychologists believe that people discover it on their own, but Robert D. Enright and his colleagues have found otherwise: that “most people need to be taught about forgiveness to begin forgiving.”<sup>29</sup>

Browning and Reed favor incorporating forgiveness in church-based education programs.<sup>30</sup> They recommend a method which Enright developed and is now implementing at schools in Northern Ireland and several U.S. cities, based on a four-stage model of forgiveness (summarized in Insert 4).<sup>31</sup>

The Enright model is partly based on one proposed by Joanna North, which analyzes not only the forgiver’s step-by-step movement toward forgiveness, but also the wrongdoer’s parallel movement toward accepting forgiveness.<sup>32</sup> Since we are concerned with both seeking and offering forgiveness, a church-based method of teaching forgiveness should probably incorporate both in some fashion (as did McCullough’s advice in Insert 3).

Forgiveness education is still a work in progress; the materials cited in this essay are a good place to begin exploring its potential for different pastoral contexts. I also recommend an award-winning, 78-minute film by Martin Doblmeier titled *The Power of Forgiveness*.<sup>33</sup> It was brought to my attention by Moravian pastor Judith

### **Insert 4: Four Phases of Forgiveness**

(Summarized from Enright et al., in *Exploring Forgiveness*, p. 52)

- *Uncovering*: examining the obstacles to forgiveness, such as anger and shame, and thinking realistically about the event that needs forgiveness.
- *Decision*: a realization that the old strategies are not working, a willingness to consider forgiveness, and eventually a personal decision to forgive the offender.
- *The work of forgiveness*: increased understanding of the offender's situation and motives (also called *reframing*); developing empathy and compassion for the offender; acceptance of the real pain involved for the forgiver.
- *Deepening*: finding meaning in the suffering and in the forgiveness process, solidarity and new purpose in the life of the forgiver.

Justice, who used it in 2008 in a Lenten study group. The film features the respective projects of Enright and Worthington, a segment on the Amish community that forgave their children's murderer, and interviews with Elie Wiesel, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Rev. James Forbes.

Other teaching resources can be found on the Internet and in church or secular journals. Some are better than others; I would appreciate recommendations from readers.

I have presented forgiveness here, not as an alternative to more pragmatic conflict resolution processes, but as a goal to be pursued with their help—remembering that the Holy Spirit has its own logic and processes. If our work is crowned by a moment of forgiveness, as Count Zinzendorf's was, it may not be because we got it right but because God has promised to accompany us, as God accompanied Jacob on his way back to Esau.

### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Resolution #54 from the 2002 synod of the Moravian Church (Southern Province), available on the internet at [http://mcsp.org/Synod2002/new\\_synod\\_resol54.htm](http://mcsp.org/Synod2002/new_synod_resol54.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> Craig D. Atwood, "Faith, Love, and Hope: The Moravian Theological Heritage," 2004 Moses Lectures at Moravian Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, PA. In *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 2004), 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Allan W. Schattschneider, *Through Five Hundred Years: A Popular History of the Moravian Church* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Church in America, 1957), 55.
- <sup>4</sup> Truman Lee Dunn, "Preserving the Unity: Community and Conflict in Moravian Church History," Ph.D. dissertation at Union Theological Seminary (New York: 1989), 120-122.
- <sup>5</sup> Schattschneider, 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Arthur J. Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Church in America, 1998), 13 n. 16; see also 34 n. 27.

- <sup>7</sup> Available from the Mennonite Central Committee, online at <http://peace.mennolink.org/agree.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 27.
- <sup>9</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, "Stations on the Journey from Forgiveness to Hope," in Everett L. Worthington, Jr., ed., *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research and Theological Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 1998), 345-346.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 47.
- <sup>12</sup> Joanna North, "The 'Ideal' of Forgiveness," in Robert D. Enright and Joanna North, eds., *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 20, 26.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Moral Courage: Motives and Designs for Ministry in a Troubled World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 76-77.
- <sup>14</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 266.
- <sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, 55 and 91.
- <sup>16</sup> Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, 45.
- <sup>17</sup> Miroslav Volf, "The Social Meaning of Reconciliation," in *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (April 2000), 166.
- <sup>18</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 163-164.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, "Reconciliation as a Means to Overcoming Polarization," Killeen Chair Lecture at St. Norbert College, De Pere, Wisconsin, February 15, 2007 (manuscript).
- <sup>20</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999), 165.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Kreider, Eleanor Kreider, and Paulus Widjaja, *A Culture of Peace: God's Vision for the Church* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 112, 115.
- <sup>22</sup> Browning and Reed, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Moral Courage*, 205.
- <sup>23</sup> *Moravian Book of Worship* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Church in America, 1995), 183, 194 and parallels.
- <sup>24</sup> *Moravian Book of Worship*, 13-17.
- <sup>25</sup> L. Gregory Jones, "Crafting Communities of Forgiveness," in *Interpretation* 54, no. 2 (April 2000), 127.
- <sup>26</sup> Michael E. McCullough, Steven J. Sandage, and Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *To Forgive Is Human: How to Put Your Past in the Past* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 208-211.
- <sup>27</sup> Lederach, 23.
- <sup>28</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr., Constance B. Sharp, Andrea J. Lerner, and Jeffrey R. Sharp, "Interpersonal Forgiveness as an Example of Loving One's Enemies," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34, no. 1, 39.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert D. Enright et al., "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness," in Robert D. Enright and Joanna North, eds., *Exploring Forgiveness* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Browning and Reed, 200-202.
- <sup>31</sup> Enright et al., "The Psychology of Interpersonal Forgiveness," 52.
- <sup>32</sup> North, "The 'Ideal' of Forgiveness," 30.
- <sup>33</sup> Available on DVD at <http://firstrunfeatures.com/forgivenessdvd.html>, list price \$25.00.Text.

# Responses

## Glenn Asquith

I am glad that Margaret Wilde took on the difficult spiritual and theological issue of forgiveness for this issue of *The Hinge*. Her article is certainly timely in light of the various controversies that have caused division in several provinces of the Moravian Unity, including the issues she noted from the 2002 Synod of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church in North America. Sister Wilde presents a creative and very helpful summary of the definitions of forgiveness and reconciliation, the differences between the two, and their importance in the communal life of God's people.

As I read this, however, I think of many different contexts in which forgiveness and/or reconciliation would be very helpful but seem impossible.

In many of our mainline Protestant denominations, for example, major differences over the biblical understanding of sexual diversity in religious leadership and congregational life are dividing denominations the same way they were divided in the mid-1800s in the US over slavery and abolition. Churches, associations, and entire regions are leaving the fold of my denomination, the American Baptist Churches, USA, over whether congregations should be welcoming and affirming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered persons. Since the early 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention

(SBC) has been involved in major divisions over biblical inerrancy. Fundamentalist believers have taken over most of the SBC's agencies, schools, and seminaries with an agenda not only to exclude GLBT persons but also to prevent the ordination of women on the basis of a literal interpretation of certain New Testament passages and to question and reject any believers who do not express unequivocal opposition to abortion.

In these situations, as well as in similar systemic conflicts arising in the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Methodist denominations over issues of sexual diversity, there is not much promise of reconciliation—not to mention forgiveness—on the horizon. Each group believes itself fully right and is proceeding on that basis. Southern Baptist churches, for example, have effectively divided into two separate denominations: the Southern Baptist Convention for fundamentalist believers and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship for moderate believers. Each now has its own schools, seminaries, mission efforts, and national conferences. Reconciliation between these groups will likely never occur. *Forgiveness*, however, might be a good and valuable spiritual movement, especially for those now in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who have been disenfranchised and rejected by the “fundamentalist takeover” of the denomination of their heritage.

Theological differences in the Moravian church have also threatened to cause denominational splits and at least have caused animosity and pain for those on both sides of the issues. Individuals have been hurt and alienated by things that have been said and actions that have been taken. Thus, I fully agree with Sister Wilde (and Lewis Smedes and others whom she quoted) that an “official” reconciliation will likely be a “pseudo-resolution” without the spiritual investment of forgiveness on the part of those affected by deep division. The question remains as to how that is best achieved.

To that end, I have been impressed with the method utilized by Bishop Desmond Tutu in his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following the end of apartheid in South Africa. A critical step of Tutu’s approach is “truth-telling,” in which the victims of apartheid tell the particular stories of the violence and repression they experienced directly to those who committed the acts. Tutu found that truth-telling provided the best possibility for bringing offenders to the point of realizing their wrongs and then confessing and repenting of their actions. This opened the door for true forgiveness and healing.

What if the perpetrator does not repent and confess? As Tutu says, forgive anyway! In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu writes, “Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim” (272). It frees us from our own prison of anger, bitterness and alienation, and thus is good for our physical and spiritual health. Thus, even if there is no reconciliation, there is healing.

Whether we are speaking of forgiveness or reconciliation, truth-telling is a central value in Christian practice that brings grace and harmony in relationships. The church at Ephesus is admonished to “put away falsehood” and “speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Truth-telling is not meant to be an evil attack, but only for the purpose of “building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:25, 29 NRSV). When there has been hurt and damage done in relationships, I believe that truth-telling is essential, if not for forgiveness, at least for true resolution, in order to avoid perfunctory, surface-level “reconciliation” that has little meaning in the hearts of those involved.

### **For Further Reading**

To read more about departures from the American Baptist Churches, USA, see John Dart, “American Baptists face breakup threats,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 13 (June 28, 2005), 12–13. For more on events in the Southern Baptist Convention, see Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), and Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

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## Brad Bennett

After reading Margaret's article on forgiveness I did my best to work my perceptions down to their simplest form (my thoughts are pretty simple to begin with, so this wasn't too hard). My reaction is, basically, that to forgive is to no longer let some "wrong" done to me by another person have any significant power over me—a reaction that closely resembles the Howard Zehr quotation in the article. My comments on Margaret's article are through the lens of such simplicity, though none of the issues are simple. The article is indeed thorough and covers a lot of ground, so my comments will work in and around her work as best as they can!

A distinction I want to make, though, is that I don't think a simple disagreement with someone over something—even something we both perceive as important—necessarily means that forgiveness is needed between us. We simply don't see something the same way. I was never a fan of George W. Bush as president, but I see nothing requiring forgiveness between me and someone who was, even though both of us may hold strong opinions. Now, if somebody calls me an idiot because we disagree, then I may need at some point to think about forgiving his or her stupidity for calling me an idiot! Okay, that was a bad joke (forgive me), but it shows how disagreeing may be the first step toward wronging someone. Simply disagreeing, however, does not necessarily need forgiveness.

It seems, though, that our sensationalistic,

entertainment-oriented news and other media tend to exacerbate disagreements to the point that it is hard to disagree without wronging another. Any real relationship that has any depth will experience disagreements and the occasional wrongdoing requiring forgiveness. The key is to keep disagreements from reaching the level where wrongs are done. But often in today's politics and "reality" shows, disagreement is not a matter of seeking understanding, trading ideas, finding common ground, etc.; it is a mission to search out and destroy the one who disagrees with you. It's survival of the fittest, a contest that will produce a clear winner and loser. How do you go about forgiving someone who has gone out of his or her way to utterly destroy you because you disagree?

Another problem is that in today's disposable and cafeteria style culture—which includes the church—people don't seem to see much need for forgiveness anymore. If a person feels wronged by something someone says or does, that person can just leave. (Or, in keeping with the search-and-destroy mission, another popular response these days is to destroy the offender and then leave.) There is no shortage of congregational ballet when something happens at one church and there's a migration to another one. Then there is the extreme where a group wants to break off and start their own church—forget the rest of them, no chance for forgiveness or reconciliation there.

Margaret's title implies that forgiveness is no longer a part of Moravian life and worship and needs restoring. Perhaps she's right. The

more diversity we see in our world—and perhaps in our churches—the more too many people want to wall themselves up with only people who agree with them. But it's important to remember that forgiveness for a wrong done doesn't mean there is no longer any disagreement. People can disagree—even on important things—and still be in community with one another if they so choose.

Margaret goes far beyond my simplistic view of forgiveness. Theologically, my view doesn't hold up because it suggests that God, in forgiving me for some wrong I've done, is deciding not to allow me to have power over God. What conceivable power could I have had over God, whatever I might have done? Human forgiveness is between two equal human beings. God's forgiveness is in a whole other category, because for God to forgive me, there has to be grace involved. But that's what Jesus is all about. Jesus is the human/divine picture of God's grace and forgiveness.

If we Moravians are in a postmodern "Sifting Time," then in many respects we may look very different in, say, ten years. It may be that many will have left. Perhaps others will have come on board. Forgiveness and reconciliation will certainly be a part of the new order. But so will different ways of thinking about community, which will include repentance and forgiveness (in whatever order) for however our ways of thinking and living have caused division, pain and suffering. But those ways of thinking will also acknowledge that we will never all see things the same way and perhaps it's okay if

people think and live in different ways. Even Christians. Even Moravians.

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## **Bradley Jones**

"When I think about all that I have experienced in the church in the past few years, I realize that in many ways I am still recovering from all that has happened." I spoke these words to some friends of mine, the Rev. Brad Bennett and his wife, Sue, the night before Christmas Eve. I was rather surprised by this revelation, which had suddenly dawned on me during this late night discussion at a bookstore.

The words were a reflection on some tumultuous experiences I had encountered in the Moravian Church in recent years. Those years began with fighting in the Southern Province over what Jesus as the sole source of salvation means and over the issue of homosexuality. Around this time I became acquainted with the Czech Moravian Church through two mission trips; again I felt the blow of fighting in the Moravian Church, this time on another continent.

In both the Czech church and the Southern Province, I have walked with many Moravians through both the mountain peaks of personal

renewal and the valleys of estrangement from people they were once close to. I have wept with and for many Moravians over what has happened and is continuing to happen in the church. Such experiences are not uncommon in the church today; indeed, they hit closer to home than a lot of people are willing to talk about.

I confess that as I read M. Wilde's article, even her mention of some of the disagreements awakened a strong sense of both grief and anger inside me. These feelings are something that I and many others have dealt with for many years, though they tend to be lost, overlooked, or buried beneath the day-to-day activities that make up our lives.

Such emotions serve as a reminder that we live in the completed but "not yet" work of Christ, awaiting the day when all that is not of the Lord will be burnt away (see 1 Corinthians 3:10-16) and we live on the new earth in the presence of God, seeing Him in full (see 1 Corinthians 13:10-13 and Revelation 21). The pervasive reality of living in a broken world, waiting for the coming of our mustard seed kingdom (Luke 13:18-21), stretches beyond the bounds of our churches and into every aspect of human life.

The stain of sin on the world and the reminders of the life we once had before coming to the transformative life of Christ are all a part of what makes us the way we are and how we relate to the world. Although the marks of sin blind us from seeing our needs perspicuously, the redemption of Christ coming into our lives is the answer to our deepest needs as human

beings. In many places, Paul wrote that this redemption is something that has yet to be fully experienced. To the Roman Church Paul wrote about the desire for a further redemption, telling them that all of "creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth" and even God's people "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23, ESV).

Although Paul saw that the redemption of Christ was in part directed towards an eschatological reality, this same apostle also wrote that part of that redemption takes place now. Breaking many understandings of who people are, Paul wrote to the church in Galatia telling them that because of the work of Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female" and that through this work, we "are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, ESV). While in some sense our redemption is set in the future, we are also called to invite that reality into the world that is awaiting the eschaton.

In John 17, Christ prayed that the church would have unity. Although Christians view the New Testament as the predominant declaration of God's desire for unity among His people, that desire is threaded deep into the fabric of all Scripture and into the very character of the Triune God.

In a time when the church experienced many unnecessary divisions, the Moravian Church led the way in the Spirit of Christ to show that unity is built upon the person of Christ and the experiential revelation of

Him, rather than on dogma in areas where the Scripture gives little to no explicit direction. Moravians have a rich history of reaching out in the Spirit of Christ to other churches, seeking both to learn from them and to aid them in declaring the Gospel to the world. Despite the massive difficulties that the Moravian Church has faced from within and without, unity has always been a high priority; maintaining and promoting unity is something for which the church still strives.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the church that once proved to the world that it could live in the tensions of a diverse community has, in recent times, fallen into becoming much like the rest of the church in America: Instead of remaining closely tied to what the Lord has clearly said He requires of His followers (while giving people Christian liberty in the incidental matters of doctrine), we have by and large dumbed down the message of the cross to a point where what we have to say, while not necessarily heretical, is no longer meaningful or relevant to people's lives. In an attempt to unify the church, we have neglected to hold ourselves to the objectivity of the Gospel; that is, we have begun to accept subjective experience as being of value equal to or greater than the objective work of the God-Man Jesus Christ done in real history. Holding out the word of the cross, of Christ's literal death and resurrection and of what God accomplished through it, has taken a back seat to a romanticized version of unity that did not even exist in the early church.

When the topic of unity arises among Christians, there is usually mention of Jesus' prayer that the church "may be one" (John 17:11)

as God is one, along with similar passages. The idea that God wants the church to be unified is, beyond a doubt, clearly present in the Scriptures. However, while many texts tell us that we need to be unified, few tell us how that unity will be brought about. It is one thing to say that God wants the church to be unified. It is a different matter to read into the Bible our cultural understanding of unity, an understanding that may be foreign to the text.

The Jesus who prays for unity in John 17:11 is also the Jesus who told us that He did not come to bring peace on the earth, but division and a sword; that our enemies may indeed be those closest to us (Luke 12, Matthew 10). John writes in his epistles that not all who claimed to be the people of God had a true understanding of who God was (1 John 1:19; 3:1,8). Paul tells the church in Corinth, a church known for divisions, that some division is necessary and even beneficial (1 Corinthians 11:18-19).

Ultimately, there will be no true reconciliation in the Moravian Church until there is agreement on the nature of the Bible and the meaning of biblical authority. Those who see reason and culture as illuminating Scripture and those who see Scripture as the means of illuminating our ability to reason and our view of culture will be at odds indefinitely, as even the meaning of forgiveness and how that forgiveness is lived out are tied up in how we view Scripture and its role in guiding us.

We may agree that forgiveness and reconciliation begin when people free themselves from their imagined role of judge and lord over

those with whom they differ; but how we view the next step depends upon our view of Scripture. Some may seek to maintain differences in close proximity to one another. Others, in the face of a disagreement they see as irreconcilable, may divide in order to promote what they see as true unity, a fellowship based on understandings that they consider orthodox. Those in the second group view themselves as able to live peacefully with differences, sharing life in many capacities, provided they are not under the spiritual direction of those with whom they disagree.

Unfortunately, people all too often cannot live in the midst of this tension without disparaging those with whom they differ. But however badly we may miss the mark, living peaceably in this tension is what I know Scripture to teach and is what the Moravian communities did when their settlements had to interact with the world that existed outside of their community. Christ can empower us to live in the midst of this tension, as He empowered the saints who came before us, and to trust and obey Him in this matter is to trust that God will give to us what He commands for us to do.

Wilde's article contains some invaluable insights regarding the need to equip people with practical and effective methods for bringing about forgiveness. Speaking directly with the person with whom we have a disagreement, following other biblical guidelines for dealing with conflict—these are much-needed practices for the people of God in dealing with conflict both inside and outside of the church. Wilde's realistic suggestions give hope that the church can, in fact, learn how to deal more effectively with conflict.

Although these methods do provide a framework from which the church can work, having a new framework does not automatically mean that reconciliation will occur:

We are responsible to pursue reconciliation, but live with the pain if it does not succeed. In other words, we are not responsible to make reconciliation happen. Paul says in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." So far as it depends on you. Jesus took every step required of a human being to make matters right with his enemies (He never sinned), and still they had things against Him and were not reconciled to Him.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians living before the eschaton, we cannot expect that all people will respond to the message of Christ in a positive manner. Believing as we do that there exists an absolute truth, we must accept that not every different understanding of God can be a right understanding. There will always be people who call on God, believe in God, but do not have a right understanding of who God is. That is not to say that our interpretation is the truth, but it does mean that even though people may have some knowledge of God, not all are correct in their understanding. Therefore, when conflict arises, we should be listening to what the other person is saying, examining it to see if it is in line with Scripture, and having open discussion to lead the other person to see our perspective. Ultimately we must be obedient to Scripture and not forfeit what God has revealed to us simply to appease others.

Lest we deceive ourselves, as professing Christians we should ask whether we are actually willing to forgive others. “An unwillingness to forgive clearly has no place in the kingdom, and may in fact signal that such a one has not experienced the initial forgiveness of God in his or her life.”<sup>3</sup> Saving faith in Christ is not just the belief that Christ has forgiven us:

Saving faith means tasting this forgiveness as part of the way God is and experiencing it (and him!) as precious and magnificent. Saving faith looks at the horror of sin, and then looks at the holiness of God, and apprehends spiritually that God’s forgiveness is unspeakably glorious.... It means savoring the truth that a forgiving God is the most precious reality in the universe.<sup>4</sup>

When God gives us the eyes to see the reality of His forgiveness, we cannot help being humble and forgiving people. Although people who profess faith in Christ may not have a true knowledge of Him, there is no reason to conclude that they cannot come to a true knowledge of Him. In fact, God may desire that they will come to know Him through people with whom they are in conflict. God will oppose us if we are proud with one another, but will give us grace if we are humble (James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5). When we are able to see that Christ has paid for all of the sins of His children and that He is sovereign over all things, we can claim the promise “that all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28) in spite of what may appear to be happening around us.

Perhaps it is time that our efforts to maintain unity be refocused onto the only

one who can truly unify us. Maybe if we are broken enough, humble enough, we can shed our veneers of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency and receive the kingdom like a little child. Then maybe, just maybe, we can see restoration begin to take place.

*Father, this is me calling, a broken child in a broken world...*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> From some of the reading I have done about Zinzendorf and the Moravians on his estate, as well as the Moravians in Bethlehem, I cannot help wondering if the problems in the Moravian Church today are, in part, a sociological outworking of the process of adapting from an earlier model, in which the church was the center of community that defined its members’ lives, to a new model for “doing church” in an individualistic, decentralized and pluralistic society. This explanation does, in many ways, seem appropriate to what has been occurring in the Moravian Church in particular, as well as in the church in America as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> John Piper, “Getting Right with God and Each Other (Matthew 5:21–26),” [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org), March 10, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1994), 120.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), 269–270.

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## Robert E. Sawyer

First of all I want to express thanks to the editor, board, and author for choice of the theme. Forgiveness is mentioned a lot (“Oh, just forgive and forget,” or “Better to ask forgiveness than permission”). But few seem to really understand what forgiveness is.

I appreciate the biblical and theological dimensions of the essay. I appreciate the “contrast and compare” discussion of conflict resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Margaret clearly ties mission to forgiveness in relating the results of the Moravians’ August 13, 1727, experience, and in noting that “in theology and the social sciences, reconciliation is described as a combination of justice and peace, or the restoration of right relationships.”

But a prior question loomed large for me: What is it that brings forgiveness into the life of a person who has been terribly wronged? Why is it that some who experience extreme discrimination, violence, and intentional deprivation respond with hatred and violence, while others take the path of forgiveness and reconciliation?

I find some answers in Margaret’s essay. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and making peace are not human creations but are the work of the Holy Spirit, so forgiveness is far more likely in the life of those who are spiritually alive and open to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Seeing forgiveness modeled by others is a motivator. But I think there is another reason why some who have been terribly wronged can still forgive.

Margaret notes that forgiveness and reconciliation both have deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In our Christian tradition, forgiveness and reconciliation are grounded in Christ’s atoning death (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In the broader tradition they are grounded in the understanding that every human being is created in the image of God, “only a little lower than God, and crowned with glory and honor” (Genesis 1 and Psalm 8).

Among the friends I have been privileged to know are three Palestinian Christian clergy: Melkite archbishop Elias Chacour, Lutheran bishop Munib Younan, and Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb. One lives in the State of Israel, one in East Jerusalem, and one in the Occupied West Bank. I listen to and read their stories, and I readily understand how their experiences could have led to lives of bitterness and hatred rather than forgiveness and reconciliation. Why is forgiveness at the core of their lives and ministries?

They all speak of the essential dignity of every human being. Pastor Raheb wrote in *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, “To love one’s enemy means that despite the conflict one recognizes the enemy as a creature of God who has a right to live, to be forgiven, and to love—but not the right to commit an unjust act” (103). In his 2006 Easter message Bishop Younan wrote, “Our witness should be strong and simple: Our God is risen and calls us to live as people of the Resurrection, sisters and brothers in Christ and of creation, *caring for each human being with dignity and justice.*”

Archbishop Chacour writes about a day that he pondered the Beatitudes at the site where Jesus gave them. He got to the one about hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and he thought about Jesus' new understanding of righteousness. "The stiff laws of the Old Testament were only a shadow of the higher law of God's love that He had come to fulfill." Scenes of Jesus' ministry raced through his mind. There was forgiveness for the woman taken in adultery. The blind and the crippled were healed on the Sabbath. The Samaritan outcast became a person worthy of honor and concern.

"For one of the first things Jesus did when He reconciled man to God was to restore human dignity.... Suddenly I knew that the first step toward reconciling Jew and Palestinian was the restoration of human dignity" (*Blood Brothers*, 153).

Forgiveness and reconciliation are hard work and they require strength of character, a strong sense of one's own dignity and the dignity of the "other." Both insecurity and chauvinism are enemies of forgiveness.

Margaret touches on another question well worth exploring. "Can nations or groups forgive?" (See her Insert 1.) It's a discussion well beyond this response, but in my opinion, forgiveness by a group is possible, although extremely rare. The Southern Province Synod of 2006 took a step in that direction by adopting a resolution in which it "expresses its regret and apologizes to the African American community for the past participation of the Moravian Church in the institution of slavery." That was a good step and was well received by the community.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

in South Africa had national as well as individual dimensions and has been emulated in a number of other countries as well as at least one city (Greensboro, NC). In these and other contexts I think that the degree to which a group can forgive depends on the degree to which a group is truly a body or an organism, where group identity supersedes individuality. That means the church, the Body of Christ, is a place where forgiveness and reconciliation can indeed take place. Maybe Margaret's essay will move us along a bit further.

*Robert E. Sawyer served as a Moravian pastor and administrator for 40 years and is now engaged in peacemaking in Israel/Palestine through his position as executive director of Pilgrims of Ibillin.*

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## **Angelene Swart**

Margaret Wilde did well in addressing the issue of forgiveness as it is very relevant. Forgiveness is a pressing need throughout the worldwide Moravian Unity.

I wish to share my experience as a South African who lived through years of oppression where hatred, anger, rage, and resentment built up within the hearts of the majority of the oppressed population.

With the demise of apartheid there was fear that after so much pain, hurt, torture, and degradation and so many inhumane acts of violence and death, forgiveness would be almost impossible or unacceptable for the victims. The ultimate aim of the newly-elected government

was to rebuild and reconstruct South Africa into a new and all-inclusive democratic nation. Our leaders took the initiative to explore the road of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation. They established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to hold public and private hearings in which victims of gross human rights violations could tell their stories with some prospect of possible reparations. The idea was to promote national reconciliation rather than vengeance.

Victims told their heartrending stories and expressed their willingness to forgive. Perpetrators gave their accounts of their disgusting acts of violence, murder, and unrest and asked for forgiveness. For both parties there was a sense of relief and a chance for a new beginning.

In his 1999 work *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu, the retired Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town who was also the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said, "We do not usually rush to expose our vulnerability and our sinfulness. But if the process of forgiveness and healing is to succeed, acknowledgement of the truth and of having wronged someone is important in getting to the root of the breach" (270).

The whole process was very emotional and stirring. It was amazing to witness the exceptional consideration and respect that the victims demonstrated. Forgiving an oppressor is very difficult. The idea of rebuilding a relationship with an oppressor needs hard and long thinking as one is never sure of the oppressor's sincere desire for forgiveness and reconciliation.

It is sad to mention that not all perpetrators

and victims participated in the hearings, and not all were willing to give or receive forgiveness. There were those who said that they would never forgive. We are aware that the atrocities of our recent past cannot be easily forgotten. It will be difficult for people to forget personal crimes and abuses that robbed them of their loved ones, their dignity, and their security. But it is also necessary to remember so that we should not let it happen again. "Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what has happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence," says Desmond Tutu (271).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a bold effort to deal with the situation that our country faced when we launched our newfound democracy. It was not a perfect process, but it did bring a sense of hope and a possibility of a shared diverse future.

In our process it was clear that all of the past had to be dealt with. The wrongs of the past had to be understood, and there had to be a willingness to confess, to forgive, and to reconcile.

People choose to let go of the wrongs of the past in their own time. We in South Africa, including our religious communities, are still on the path of seeking and offering forgiveness, of letting go of the bitterness and overcoming the powers of estrangement.

We can all do well if we follow the brave and gallant example of forgiveness and reconciliation as personified by our first

democratically elected president, Mr. Nelson Mandela. He stepped out of prison after 27 years as a political prisoner without words of hatred and revenge. With unwavering consistency he continues to promote national unity and reconciliation.

In conclusion, it can be said that the South African experience was a complex socio-economic transformation process. While allowing enough space for people to forgive each other on an interpersonal level, the reconciliation process on a deeper level was aimed at addressing the deep-rooted historical, economic, and political contradictions in the society. In this sense I agree with Lewis Smedes' observation, cited by Margaret Wilde in her article, that forgiving is an individual process whereas reconciliation is a social process.

The teaching of forgiveness and reconciliation is indeed a necessary and valuable tool in the hand of the church, helping congregants to fully understand how they contribute to establishing the reign of God through forgiving each other and participating in processes of reconciliation.

*Born and bred in Cape Town, Angelene Swart served as the first full-time Christian educator for the Moravian Church in South Africa, the first female director of Moravian Theological Seminary, the first female president of the Moravian church in South Africa, and the first lay female president of the Moravian Unity Board. She currently serves on the Council of the Lutheran World Federation and as chairperson of the Western Cape Council of Churches.*

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## **Livingstone Thompson**

I commend Margaret Wilde for a serious attempt to address the tension evident in the Moravian Community, particularly in America. Mind you, the tension in the American church is not unique. Recent tensions in the Czech Republic and hitherto in Nicaragua and Honduras, although having different causes, indicate a propensity to tension within the Christian community in general and within the Moravian community in particular.

In responding to Wilde's paper I will first comment briefly on the issue of forgiveness. I will show that part of the difficulty in discussing forgiveness is that because of the limitations of language, those in the discussion may be using the same word but speaking of different notions. When we refer to biblical notions like forgiveness, we should be mindful not only of differences between Hebraic and Greek concepts but also of differences within Greek usage itself.

Secondly, commenting a little on hermeneutics, I hope to show that engaging difference is an ongoing part of the Moravian tradition and not some unusual "sifting" moment. I will argue that in the Moravian Church there is a fundamental tension between the Comenian and Zinzendorfan sub-traditions. This tension accounts for some of the trends and difficulties historically evident in modern Moravian hermeneutics.

### **Forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible**

In the Hebrew Bible there are, in the main, three words usually translated into English as

“forgive” (or forgiveness, forgiving, etc.). The least common of the three is the one we find in Jeremiah 18:23, which according to Fohrer’s *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament* comes from the root כפר meaning to placate, smear or cover.<sup>1</sup> A derivative of the word is found also in Isaiah 28:18, where it is translated “annulled.” It is from this root word that we get the idea of atonement found in, say, Romans 3:25.

The second word we translate “forgive” comes from the root פלל, a derivative of which we find in I Kings 8:30, Jeremiah 31:34 and Psalm 103:3. Of the three main Hebrew Bible words usually translated as “forgive,” this word is the most frequently used. In these references, the idea, evident in the form of the verb, is God’s readiness to forgive. So there is a certain character of “readiness” that qualifies the act of forgiveness, but the qualification itself is not separate from the act of forgiving. Fohrer considers this second idea of forgiveness as characteristic of God alone.

The third usage, to which Wilde refers in her quotation from Exodus 34:7, is נשח. It is the most complex of the words used to mean forgiveness because, as both Fohrer and Strong<sup>2</sup> note, the word can also mean lift, pick up, carry, take away, and count, among several other concepts. Wilde is unfortunately wrong if, as I understand it, she suggests that it is from this understanding of forgiveness that the notion of atonement comes. This illustrates the problem we find in hermeneutics today. We are operating with notions from modern usage and are inclined to impose these notions on the biblical text.

## **Forgiveness in the NT**

The problem of going to Scripture to underline our convictions is likewise evident in use of the Greek NT. Like the Hebrew Bible, the Greek NT has three words that we translate as “forgive.” The first, χαριζόμενοι [Ephesians 4:32], is from the word χαρίζομαι and has as its root χάρις, which means graciousness, favor, goodwill, benefaction. This word is completely different from the one we find in Matthew 6:15 (Wilde’s reference), which comes from the word ἀφήμι. This latter word carries the notion of cancel, pardon, give up, abandon, and does not appear at all in Matthew 5:23-24 (Wilde’s reference).

The third word translated “forgive” is ἀπολύω, which we find in Luke 6:37. The principal idea here is that of pardon, as with a debt, and does not necessarily indicate relationship between the parties involved. A debt can be cancelled or pardoned and yet the individual is not forgiven and may certainly not be reconciled.

The Greek word διαλλάσσω, translated “be reconciled” in Matthew 5:23-24, comes from two words, one meaning “through” and the other meaning “change.” It appears that in this case the one going to worship makes the change; the text does not refer to the one against whom there might be a cause. The implication here is that both the initiative and the change take place in only one party. This idea of reconciliation would be closer to the idea of repentance. By contrast, the concept of reconciliation that we find in 2 Cor 5:18 (with

the word *καταλλάσσω*) carries the idea that the reconciliation takes place in both parties. From one idea that we find in Scripture, then, reconciliation does not necessarily require an action by both parties.

If my understanding of reconciliation in Matthew 5:23 is correct, then Wilde's assertion that "reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness" would be misleading. From a biblical point of view, it would be more accurate to say that reconciliation cannot happen without repentance and a change of attitude. It is therefore not necessary to predicate discussion of reconciliation on any notion of forgiveness. By the same token, discussion of forgiveness, as a biblical concept, need not involve any discussion about reconciliation.

### **Tension in the Moravian Tradition**

For us in the Moravian Church it might be helpful to realize that the tensions we experience now are connected to a pre-existing tension in the way the Moravian tradition has historically gone about reading the Bible, theology and Christian history. It seems that tension in the Moravian tradition was inevitable, as the tension first and foremost reflects the differences between the approaches of John Amos Comenius and Count Zinzendorf, the two most influential theologians in the Moravian tradition for the last four hundred years.

Comenius writes out of a pre-Enlightenment context, in which he shows a willingness to embrace reason and sees it in harmony with faith. Zinzendorf writes within an Enlightenment context and takes a position

over against rationalism, in which he limits the role that reason can play in matters of faith. What became the tension in the hermeneutics of the Renewed Moravian Church already existed in the differing hermeneutics of Comenius and Zinzendorf. It may not be necessary to attempt to resolve that tension because this plurality of views, especially on non-essentials, is itself engraved in the Moravian self-understanding.

In addition to the differences between Comenius and Zinzendorf, there seem to be two other sources of the Moravian hermeneutical tension. The first is the plurality of traditions that were formally incorporated into the Renewed Moravian Church in 1744. According to that Synod, "The renewed Brethren's Church recognizes within its pale three modes of teaching Christian doctrine, which it distinguishes as the Moravian, the Lutheran and the Reformed tropus."<sup>3</sup> The Synod of 1774 reaffirmed this position while adding that the entire Protestant Church, which sprang from the sixteenth-century Reformation, agreed on the sole authority of Holy Scripture in matters of faith and on justification by faith. The centrality of the Scriptures was found to be consistent with the Bohemian/Moravian Brethren Church, which preceded the Reformation by some fifty years.

The differences in the three conceptions of Christian doctrine, the constitution and ecclesiastical practice, could be regarded as different ways of apprehending the one divine truth. However, none of the three tropoi was required to give up its peculiar confession

of faith in becoming a part of the Renewed Moravian Church. The result was that the three interpretive traditions were allowed to exist side by side in the new union. The plurality of ways of apprehending divine truth was seen as a precious treasure to be faithfully preserved. The Moravian Church believed it should “be of service to the [whole Protestant Church] by means of this gift ... to help it [the Protestant community] more and more fully to carry out the will of the Lord, ‘that they all may be one.’”<sup>4</sup>

This perception of the church as an instrument of unity has influenced the role it has played in inter-church ecumenism. However, the different hermeneutical approaches that the three tropoi brought persisted for some time, thus ensuring differences and tensions in the ways in which Scripture and the wider Christian tradition were read. In the early years of the Renewed Church, Zinzendorf played a key role in developing a bias towards the Lutheran tradition, and so the Augsburg Confession was declared to be the main confession guiding theological discourse.<sup>5</sup> In the immediate post-Zinzendorf period there was an attempt to lessen the role that one confession was perceived as playing. Consequently, the current *Church Order* lists ten different confessions to which it subscribes. In addition to the Nicene, Apostles’ and Athanasian creeds, the list includes the 1535 Confession of the Bohemian Brethren, the Twenty-One Articles of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, and the Heidelberg Confession. The lesser-used 1532 Declaration of the Synod of Berne, the Shorter Catechism

of Martin Luther and the 1934 Declaration of Barmen are also part of the list. Of the whole list, though, only the Bohemian Confession of 1535 can be called Moravian.

### **Liberalism**

Also present in the Moravian Church is hermeneutical tension of more recent vintage, arising out of conflicts over liberal theology and the extent to which the historical-critical method was to be allowed to influence Moravian hermeneutics. The reaction within the Moravian Church to liberal theology came first and foremost from the German Province because of the attempts to introduce the thoughts of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and Wilhelm Hermann (1846–1922) into the Moravian Seminary at Gnadensfeld. So extensive was the controversy that the Synod considered a proposal for the closure of the seminary. Although that proposal was not approved, groups that supported Moravian overseas mission threatened to withdraw their financial support.<sup>6</sup>

The *Church Order* of 1911 reflects the thinking of the German Synod of 1908, where the issue proved to be contentious.<sup>7</sup> In responding to the theological controversies the *Church Order* retrieved earlier theological formulations that were first promulgated at the Synod of 1879. It argued as follows: “We hold fast to our genuine Moravian view, that it is not our business to determine what the Holy Scriptures have left undetermined, or to contend about the mysteries impenetrable to human reason.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, this suspicion of

reason in theological circles reflects a general mood in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the Compendium of Doctrine included in the *Results of the Synod of 1857* does not include any statement that refers to the limitation of reason, despite the limits that Zinzendorf placed on reason in his commentary on the Augsburg Confession.<sup>10</sup>

This latter source of tension, concerning the extent of use of liberal theological methodology, has been an influential factor in Protestant hermeneutics and continues to play a critical role today. The truth is that both approaches—one embracing liberal theology, and one remaining suspicious of it—belong to the broader Moravian tradition in the same way that a Comenian embrace of rationalism and a Zinzendorffian suspicion of it co-exist within the same tradition. As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> both approaches have an important contribution to make to Moravian theological discourse today and must be allowed to do so.

For that reason I do not receive well the notion of “Sifting Time” to which Wilde refers, as it suggests that engaging difference within the Moravian tradition has not been an ongoing enterprise.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Georg Fohrer et al., eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary of the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1973), 126.

<sup>2</sup> James Strong, “A Concise Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Results of the Synod of the Protestant Church of the United Brethren Held at Herrnhut in the Year 1848*, IX, 104.

<sup>4</sup> *Church Book of the Brethren’s Unity of the British Province*, II, 9, 44.

<sup>5</sup> In the Introduction to Zinzendorf’s *Twenty-One Discourses*, the Synod of 1748 was keen to indicate the consistency of its positions with the Augsburg Confession. See for example ix-x. However, under the leadership of Spangenberg in the immediate post-Zinzendorffian period there was a trend away from some Zinzendorffian views. See Hamilton, *A History of the Church*, 216-221.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Crews, *Confessing Our Unity in Christ: Historical and Theological Background to “The Ground of the Unity”* (Winston-Salem, NC: Moravian Church in America, Southern Province, 1994), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Crews, *Confessing Our Unity in Christ*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Church Order 1911*, II, I, 2. See also *Results of the General Synod of the Brethren’s Unity 1879*, II, 6 (London: Moravian Publications Office, 1881), 10. The only difference between the 1879 and the 1911 statements on the issue is the first phrase. In 1879 it runs, “We strictly adhere to the principle which has always obtained among the Brethren, that is not our business...” etc. The 1911 statement runs, “We hold fast to our genuine Moravian view, that it is not our business...” etc.

<sup>9</sup> Toland refers to this suspicion and was critical of the church in general for its negative attitude to reason. The project of deism was to show that reason in fact had a role in religion, hence Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity*.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, at the Synod of 1769 Spangenberg questioned whether the use of the lot, which had earlier been instituted in recognition of human inefficiency in arriving at a reasoned consensus, would not be best dropped, since it remained a bone of contention. For the details see Hamilton, *A History of the Church*, 217.

<sup>11</sup> See Livingstone Thompson, *A Protestant Theology of Pluralism* (New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

*Livingstone Thompson lectures in world religions at Trinity College and St. Patrick's College, Dublin, Republic of Ireland. An ordained minister and former president of the executive board of the Moravian Church in Jamaica, he is author of A Formula for Conversation: Christians and Muslims in Dialogue (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2007) and the forthcoming A Protestant Theology of Religious Pluralism (Oxford: Peter Lang).*

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## The Author Responds

What a wonderful set of reflections! Could this be the right time for an extended conversation, starting perhaps with an intersynodical event or a retreat, about the many ways of seeing and doing forgiveness wherever we are in the body of Christ?

Several of you spoke from your own pain, and that kind of pain can last a long time. Brother Asquith, I first heard you grieving over the mounting schism in the Southern Baptist Church in 1983, in the Harstines' living room soon after Ted and I moved to Bethlehem. Brother Sawyer, you and I have long shared a sense of helplessness over the cycle of bitterness among God's children in Israel and Palestine. Brother Jones, you speak eloquently for those who still seek to remain faithful to a church you believe has gone astray.

I believe God grieves over these things too—as he did over Ephraim (Hosea 10:8-9), or as Jesus wept over Jerusalem because “the things that make for peace ... are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). In that sense, Brother Bennett, we do have a kind of power over the God who makes himself vulnerable, whose grace lies precisely in absorbing and redeeming our pain. Perhaps the relationship between divine and human forgiveness is not only metaphorical but sacramental: our suffering and forgiving are not only an imitation but truly an expression of God's sorrow and mercy.

Thank you, Sister Swart, for reminding us that grace broke through in South Africa when we least expected it. Glenn may be right that there's not much promise of reconciliation on the horizon, but maybe the horizon is the wrong place to look. “The kingdom of God is not

coming with things that can be observed,” said Jesus; “in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21). God’s grace works among us quietly; the Holy Spirit has its own logic and process. We don’t know why the people of South Africa were ready to forgive, but they were. Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu saw it, not on the horizon but in themselves and among the people around them, and by calling attention to it they helped bring it to fruition.

Brother Jones and Brother Thompson, I would love to talk with you together—from your very different perspectives—about the authority and interpretation of scripture. When Brother Jones speaks of unity, and Brother Thompson of forgiveness, we all agree on the need to separate modern cultural understandings from the meaning of a text. But

we may have different cultural understandings of unity and forgiveness; and we may not agree on which understandings are biblical, which are modern and cultural.

Sometimes I try to set aside such disagreements, respectfully and temporarily, in order to identify points of agreement and keep the search for meaning open (as earlier Moravians were trying to do, perhaps, in their ambivalent response to theological liberalism). It doesn’t work very well with people who are sure that a text has only one meaning, apart from the wider biblical context. In such cases we have two choices: to cut off the discussion (which thankfully, Brother Jones does not want to do), or to speak the truth as we see it, and seek and offer forgiveness when our words cause division among us.

## Book Review

Engel, Katherine Carté, *Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Reviewed by Donald Frey.

Katherine Engel's book tells the story of the Bethlehem Moravians from the community's founding through the early years of the Republic. Even within this long time-frame, Engel shows great familiarity with details of the economic dealings, structures, and organization of this "pilgrim congregation." Engel argues that the rise and decline of Bethlehem must be understood in terms of the community's degree of involvement with missions.

According to Engel, Bethlehem's early communal economy (the Oeconomy or General Economy) was mainly a practical strategy meant to cover the large expenses of mission work. She is not alone in stating that the General Economy, with its socialist elements, was not a fundamental tenet of Moravian belief. Indeed, the General Economy was quickly disbanded by the Unity when Bethlehem's role in missionary activity was downgraded after 1760.

Readers of Engel's book may wonder: Was the General Economy anything more than a practical strategy, to be discarded when no longer needed? Engel makes a good case that that is all it was to Unity leaders in Herrnhut (and even in Bethlehem). However, some details in the book show the General Economy in another light. When average congregation members were polled about discontinuing the General Economy, several of the answers "imbued the Oeconomy with religious meaning beyond its pragmatic origins ... and assumed that the communal household had value in and of itself" (150). And some residents stated how "it fitted Moravian religious beliefs." Some residents saw the common housekeeping as the Savior's household. For average members, the General Economy had become "a way of expressing devotion to God" (151). It appears that what may have started as a practical measure to meet missionary expenses had gained deeper, spiritual meaning to participants in the General Economy.

Engel gives only passing mention to the Brotherly Agreement of 1754; but the wording of the Agreement suggests that the General Economy held religious significance to the signers. The Brotherly Agreement, in my view, stated a fragmentary Christian critique of the economics practiced in the outside world; it also highlighted the spiritual nature of the brotherhood and sisterhood that made a communal economy work. So, while religious socialism surely was not a formal tenet of Moravian belief, it probably was more than a mere tactic to many of the Moravians who participated in it. Craig Atwood, in his *Community of the Cross* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), appears to support this view. Engel's book gives evidence that a spiritual interpretation existed, but Engel does not develop it.

In relating to non-Moravians, the community adopted the economic practices of the times, within the bounds of Christian ethics, which called for honest dealings (including what we now call “transparency”), fair pricing, good quality, and property rights constrained by stewardship. When the General Economy was abandoned, the same ethical rules were in force for the “privatized” businesses and the ongoing church-owned businesses of Bethlehem. This Moravian commercial morality differed little from that of other colonial Protestants (but differed greatly from nineteenth-century American economics, a topic outside Engel’s research).

This book will be engaging to anyone interested in Moravian history. Katherine Engel covers much more than what I have considered in this short review. For example, she shows how the missionary work of the pilgrim congregation was distinctly counter-cultural for its day: the unique work and relationship of the Moravians with the Native Americans caused their European-American neighbors to see them as a potential threat when war loomed and many Indian tribes allied themselves with the French. Indeed this history can be read as a tragedy in which world politics, war, and even Unity decisions disrupted and finally ended the kind of Indian mission that had made Bethlehem unique.

*Donald Frey is a member of Home Moravian Church and professor of economics at Wake Forest University. His recent book, America’s Economic Moralists: A History of Rival Ethics and Economics (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), includes a chapter on ethical values displayed in the colonial Moravian settlements of North Carolina.*

## Letters to the Editor

### **To the editor:**

The subject of the summer 2009 issue, “Moravian Theology Today,” has evoked responses from students about what it ought to be. It seems to me that any serious effort to redefine a church’s theology should begin by defining the current historical context appropriate to that theological revision. The Lutheran Reformation and the British church reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century found the Bible to be the agent in activating the widespread desire for redefining authority. The heart religion of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravians both energized the church community and initiated a missionary response to the Zeitgeist of a wider world to be conquered.

Today’s historical context has a different direction. It appears that mainstream Protestant churches, including the Moravian Church, are in the early stages of consolidation. Whereas in earlier times issues relating to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church governance, and the interpretation of the Bible were cause for separation, today these are minor compared to some more recently emergent issues of race, gender, homosexuality, and abortion. Indeed, the issue of homosexuality may be dividing the Episcopal Church, and is unsettling in other denominations. In other respects these denominations share much in common. We all have the same Gospel. Mainline seminaries teach, basically, the same material, based on the same scholarship. The faculty at Moravian Theological Seminary represents several denominations. The student body is ecumenical. One could venture to say that there are more differences within the denominations than between them.

Our society is in the midst of cultural reorganization and redefinition. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century being a Christian was defined in theological terms that distinguished denominations from each other. Today, being a Christian arouses the consciousness of not being a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or a non-believer. The divinity school of our country’s oldest university, which was founded for the training of Christian ministers, recently revised its curriculum on the principle of “de-centering,” stating that it offers to prepare professional practitioners for all the major religious faiths.

Biblical faith leads me to ask the question: What is God doing in the world today? Searching our past is helpful in finding our roots, but unless we utilize it for defining the present and the future it will not get us very far.

—Howard Cox

## Letters to the Editor (continued)

### To the editor:

The comments in the summer 2009 issue of *The Hinge* inspired me to pull a hymn text out of the past, polish it up for the present and offer it as a gift for others to use and share as the Spirit moves them during this season.

The original hymn, entitled “Help Us Return,” was written in 1997 and sung by the Home Church Men’s Chorus at a Singstunde in 1999. It lay dormant until the hopes and concerns student seminarians expressed for the Moravian Church in *The Hinge* sparked it back to life with quite a few new words and a whole new name.

“Let Us Live Now” (Phil. 3:16)

Tune: Truro

Text: Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski, Aug. 10, 1997, revised July 24, 2009

Help us return to you this day!  
Now hear our heart-based plea, we pray.  
We move still in your Unity;  
From backward vision set us free.

Help us to hold your presence near.  
Preserve our past, which we hold dear.  
Let us live now what we’ve attained;  
Our Holy Spirit has remained.

In gratitude for fields we’ve trod,  
We vow to break both bread and clod;  
For your good seed needs fresh plowed ground.  
Let sun, fresh air, and rain abound.

Help us reveal a message clear.  
Protect us from the throes of fear.  
Your Spirit beams, when we agree  
To strive to live in Unity.

Blessings to all, wherever you may find them,

—Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski

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