

# *Faith as Individual and Communal*

Arthur Freeman

A Tradition of Moravian Theology? .....	1
Recovering Our Heritage .....	4
The Traditioning of Our Heritage .....	4
Barriers .....	7
The Moravian tradition.....	7
Tradition and Journey, Unity and Variety.....	11
A Model for Effecting Change in the Tradition.....	12

This was put together as a way of gaining perspective on the theological differences which are a natural part of a living, thinking, journeying, exploring, theologizing Church.

## **A Tradition of Moravian Theology?<sup>1</sup>**

As to whether there is really a tradition of Moravian theology, the Moravian Interprovincial Faith and Order Commission in 1990 stated in a position paper developed for guiding its own theological tasks: <sup>2</sup>

Although it has often been said that the Moravian Church does not have a theology or is not theologically inclined, it is our understanding that it has a very definite theology. In its long history it has variously had its unique stance, also being influenced by the theological expressions of the other theological traditions: in the late 16th and early 17th century the Ancient Church was decidedly affected by the Reformed tradition, while in 18th Century Germany the Renewed Church was quite Lutheran, affirming the special role of the Augsburg Confession.

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<sup>1</sup> Much in the first two sections is taken from Arthur Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf*, Bethlehem, Winston-Salem, The Moravian Church in America, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> "The Theological Task As Understood Within the Moravian Tradition," was revised and accepted for use by the Interprovincial Faith and Order Commission of the Northern and Southern American Moravian Provinces on July 13, 1990. This paper was intended as a statement of theological method which was to be foundational for the future work of the Commission. The mentioned Joint Theological Commission was formed before the Faith and Order Commission and was given the responsibility of examining the theology of the Moravian heritage to see if theological differences contributed to the failure of an attempted merger of the two North American Provinces of the Moravian Church. The 1979 statement indicated the sharing of a common theology between the Northern and Southern American provinces and that theological differences were not contributive to the failed merger.

Generally, sometimes more and sometimes less consciously, there has been an awareness of epistemological issues which has decidedly affected the position of the Moravian Church on theology. It is well expressed in the statement on theology in 1979 by the Joint Theological Commission of the Northern and Southern Provinces, U.S.A.:

Theological reflection in the Moravian tradition is not to be understood as an attempt to arrive at final answers but is a way of thinking about God and His relationship to us so that He can, through His Spirit, draw us to Himself, and to His Son, and we can know Him as the Source of our living. Such reflection should lead to sharing of ideas and experiences, articulation of our faith, new levels of trust toward each other as persons through whom God partially discloses Himself in various ways, stimulation of the Christian life and our attentive waiting upon God for His clarification of our understanding.

One may say that the theological views which are particular to the Moravian Church were formed by an awareness that Christianity at its heart is relational and devotional, not conceptual; that the fostering of relationship with God and Christian life are central, without which concepts have no "coinage". Conceptual, liturgical and institutional expressions, while sharing the foundational experience of faith and life, are always shaped by historical and cultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> The theological understanding of the Ancient Moravian Church was particularly formed by its dividing all theological and ecclesial matters into *essentials, ministerials and incidentals*. For it the essential was the relationship with the Triune God expressed in the three-fold response of faith, love and hope. In the Zinzendorfsian period we have the emphasis on basic truths or fundamentals, and Heart Religion (the heart relationship with the Savior) -- somewhat equivalent to the essential of the Ancient Church. This is a very explicit theology, though it is not a systematic theology. Zinzendorf, for example, did not write a systematic theology because he theologically believed that it was not possible -- one cannot know and express God that way.<sup>4</sup> Any

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<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Bettermann, formerly director of the Archives in Herrnhut, published an article on "Grundlinien der Theologie Zinzendorfs," *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, 11, 1934, pp. 3-18. He uses the German word *erbaulich* to describe the character of Zinzendorf's theology. This word may be translated as "edifying" or "devotional." He asserts that in Zinzendorf "Devotional and theological expressions cannot be separated from one another: his devotional language, in sermons as in hymns, is theological and his theology is devotional. He has undertaken, and that is a great thrust of his theology, to close the chasm which has been erected between theology and devotional language." ... Moreover, "Zinzendorf in his practical activity had to do with a lay theology; and through engagement with this theology, and at the same time also with scientific theology, his own theology arose." p. 3-4. Bettermann also asserts that Zinzendorf recognized that "...theology and doctrine change with the times..." p. 5

<sup>4</sup> The closest expression of a systematic treatment of theology is his *Ein und Zwanzig Discurse über die Augsbургische Konfession* (translated as by F. Okeley as *Twenty One Discourses or Dissertations Upon the Augsburg Confession*, London: W. Bowyer, 1753) where his subject matter committed him to a topical treatment. However, even here Zinzendorf as the poet is evident, for he made primary use of a poem/hymn of 161 stanzas he composed on the Confession. The extensive body of poetry and hymns which he produced indicates that poetry was for him an important way of doing theology. For Zinzendorf the *Augsburg Confession* was "uncontestably the best from the time of the apostles until now." (I can no longer locate this quotation, but the first Discourse on the Confession clearly supports this.) In early 1741 Zinzendorf with some 40 others (a Pilgrim Congregation) visited Geneva and here he came across the resolutions of the Synod of Bern (1532). He understood this as "Pastoral Instruction" about homiletical methodology: instruction for the proclamation of doctrine. He adopted its first 18 articles and, as with the *Augsburg Confession*, composed a hymn of 198 stanzas as an appropriate way of sharing the Bern resolutions with the Moravian Church. From this time on it is the first twenty-one articles of the Augsburg Confession and the first eighteen articles of the Bern Synod that Zinzendorf regards as normative for his theology. Mary B. Havens, "Zinzendorf and the Augsburg Confession: An Ecumenical Vision?" A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, 1989, pp. 300-301. Zinzendorf argued that "the Bern Synod, with its Christological emphases, is written 'in one and the same spirit' as the unaltered *Augsburg Confession*; there is no contradiction between the two." *Ibid.*, p. 528. This is commented on in Spangenberg's *Apologetische Schluss-Schrift*, Leipzig und Görlitz: In der Marcheschen

attempt to systematize understanding of God will always have gaps because of human limitations. One needs to accept that the only Christian system is Christ, the historical expression of the PERSON of God. As Zinzendorf has God say in a poem that expresses his epistemology, "My nature, which no one sees, has built itself a body".<sup>5</sup> Zinzendorf's belief that Heart Religion<sup>6</sup> was the basis of all Christian religion allowed him to recognize that different creeds and theologies may be adhered to in different contexts as legitimate cultural incarnations of Christianity, each valid for its context. Thus Moravians of the Renewed Church in different countries adhered to different confessions, yet all belonged to the same religious community. In the 18th century Moravian Church separate membership lists were even preserved within the Church for Moravians, Reformed and Lutherans so that the treasures of each would not be lost. The Moravian Church initiated relationships with the Lutheran Church, the Anglican Church, and the Reformed Church, was in contact with the early developments of the Methodist movement, provided harbor for the Schwenkfelders. It helped to initiate the Pennsylvania Synods which Zinzendorf intended would create a German speaking ecumenical community of churches, a Church of God in the Spirit. Moravians are members of local and regional councils of churches and the World Council of Churches and have recently participated in formal theological dialogue with the Lutheran and Anglican Churches, among others.<sup>7</sup>

The Moravian Church, then, is inheritor of a particular approach to theology and a particular understanding of Christianity about which it has not always been adequately conscious or articulate. It is also inheritor of a variegated 500 year heritage, which means that it inherits within its history the debate and process by which differing perspectives are resolved or held in creative tension. Its ability to do this indicates that there is an implicit supposition that the sustaining of relationship is a divine imperative. *The greatest heresy in the Moravian Church is to break relationship.* It is not a Church without creeds or a theology. The Ancient Church had its creeds.<sup>8</sup> The Renewed Church accepted the ecumenical creeds of early Christianity and the Reformation Confessions as indigenous expressions of faith while affirming that Christianity was not primarily conceptual/creedal. It also produced several significant formulations of faith.<sup>9</sup> The Easter Morning Liturgy came to be regarded as a creed.<sup>10</sup> The Renewed Church's exploration

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Buchhandlung, 1752, p. 33. I also call attention to an article by Martin Schmidt, "Zinzendorf und die Confessio Augustana," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, ed. by D. Ernst Sommerlath, Leipzig, No. 11, November 1968, pp. 802-824..

<sup>5</sup> "Allgegenwart," *Graf Ludwigs von Zinzendorf Teutscher Gedichte*, Erster Theil, Herrnhuth, 1735, pp. 106-108.

<sup>6</sup> Zinzendorf defined "Heart" as the inner person which had five senses as did the outer person. The "Heart", especially when it has been brought to life by the Holy Spirit, can perceive the Savior *objectively* and *directly*. In modern terms we might speak of this as "intuition" or "extra sensory perception". Zinzendorf's approach is very similar to Teresa of Avila's "intellectual vision". One knows one has seen and experienced, but this is not dependent on images or emotions. The best evidence for the Heart relationship with the Savior is changed life. There are several biblical examples of "Heart Religion" which Zinzendorf liked to cite. One was that of John and Jesus' mother gathered at the cross. Another was the objective perception of Jesus by John the Baptist while he was still in his mother's womb (Luke 1). See *Einige seit 1751 von dem Ordinario Fratrum zu London gehaltene Predigten in Dreyen Haupt-Abtheilungen edirter*, Erster Band, London and Barby: 1756, Abth. II, (1/17/53), pp. 153-156.

<sup>7</sup> The March 1997 issue of *TMDK (Transatlantic Moravian Dialogue - Correspondence)*, English Edition, deals with 20th century dialogues in which the North American Moravian Church has been involved and also includes the Anglican-Moravian Dialogue in Great Britain which resulted in the *Fetter Lane Declaration (Anglican-Moravian Conversations: The Fetter Lane Common Statement with Essays in Moravian and Anglican History, London: The Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1996, Occasional Paper No. 5)*. TMDK is published bilingually in Karlsruhe, Germany, and Bethlehem, PA, and serves international theological dialogue in the Moravian Church.

<sup>8</sup> Milos Strupl, *Confessional Theology of the Unitas Fratrum*, Vanderbilt University, Ph.D., 1964. Also "The Confessional Theology of the Unitas Fratrum", *Church History* 33 (1964) pp. 279-293.

<sup>9</sup> Shortly after Zinzendorf's death August Gotlieb Spangenberg published *Idea fidei Fratrum, oder Kurzer begrif der Christlichen lehre in den evangelischen Brüdergemeinen*, Barby: 1779. the Third English Edition published in 1959 as *An*

of doctrinal issues was contained in the minutes of its international (then called General) Synods, and in 1957 *The Ground of the Unity*,<sup>11</sup> a simple yet profound doctrinal statement, was worked out as an expression of the unity of the Church following the Second World War.

## Recovering Our Heritage

The Moravian Church consists of 19 Provinces and various institutions scattered throughout the world, faced with varieties of culture and context. Thus the Unity Synod of 1995 advocated a study of Gospel and Culture throughout the Unity, a study which came to fruition in 2001. From this came a paper from the Unity Standing Committee on Theology, “A Moravian Perspective on Gospel and Culture,” which was to be discussed throughout the Unity and to which the TMDK November 2001 issue responded.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever problems the church and Christians must cope with today, the Christian community stands within a 3000 year stream of living experience. One thousand years of this represents the history of life and experience with God embodied within the biblical material and 2,000 years represents the history of the church. The Moravian Church has over 500 years of experience and the Reformation churches have over 400. What a wealth of insight, if it is appropriated. To adequately envision our future and deal with today's issues we need to recover our heritage in ways that do not merely transmit the past, but allow its spirit to inform, and perhaps transform, the present.

## The Traditioning of Our Heritage

There are helpful precedents for the handling of tradition in the New Testament materials. After all, the writers of the New Testament were handling traditions in their use of both the Old Testament and the tradition of Jesus' sayings and deeds. Jesus' critical and selective use of the Old Testament (e.g. his opposition to certain Old Testament concepts in Matthew 5 and his preference for Isaiah to inform his

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*Exposition of Christian Doctrine, as Taught in the Protestant Church of the United Brethren or Unitas Fratrum*, Winston-Salem, NC: The Board of Christian Education of the Southern Province of the Moravian Church. Spangenberg states in his Preface that the Augsburg Confession remains the Confession of the Moravian Church, and that this publication is only a laying before the public, in a free, clear and unconstrained connection, the Moravian insight into the Gospel. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was the significant work of Hermann Plitt: *Die Gemeinde Gottes in ihrem Geist und ihren Formen* (The Church of God in Its Spirit and Form), Gotha: Verlag von Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1859; *Evangelische Glaubenslehre nach Schrift und Erfahrung*, (Evangelical Doctrine According to Scripture and Experience) 2 Volumes, Gotha: 1863-64; *Zinzendorfs Theologie* (Zinzendorf's Theology), 3 Volumes, Gotha 1869-1874; and *Die Gnade und Wahrheit in Christo Jesu: Kurze Darstellung der christlichen Lehre in der evangelischen Brüdergemeine* (Grace and Truth in Jesus Christ: A Short Presentation of Christian Teaching in the Evangelical Moravian Church), Niesky: 1883. In the North American context there was produced: Augustus Schultze, *Christian Doctrine and Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Rev., Bethlehem, PA: Bethlehem Printing Co., 1914. <sup>10</sup> The Easter Morning Liturgy, developed originally in the 18th century German context of the Moravian Church used a great deal of Luther's *Shorter Catechism*. It was modified over the years. Many Moravians regard it as a confession of faith. Certainly Easter morning is a wonderful time to rehearse faith, and to do this in a liturgical context expresses the Moravian marriage of worship and theology.

<sup>11</sup> *The Ground of the Unity* was first developed by the Continental Province and then brought to the General Synod in Bethlehem, PA, in 1957 where it was revised and accepted. The Unity Synod of 1995 in Tanzania made further revisions, particularly in the statement on the authority of Scripture, reminding us that our Church has regarded Scripture as ministerial to the reality of God:

#4. The Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is the only source of our life and salvation; and this Scripture is the sole standard of the doctrine and faith of the Unitas Fratrum and therefore shapes our life.

<sup>12</sup> *Transatlantic Moravian Dialogue Correspondence*, Issue 23 North America, Issue 24 Europe, November 2001, Bethlehem, PA, available in English and German.

self-understanding) and Paul's reinterpretation of the Law as a stop gap measure in salvation history (Galatians 3) are illuminating. Both Jesus and Paul struggled with the Pharisaic position that all truth had been given by God in the Law,<sup>13</sup> if it only could be interpreted, a type of ancient fundamentalism. Both Jesus' and Paul's approaches provided for ongoing revelation, revelation beyond "Scripture". Paul theologially developed this in his description of the role of the Spirit who provides ongoing guidance to the church, helping it to interpret the tradition and to discern answers to issues where the tradition is not helpful. I Corinthians 7 makes an interesting case study as Paul provides answers to various practical questions, citing a saying of Jesus when he has one (on divorce - 7:10), giving his own opinion ("I say, not the Lord" - 7:12), and in conclusion to his advice remarking "And I think that I have the Spirit of God" (his way of indicating both that he has sought God's guidance and that there are subjectivities involved about which he is not absolutely sure - 7:40).

The Johannine tradition provides for the "creative" handling of tradition in an even more striking fashion, a process that some commentators call "creative remembrance". In the Farewell Discourses (John 14-16) Jesus comments on the function of the Spirit. The most complete treatment of this is in John 16:12-15. The implications of Jesus' words are: "I could not tell you everything while I was with you. Therefore the Spirit of truth will *guide you into all truth*. His truth, however, is not merely new, but has continuity with my truth which in turn has continuity with the truth of the Father."<sup>14</sup> In 14:25ff the Spirit "will teach you all things, and bring to *remembrance* all that I have said to you." Thus the function of the Spirit is to help the church to creatively remember the traditions of Jesus, so that these traditions come alive in new historical circumstances, and also to lead the church into truth that could not be dealt with or anticipated in the historical circumstances of Jesus' life. That this would lead the Johannine Church into problems related to subjectivity is not to be denied. The author of I John wrestles with this. The group that broke away from the Johannine community under the impetus of inspiration had gone too far. But he never rejects believing that God and Christ function in a contemporary way to help the church to discern truth in the present.

It is important to note that the whole of the biblical tradition can be seen in terms of the re-interpretation of tradition. The Exodus event was reinterpreted in a number of ways throughout Jewish history and re-interpreted again in the New Testament. There are several creation accounts in the Old Testament. These are re-interpreted in the Old Testament (for example in Psalm 8 and II Isaiah) and are also re-interpreted in the New (John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1 and in the use of the First Adam - Second Adam antithesis). Some New Testament authors prefer the Genesis 1 account (e.g. John 1 which interprets Genesis 1 without reference to Genesis 2-3) and others prefer the Gen. 2-3 account (e.g. I Timothy 2:13ff). The New Testament re-interpretation, of course, interjects Christ into the creative process as had been done with Wisdom in the Jewish Wisdom tradition (see Proverbs 8 for the earliest evidence of this in Judaism).

If one takes the Biblically described process of transmission of traditions seriously, it becomes difficult to think that all truth is tied to any historical period or any written expression. While we must stand within our traditions, God leads us to an ever-growing understanding of them and to new expressions of truth not yet stated or anticipated in them. That this happens does not deny the value of the traditions for the past

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew presents Jesus as coming not to destroy but fulfill the Law (5:17). Jesus is a new Moses bringing a new law in the form of the Sermon on the Mount. The Great Commission indicates that discipling is teaching converts to observe what Jesus has commanded. (28:20). But Matthew's position does not seem to be generally supported in the tradition of Jesus's sayings nor is it supported by Paul. The passage equivalent in Luke (16:16-17) to Matthew 5:17 has Jesus saying something quite different. Here the Law was only until the time of John the Baptist. Now something else is here: the good news of the kingdom. But the new is entered with difficulty because it is hard for the Law to be set aside.

<sup>14</sup> Author's paraphrase.

nor that they do provide roots and wisdom within the present. But God is an ever present God who engages us in the present and calls us to deal with life that is constantly changing, presenting issues often not adequately anticipated within the tradition.

Forgiveness and freedom from legalism are essential for the transmission and reinterpretation of tradition, for they provide the freedom that one needs to work creatively and responsibly. Paul called upon Christians in Galatia, tempted to return to legalism, to "stand fast" in their freedom; because "for freedom Christ has set us free." (Galatians 5:1) It is only in freedom that we are able to make the mistakes which are possible in seeking to be responsible to God, mistakes inherent in the limited nature of knowledge and prophecy and the limits of our humanity. All those who express themselves on theological and ethical issues should note Paul's comments on the limitations of prophecy and knowledge indicated in I Corinthians 13:8-13. Only when seeing God face to face will we fully understand.

In examining the value and nature of the Moravian tradition it is helpful to be aware of the above process in the formation and transmission of tradition. Each theological tradition of a particular historical period takes over previously existing tradition and reworks it in the light of new experiences and understandings and under the pressures of various external cultural forces, seeking to re-form the tradition and make it relevant. The Moravian Church clearly faced this challenge numerous times. To name a few significant moments: the transition from the anti-world and anti-society attitudes of its beginnings to the transformations under Lukáš of Prague, the transitions in coming to terms with the Lutheran and Reformed Reformations, the transition represented by Comenius when most of the Moravian Church was destroyed by the Thirty Years War, the transition in the reestablishment of the Moravian Church on the estate of Zinzendorf and the resolution of differences between Zinzendorf's vision and that of his Moravian refugees, the transition after the death of Zinzendorf, the 19th century transition when the North American Provinces gained autonomy, and the transition after the Second World War which resulted in the formulation of the doctrinal statement, *Ground of the Unity*, and the evolution of former mission fields into Provinces so that the Unity is now strongly influenced by its Provinces in the developing world. There are those historical periods when the forces of greatest creativity break through, but there are also those times when creativity diminishes or other powerful influences present themselves and accommodation to cultural forces or practical needs occur. The periods of greatest creativity and new insights frequently posed greater problems (e.g. the Sifting Period<sup>15</sup> in the 1740s) as well as offering significant contributions. The accommodations to cultural influences may also interject new life and ideas besides calling for modification in a conservative direction. What is especially intriguing about the examination of the theology of the Ancient Moravian Church is that often Moravians did not merely intend to accommodate their unique traditions to the developing views of the Second Reformation, but approached them with a conscious desire to be open to new truth. Amedeo Molnár, once Dean of the Comenius Faculty in Prague, commented:

The Unitas Fratrum never proclaimed the unchangeability of the dogmatic expression. The Unitas was convinced that the continuity of its theology was given primarily by its attachment

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<sup>15</sup> The Sifting Period is the name given to a time, lasting from 1743 to 1750 (though it continued in North America somewhat longer), when the language of the wounds of Christ and the image of mystical marriage, along with a concern for inspiration, child-like simplicity, creativity and religious experience, were carried to excess to the neglect of other responsibilities. One might compare this to the excesses of the modern charismatic movement. However, the development of excess should not deny the legitimacy of more balanced expression of the same insights. See Hans-Walter Erbe, "Herrnhaag: Eine religiöse Kommunität in 18. Jahrhundert," *Unitas Fratrum*, Heft 23/24, Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1988, pp. 8ff; Hans-Walter Erbe, "Herrnhaag - Tiefpunkt oder Höhepunkt der Brüdergeschichte," *Unitas Fratrum*, Heft 26, Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1989, pp. 37ff

to the essential tenets of the Christian faith, as they are attested in the midst of Christ's confessors by the Holy Scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

## Barriers

There are natural barriers to the recovery of heritage besides the passing of time. One is our attitude to the past. Does this history, or in fact any history, have value for the present? Another is the work involved in understanding the past, not merely its forms but its essence, and finding ways to use it and express it in the present. For the American Moravian Church primary barriers to the reading of its traditions have been the linguistic barriers of the Czech and German languages and its exposure, within the American cultural scene, to indigenous religious forces, e.g. American fundamentalism and views of verbal inspiration and literal truth in the Bible. Whereas the revival of interest in Zinzendorf on the European scene began towards the end of the 19th century and flowered in the period after the First World War, only a few books are available on Zinzendorf in English.<sup>17</sup> Some materials on the Hussite movements have been written in English by Czech scholars in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>18</sup>

One interesting additional barrier to the American appropriation of the European Moravian tradition was the negative reaction to things European as the American Moravian Provinces gained their autonomy in the mid-nineteenth century after a century of centralized European dominance. Their reaction to the conservatism of the post-Zinzendorffian period deprived them of an adequate appreciation for the creativity of the Zinzendorffian period.

## The Moravian tradition

The process of the formation and transmission of the Moravian tradition could be outlined as follows:

### ANCIENT MORAVIAN CHURCH

#### I THE OLD BRETHREN 1457-1495

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<sup>16</sup> Milos Strupl, *Confessional Theology of the Unitas Fratrum*, Vanderbilt University, Ph.D., 1964, p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> A very valuable aid for research is Dietrich Meyer, ed., *Bibliographisches Handbuch zur Zinzendorf-Forschung*, Düsseldorf, 1987, though one still needs to be able to use German. Most English language works and translations are included.

<sup>18</sup> English bibliography on Zinzendorf:

George W. Forell, *Nine Public Lectures on Important Subjects in Religion*, University of Iowa Press, 1973.

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

Kenneth G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church*, Interprovincial Board of Christian Education, Moravian Church in America, 1967.

Gary L. Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother The Spirit: An Investigation of Count Zinzendorf's Theology and Praxis*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1990.

A.J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer*, Westminster Press, 1962.

Henry H. Meyer, *Child Nature and Nurture According to N. L. von Zinzendorf*, NY: Abingdon, 1928.

John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf*, Abingdon, 1955, reprint Bethlehem and Winston-Salem: Moravian Church in America, 1989.

See footnote 3 for 18th century English materials.

English literature on the Ancient Moravian Church:

Rudolf Řičan, *The History of the Unity of the Brethren*, transl. by C. Daniel Crews, Bethlehem and Winston-Salem: The Moravian Church in America, 1992.

Jarold K. Zeman, *The Hussite Movement and the Reformation in Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia (1350-1650): A Bibliographical Study Guide*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1977.

The Old Brethren were inheritors of more radical (Taborite) forms of the Hussite Reformation and the teaching of Petr Chelěický. This was the era of Gregory (Řehoř) who sought a "true" Christianity in separation from society and obedience to the Sermon on the Mount. They first called themselves "Brethren of the Law of Christ". By a decree in 1495 this period was consciously brought to an end. One of the distinctive elements of the theology of the Ancient Moravian Church was division of the elements of Christian faith and life into *essentials*, *ministerials* (that which served the essentials), and *incidentals* (the way things were done). John Taborsky, a priest during this period, commented:

Such, we hold, is the difference between things essential or basic, and [things] ministrative, and again incidental. All the members of the Holy Church should keep themselves always, without ceasing, in every place, at all times, by every reason, in the essential things. For as a man comes quickly by God's grace to the knowledge of the Lord God and by that to the true faith and love while holding on to God, in the light of that knowledge he uses judgment while differentiating between the good and the bad. By the power of faith he ought to shun evil and by grace do good and from this have hope of eternal reward. He ought always to live in this and never depart from it. Then what things minister to such, as is the ministry of the Word of God and the sacraments; with such people should occupy themselves. All this should take place as the officials of the church recognize the need for the growth of the essential things; and they should use the incidental things for edification and betterment.

Therefore the people who do not employ this differentiation and, accordingly, consider things ministrative or incidental as essential, judging them to be faith and truth, place themselves in great jeopardy with regard to the work of their salvation.<sup>19</sup>

## II ERA OF BROTHER LUKÁŠ 1495-1531

Lukáš helped the Church move from a rural sect into its society and cities and encouraged opening the door of the Church to the nobility. He formulated a theology which affirmed the distinction of essentials from ministerials and his theology continued to play a significant role throughout the Ancient Moravian Church's history.<sup>20</sup> The essentials were in the hand of God and cannot be within the power of people, church or sacraments. However, his expressions were scholastic and he still believed in seven sacraments. He began the contacts with the "Second Reformation" of Luther and Calvin, though he maintained his independence.

## III PERIOD OF LUTHERAN ORIENTATION 1531-1546

Under the leadership of John Roh and John Augusta the Moravian Church was strongly influenced by the Lutheran Reformation, establishing contacts with Luther and producing a Confession of 1535 informed by Lutheranism, to which Martin Luther wrote a Preface. During this time it was decided that the writings of Lukáš were not to be binding.

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<sup>19</sup> Milos Strupl, *Confessional Theology of the Unitas Fratrum*, Vanderbilt University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1964, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> I call attention to a treatment of his theology by C. Daniel Crews, "Luke of Prague, Theologian of the Unity," presented as the W. V. Moses Lecture at Moravian Theological Seminary on April 24, 1997.



#### IV ERA OF MATTHIAS CERVENKA AND JOHN BLAHOSLAV 1546-1571

Pupils of Melanchthon advocated a return to Lukáš and less passive attitude to society. At this time members of the Church moved into Poland and East Prussia because of persecution. Greater contacts developed with the Reformed tradition. The Sendomir Consensus between the Moravians, Reformed and Lutherans was developed in Poland in 1570.

#### V THE LAST 50 YEARS IN BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA 1571-1620

The nobility was influential in leadership. There was a stronger turn to Calvinism, greater appreciation of the Old Testament, publication of the Kralice Bible (equivalent in the Czech language to Luther's translation), relaxing of ascetic attitudes to life. The Thirty Years War brought the institutional existence of the Ancient Church to an end, though it continued to some extent in Poland almost to the time of its renewal by Zinzendorf.

#### VI THE EXILE AND COMENIUS 1620-1721

This is often called the "time of the hidden seed" when the Moravian traditions were maintained in secret. Bishop John Amos Comenius (died 1670) dedicated much of his life to keeping the heritage of the Ancient Church alive, preserving it for such as Zinzendorf who would rediscover it in the future. Comenius worked on improving education as a theologian. He sought to bring together Scripture, reason and emotion to solve the questions of his time. For him faith in Christ as king was central and he saw this as soon to be expressed in the near end of time. Because of the nearness of Christ's second coming, he saw no period of church history as standard for all. Only the age to come provided the paradigm of the church. In 1662 Comenius published the last Confession of the Unity.

It is important to note that theology in the Ancient Moravian Church was more of a communal rather than an individual enterprise:

Whether or not the Unity of Brethren in the course of its history, as we have indicated, had enough theological leaders with creative powers of thought, it still had in all periods of its development a unique quality in that it appreciated theology as a congregational, communal function of the whole church. It was properly a function of all servants of the Word. Because of this, their theological statements time and again are for the most part those of synods and sessions of the Inner Council rather than the result of individual speculative effort.<sup>21</sup>

### RENEWED MORAVIAN CHURCH

#### VII ERA OF ZINZENDORF 1722-1760

The beginnings of the Renewed Moravian Church could best be described as a fellowship of committed persons from Berthelsdorf and Herrnhut, under the guidance of the Lutheran pastor and under the oversight of Zinzendorf. This fellowship came to include persons from Lutheran, Moravian and Reformed traditions. Zinzendorf was a Lutheran Pietist who sought to forge

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<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Øfëan, *The History of the Unity of the Brethren*, transl. by C. Daniel Crews, Bethlehem: The Moravian Church in America, 1992, p. 400.

creative answers to the Enlightenment. He used the developing Moravian Church as a lab in which to experiment with his theological understandings and pietistic concerns for the creation of a true Christian community, what he came to call “*Gemeine* of God in the Spirit”. The Moravian elements of this community, who began their migrations to Zinzendorf’s estate in 1722, insisted on the revival of their ancient traditions which Zinzendorf, with great hesitation, ultimately came to feel was God's will. The Renewed Church needed to sensitively relate itself to the existing creeds and catechisms of the state churches. Though it is unclear as to how much Zinzendorf's thought was affected by his growing awareness of the Ancient Church, it is clear that many of his ideas are strikingly similar. Consecration of Moravian bishops was received through the last remaining bishops of the Ancient Church. This was an extremely creative period, seeing the spread of the Moravian Church to many lands. Zinzendorf's ideas, his own blend of Pietism, Luther and Mysticism, are formative for this period, though not always fully understood or accepted.

#### VIII REORGANIZATION, STABILIZATION, EXPANDING INFLUENCE 1760-1857

The Synods of the first two decades after Zinzendorf both preserved and modified his insights in "more acceptable" directions, and reorganized and centralized the Church. A. G. Spangenberg published his *Idea Fidei Fratrum* and *Life of Zinzendorf*; Gregor's Tune Book was published in the 1784. Moravian schools flourished. There were pressures to modernize and the great settlement congregations, the communal form of church life, gradually declined. Such a person as Schleiermacher, who called himself a “Moravian of a higher order” and attended Moravian Schools, expressed a critical reaction to this period. Hans-Walther Erbe describes the transition to the post-Zinzendorffian period:

The Moravians, who previously had spread abroad so much noise, so much excitement and unrest, the Church which had been like a volcano, now became - it is scarcely to be believed - the “Welt der Stillen im Lande” (the world of the quiet in the land), a piece of German Biedermeier, middle class and noble, closed in upon itself in its Settlement Congregations, these quiet and proper villages, simple and distinguished, separate from the greater world, at the same time intimate and world-wide, with its culture in life-style and the arts worthy of respect, in constantly new realizations of community (*Gemeine*) shaped by its focus upon itself.<sup>22</sup>

#### IX THE MODERN PERIOD From 1857 to the Present

There was decentralization of Church government and attempts to update doctrine, including new interest in Zinzendorf in the last quarter of the 19th century, exemplified in Hermann Plitt's *Zinzendorfs Theologie*. The interest in Zinzendorf has greatly grown on the Continent in this century and the North American Moravian Church is now developing its own cadre of Zinzendorf scholars. Significant matters with which the Church has had to deal are the development of liberal theology, the ecumenical movement, two world wars, developing secularism and pluralism, the decline of the position and influence of established Christianity, and the development of modern technology. Decentralization and the barriers of language have frequently allowed the Provinces to undergo indigenous theological developments only vaguely in touch with the heritage of the Ancient Church or Zinzendorf. Since the Second World War the

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<sup>22</sup> Hans-Walter Erbe, “Herrnhaag - Tiefpunkt oder Höhepunkt der Brüdergeschichte,” *Unitas Fratrum*, Heft 26, Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1989, pp. 45-46.

former mission Provinces have been granted status equal to those in Europe, England and North America, and the majority of Moravians are now in the developing world. Unity Synods, the governing body of the international Moravian Church, are strongly influenced by this developing world. The Church in Tanzania alone is much larger than the Moravian Church in North America, Europe and Great Britain put together.

### **Tradition and Journey, Unity and Variety**

I believe that the Church must have a tradition which defines faith and life. This wisdom is dynamic and living, not only preserving the past but engaging the present and rethinking itself in the light of the present. It is living because the dynamics for change and rethinking are inherent in its nature and are not merely forced upon it by context. It is also living because it serves and is energized by the Essential of relationship with God and response to this relationship. Its very nature provides latitude and a safe place for exploration, journey and the legitimacy of variety, for the individual journey as well as the communal. The faith commitment which is bound to the history of the tradition and the faith of the Moravian community needs the commitment of all, whatever the direction of the individual journey. It is natural, not incongruous, to live with two commitments: the truth of one's own journey and the truth of the Church's journey and insights. In fact, it is a mark of maturity in faith to move beyond the simplicity of singular insights and to embrace the varied perspectives of faith, especially the perspectives of the community which extend into history, reach into the cultural variety of our world, and transcend individual faith expressions. Understood rightly there is no contradiction between believing the faith of the Church and affirming my journey. The nature of spiritual reality calls upon us for this double commitment which enriches our lives.

One of the tasks of our professional theologians and historians is to work at both the tradition and contemporary variety with intent, to recover and rediscover our tradition, make it explicit, support what is appropriate and challenge what is not, mindful of the one Essential of relationship with God responded to in faith, love and hope. It is also the responsibility of provincial leaders and appointed commissions to appropriately engage the whole Church in the necessary process. The formulation of doctrine is ultimately the task of the Unity Synod but needs to involve various provinces and theological institutions, as is the case with the Unity Standing Committee on Theology's report on Gospel and Culture, looking also to the wisdom of the bishops. Individuals may also make significant contributions from the learnings of their journey which may challenge the Church, but this should be done in responsibility to and with love for the Moravian community, in responsibility to the tradition, and with willingness to learn not only from one's own journey but the individual journeys of others.

It is often tempting for clergy to seek to involve their congregations in their own journey, to call others to their own wisdom, rather than supporting the tradition and the many different individual journeys which are taking place in the real life of congregations. I often think that we do not make sufficiently articulate this double commitment which really should characterize us all: commitment both to the wisdom of our tradition and to our personal journey. The role of our tradition means that the Church must always see to the education and formation of its leaders in its tradition, a prerequisite of ordination, as well as helping persons to explore styles and possibilities of individual journey (and journey with others).

One of the difficulties with some personal journeys is that they call into question that which is regarded as essential. To do this, and even to deny the tradition, is a natural part of the process of some. But while some may call everything into question, this must be done in the context of a community that holds/embraces faith and tradition and protects and respects the dignity and value of the faith journeys of others who do not agree with the radical questions posed. When the minister needs to engage in a journey which diverges from the faith of the Church, he or she does this in the context of faith which is held in

trust for them by the community. When the minister is no longer willing to be held within the faith of the Church, then perhaps he or she needs to decide whether they wish to remain within the Church. But there must be some way of holding side by side faith and journey, tradition and divergence, and the diversity of journeys which constitute normative congregational experience.

The struggle to define faith and life, the exploration of the mystery of God, must always keep in mind the articulate struggles of the Apostle Paul regarding knowledge.

In his famous chapter on love in I Cor. 13 Paul deals with the limitations of knowledge:

13:8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 13:9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 13:10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 13:11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13:13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Prior to that in I Cor. 8:1-3 Paul dealt with the limitations of knowledge in settling issues regarding food offered to idols:

8:1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 8:2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 8:3 but anyone who loves God is known by him.

The highly intricate theological argumentation of Romans 1-11 ends with:

11:33 O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 11:34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" 11:35 "Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?" 11:36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Whatever the logic of our logic we are somehow dependent on the unsearchable and inscrutable ways of God. In the end we can only say "To him be the glory" and "Amen," and hold fast to each other in the love which is the expression of God's ultimate reality.

### **A Model for Effecting Change in the Tradition**

In 1993-1995 various groups and persons within the Moravian Church explored changing the form of the statement on the nature of Scripture's authority in the *Ground of the Unity*. Having provided resources for the study and debate, I then produced a book which contains the history of the process so that the meaning of this experience might not be lost. It could provide a significant model for dealing with the tradition and effecting change, or at least provide insight into the experience of others who have dealt with this challenging task. It is available and entitled (title page follows):

***THE UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE  
IN THE MORAVIAN CHURCH  
(UNITAS FRATRUM)***

*With Special Consideration of:*

*Historic Descriptions of Scripture,  
the History of the Statement about Scripture  
in the Ground of the Unity, 1957,*

*the Debate about Scripture in the Northern Province, 1993-1995,  
and Changes to the Ground of the Unity  
Effected by the Synods 1994-5*

Arthur J. Freeman  
Moravian Theological Seminary  
Bethlehem, PA  
May 17, 1996

This was written  
To Remember History,  
To Know What Was/Is At Stake  
In What Has Been Transmitted To Us,  
And To Know Why