

that when it comes to our possessions we are taking our cues from our culture rather than from Christ? I believe Christ is calling us to change the way we treat the wealth

entrusted to us. I believe that Christ is calling our North American Moravian Church to turn from our culture and look to him.

## Hampton Morgan, Jr.

### Let's Revisit the *Ground of the Unity*

2002, a year of provincial and Unity synods, marks the 45th anniversary of the adoption of the *Ground of the Unity* as the statement of faith of the Moravian Church. The 1957 Unity Synod that approved the *Ground of the Unity* was the first gathering of the worldwide Moravian Church after the end of World War II twelve years earlier. That Synod gave the Church a new doctrinal formulation. In the intervening years the world has changed much, while the *Ground of the Unity* has changed little. The Moravian Church should seize the moment provided by these first synods of the new millennium to at least begin a formal conversation about whether the *Ground of the Unity* remains a sufficient doctrinal foundation for the challenges of being the church of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century.

In Confessing our Unity in Christ: Historical and Theological Background to *The Ground of the Unity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moravian Archives, January 2000), Daniel Crews offers helpful insight into the context out of which the *Ground of the Unity* was developed. Crews notes that the impetus for a new doctrinal statement came from the shattering events experienced by European

Christians, especially the Germans, in the 1930s and 1940s. The German Evangelical Church capitulated in the face of Nazi ideology and many German Moravians were unable to resist the regime's demand that all citizens bow at the altar of this demonic power. It was the still vivid and bitter grief of the church's failure during those years that convinced European Moravians that a new doctrinal formulation was imperative. Though other provinces had not gone through the same experiences, the Holy Spirit cultivated a remarkable unity and the new doctrinal statement was unanimously approved.

Those urging a new statement did not start from scratch. They drew from their own Moravian theological tradition, but it seems clear that the Continental Moravians were also deeply influenced by the Theological Declaration of Barmen (Crews, p. 24). The Barmen Declaration (adopted in 1934) was the doctrinal affirmation of the "Confessing Church," those German Protestants who recognized very early in the unfolding of the Nazi project that the very soul of the German church was at stake. The Barmen Declaration targeted the heart

of the matter for German Christians living under a demonic regime and affirmed the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ over his church. One can clearly see the footprints of this strong emphasis in the *Ground of the Unity*.

In comparison with other confessions, the Barmen Declaration is remarkable for its brevity. To be sure, it was not an attempt to cover the entire theological waterfront, as did other historic Protestant confessions, the validity of which Barmen acknowledged. It spoke rather to an emergency situation using an economy of words to target what was most at issue in the life of German Christians living under Nazi power. The *Ground of the Unity*, containing only about 1,600 words (200 fewer than Barmen), is similarly brief and obviously targeted, making no attempt at theological comprehensiveness.

My effort to find in the Barmen Declaration a major inspiration for the *Ground of the Unity* is also an attempt to ask whether the Moravian Church understands the role of a doctrinal statement to be limited and targeted, addressing what is most at risk or at issue in the life of the church. I believe that it is and that this has generally been the role of creeds, confessions and doctrinal statements. Few if any confessions are produced in a vacuum. They arise out of the questions confronting the church, questions that demand more clarity than is available in a previous statement.

I assert that these first years of the new millennium are for today's Moravian Church

what those years during and after World War II were for the Moravians who gathered in the Unity Synod of 1957. We are confronted with a cultural challenge that is as potentially dangerous to the life and mission of the church as was the Nazi challenge of 70 years ago. But let me also state this positively because that which challenges also presents opportunity. The twenty-first century offers the potential for the church to experience a renewal that will better equip it for faithful missional engagement.

I believe that an essential part of faithfully responding to the challenge of the new millennium is, as it was for Moravians following World War II, having and promoting a confession of faith that speaks to what is at issue for the church in being faithful within the context of its situation. Since we are called not to isolation and individualism but to community, the church has the risky and unavoidable task of affirming a common faith that speaks with meaning, force and clarity. Moreover, it also has the task of standing behind that common confession as the belief of the church without wavering or apology.

It is often said that the theology of the Moravian Church is not confessional but relational. While there is some truth in this, such a categorical statement is misleading. Relational theology is indeed our inheritance from Zinzendorf and one of the attractive aspects of the Moravian Church. We have long been noted for our "religion of the

heart” that we understand and experience as a deeply personal relationship with Jesus that is also worked out in committed relationships with fellow believers within the body of Christ.

But the Moravian Church is also confessional. In the booklet mentioned above, Daniel Crews traces the doctrinal line from the ancient Unity to the modern Moravian Church. There has never been a time when the Moravian Church did not have a common confession that defined, as well as words are able to, what the church believes. Historically, this has not been an incidental aspect of our self-understanding, something to be marginalized as of secondary importance. In fact, as Crews points out, the Moravian Church has invested in this task on numerous occasions, seeking always for a confessional stance that is scriptural and speaks with contemporary relevance.

One of the theological challenges that has always faced the Moravian Church, and one in which it has generally succeeded, is the challenge of holding the confessional and the relational in a healthy and creative connection. The relational, like the branches and leaves of a tree, is more visible. The roots, however, are confessional. We are relational because of what we believe about the gospel, which is the soil from which our relational branches draw nourishment through our confessional roots. If the trunk is cut, the branches and roots will both die and the nourishment of the soil will be of no value. So also must the relational and con-

fessional aspects of our theology be held together if the church is to be healthy in its life and ministry.

The twenty-first century cultural challenges and opportunities (which were already having an impact the church before the magic moment of January 1, 2000) have strained the tension between the relational and confessional almost to the point of breaking. Though the *Ground of the Unity* still stands as the confessional statement of the Moravian Church, it appears at times to totter under the assault of a culture of relativism that has clearly had an impact on the way some Moravians think about truth.

Earlier this year in the pages of this journal, Truman Dunn shared his concern about the mission of the Moravian Church in the twenty-first century, stating that the source of the church’s growing irrelevance in post-modern culture is its exclusive truth claims, some of which are contained in the *Ground of the Unity*. Dunn identified in particular this statement from the second paragraph of the *Ground of the Unity*: “We believe and confess that God has revealed Himself once and for all in His Son Jesus Christ; that our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him.”

It would have been helpful to the important discussion that needs to take place about the *Ground of the Unity* and the role of doctrinal confession in our church if Dunn would have also suggested the

changes that would make the *Ground of the Unity* a more relevant statement of faith for the twenty-first century. Had he done so, I expect that what would have become obvious is that no doctrinal statement or confession is able to avoid exclusive truth claims. Anytime the church says, “We believe,” it is drawing a circle that implies that there is something else that lies outside of the circle that it doesn’t believe to be true. The more inclusive statement about the person of Jesus in relation to God and salvation that Dunn seems to desire cannot avoid the same mistake that Dunn bemoans the church has already made in the present statement. It will also exclude.

The Synod that developed and approved the *Ground of the Unity* clearly recognized the exclusive nature of doctrinal confessions. In the fourth major section of the *Ground of the Unity*, “Creeds and Confessions,” after stating that the “Unitas Fratrum recognizes in the creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the Body of Christ,” the Synod listed three ways in which creeds help the church. First, in “formulating a Scriptural confession.” Second, in “marking the boundary of heresies.” And third, in “exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age.”

Concerning “formulating a Scriptural confession,” the same paragraph affirms that the “Unitas Fratrum maintains that all creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of the Holy Scriptures.” Is it time to test the

*Ground of the Unity* in light of the Scriptures or just in light of the prevailing culture? If we choose the latter, then the *Ground of the Unity* will surely fail the test, as would all the creeds that have gained some prominence throughout the Unity. If the former, then I believe the question is, “has the dawning of the twenty-first century created such a new situation and challenge that it is time for the church to lay the *Ground of the Unity* and the Bible on the table and test the former against the latter?” The Unity Synod is the forum where such a question is ultimately answered, but the discussion could certainly begin at a provincial synod.

Regarding “marking the boundary of heresies,” one wonders how seriously the Moravian Church takes this. The “H” word is simply not in our vocabulary or practice. To many the idea conjures images of trials, judgment, defrocking of clergy and excommunication. It is not surprising that a church with roots in the reforming ideas of John Hus would have little heart for using creeds and confessions as instruments of judgment, discipline or exclusion. This is where our understanding of our theology as relational clearly overshadows confessional considerations. But therein lies the key to honoring this understanding of the value of creeds. Accountability to one another seems to have broken down. A culture of individualism tries to empower each of us to live in theological isolation and construct our own spiritualities and creeds. There is often little sense that we are accountable to a

wider body that has, through appropriate assemblies, determined some boundaries for those who choose to be part of that body. We are concerned about a confessional baseball bat being used against the errant when the larger problem is a breakdown in relational accountability.

“Exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age” is a call to maintain the connection between faith and action. This is ultimately the highest purpose of any confession. Creeds are not vehicles to carry us to salvation but ways of expressing biblical faith and truth in a manner that helps us join word to deed and see the connection. Professing our faith in Jesus Christ as the One in whom “God has revealed himself once and for all” clarifies the uniqueness of the gospel story, sets it apart from other faith stories, and reminds the church of its reason for being: to join God in mission so that all of humanity will know God’s *shalom* in Jesus Christ.

I share with Truman Dunn and others a deep concern about the mission of the Moravian Church in the twenty-first century. We differ in our analysis as to why the anecdotal evidence suggests that our mission within North America is foundering and our church appears to be dying. Some identify the primary culprit as our exclusive truth claims about Jesus. I would argue that the theological individualism inherent in that prescription to the problem is the real culprit. It is rapidly undermining any sense of a common confession that connects us to

one another in a way that enables us to have *koinonia* in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4.5). The Moravian Church is atomizing theologically and therefore losing a cohesive voice at a time of great opportunity for witness and service.

How can this be addressed? First, I return to my point about holding our relational theological treasures in a healthy balance with our confessional theological treasures. We need to stop thinking that our choices are either/or and understand that they are both/and. We must work harder at honoring both while recognizing that each has limits. They are friends, not enemies. If the confessional gains the ascendancy, we may lose the relational. If the relational triumphs, the confessional will suffer.

Second, I think that it is time to bring into a synod setting some of the dialogue that has already been taking place about the *Ground of the Unity*. Does the Moravian Church still consider the *Ground of the Unity* to be a Scriptural confession that is targeted to what is at issue for the church today? Though there seem to be increasing pressures to do so, we have been avoiding this conversation for quite some time because it is a high-risk undertaking. We already know that the theological diversity of the church is wide. That is evident just in the day-to-day communications and interactions. A pointed conversation about the *Ground of the Unity* may highlight in a quite uncomfortable way just how wide our theological diversity is, but I think this is

unavoidable. The longer we postpone it, the longer we will exhibit those signs that have rightly been identified as pointing the way to demise.

The great fear, of course, is division or schism, but it is also possible that such a conversation could lead to renewal if we all are prepared to approach it with the humility, brokenness, and repentance that our current situation points to as necessary. Perhaps a new doctrinal statement for a new millennium is a gift God would be pleased

to give the Moravian Church. For me, the *Ground of the Unity* still rings true as a sufficient confessional foundation for the Moravian Church, but I am prepared to join in conversation with those for whom it does not.

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## Mallie Graham

### Diversity

Since being asked to write this article, I have asked questions, listened to pastors and friends, mused on the topic, observed different churches in action, read church periodicals, and I have come to some personal conclusions.

The greatest challenge for the Moravian Church in any province is how do we proclaim the good news of saving grace through Jesus Christ to our family, our church, our community, our Moravian world, and the world. After all, isn't this the mission of the church? This might be what you would expect me to say. However, why is this a challenge? After all, our renewed Moravian Church has been doing this since 1732. For me, it is a challenge for the church, and maybe not just Moravian, because of the diversity offered

to the church in the areas of worship style, music, clergy, administrative leadership, congregational make-up, finances, Sunday School curriculum, and so forth. DIVERSITY

Are we able to break from the traditions of our Moravian Church? Do we need to break from these traditions? Change is inevitable in all of life. Why not the church? What is Moravian? Is it in the eye of the beholder? All of these are questions to think about. I often hear the statement, "but that's not Moravian!"

The following things make something Moravian for some of us: First, liturgical worship with Moravian chorals and music; second, a focus on world mission, and third, connections with Moravians in Unity Provinces in worship and fellowship. For