



JESUS STILL LEAD ON

AN INTRODUCTION TO MORAVIAN BELIEF

*Studies of the Moravian Covenant for Christian Living
and The Ground of the Unity*

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Introduction

Why study Moravian Doctrine?

The Moravian Church is nearly 550 years old. Our church was established in a remote village in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic) by a small group of people who wanted to live according to their understanding of the New Testament rather than by the official teachings of the churches of their day. Despite the enormous changes in the world over the past six centuries, the Moravian Church has never lost its attitude that it is preferable to follow Christ as part of a community rather than individually or merely as a passive member of an impersonal institution. The Moravian understanding of Scripture, theology, and Christian living has always been worked out in the midst of a loving and intimate community.

It has been very important for Moravians that the members of the community of faith personally understand the teaching of the Church and participate in the ongoing formation of that teaching. We have not restricted the study and formation of doctrine to professional theologians or ordained clergy. From our earliest days we have included the entire community in the discussion of what it means to be a Christian and a member of the Moravian Church.

Our doctrinal statements are intended to help us understand the word of God in Scripture and to live according to that word. We have been reluctant to create binding doctrinal systems, preferring to let the Bible in its simplicity and rich complexity inform and shape our life as Christians. We also recognize that some portions of Scripture have greater relevance for the Christian life than others. Moravians strongly encourage all Christians to study the Bible on their own and in study groups, but we have found it helpful to have statements that guide our reading of Scripture. Such statements identify what we as a community of faith have found to be the most essential ideas in the Bible through the centuries, but they are always subject to revision as our understanding of Scripture grows. The Moravian emphasis on simplicity, which we see in the architecture of our churches and in our music, is evident in our doctrinal statements. However, simplicity does not mean that we are simplistic or simple-minded. Moravian doctrine, like the doctrine of all Christian churches, deals with some of the most profound mysteries of God and human existence. Different people will have different understandings of these mysteries based on their own experience, knowledge and reason. Through study and discussion, we can learn from the wisdom of our predecessors in the faith and from one another.

The study of our doctrine, therefore, is a great privilege and should be a joyful and energizing experience. We study our doctrine to enrich our lives, not to determine who does or does not belong in the Moravian Church. We study doctrine together so that we will learn from each other and be drawn into closer communion with God and one another. As a result, we will have a clearer picture of what it means to be Moravian in the modern world. Doctrinal statements provide us a way to communicate what is most precious about our community to the outside world and to new members. Our doctrinal statements help answer the frequent question, "Who are the Moravians?" Our doctrinal statements are part of our worship and service to God. They are joyful proclamations of what God means to us and how we hope to respond to God's grace to us.

Through the centuries, the Moravian Church has produced many doctrinal statements, some of which were called confessions of faith. The church has never been without such expressions of our common faith, but it has also never seen such statements as rigid. As the world has changed and our understanding has changed, we have changed our statements of belief. Each time, though, changes were made in continuity with what had been said before and with scripture. These doctrinal statements also help Moravians to understand ourselves and our life together as a church. They lead us into a deeper appreciation for our common values and aspirations; thus they help unite rather than divide us. Furthermore, our doctrine guides us as we make decisions so that we keep before us what our fundamental beliefs and values are. This is particularly important during times of stress and crisis.

It is very important to understand that Moravians have always developed their doctrinal statements as part of the larger body of Christ. Moravian doctrinal statements do not attempt to define the meaning of Christianity for all Christians; rather they are expressions of our understanding of being Moravian within the Body of Christ. Therefore, Moravian doctrinal statements use older statements of faith that are common to other Christian churches, such as the Apostles' Creed. They do not attempt to say all that can be said about God and the Christian life but discuss what is most important to us as Moravians.

It is also important to understand that since its founding, the Moravian Church has been more concerned with right living (sometimes called Orthopraxy) more than with right belief (Orthodoxy). Theology is important, but for Moravians the practical aspects of Christianity have had priority over academic debates. This is reflected in our doctrinal statements, especially compared to other churches.

Background on the Moravian Covenant for Christian Living

In early days of the Moravian community of Herrnhut there was a danger that the fledgling community would collapse because of conflict. People were divided over theological opinions, religious ceremonies, organizational matters and ethnicity. Under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf, the residents of Herrnhut discussed their many differences and began to recognize that what they had in common as followers of Christ was more important than their divisions. They also saw the need for some guiding principles to help organize their life as a community. The result of this discussion and prayer was the Brotherly Agreement that was signed on May 12, 1727. The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living is the modern version of the Brotherly Agreement.

The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living is part of the Book of Order of both the Northern and Southern Provinces and is therefore an official doctrinal statement of the Church. It has been changed many times through the centuries in an effort to express more clearly the Moravian understanding of Scripture and Christian living. It includes guidelines for individuals, congregations and the denomination as a whole. Although it is not binding on people, it is a statement of what the Moravian Church most values. It is intended to guide our decisions as a community of faith.

The original Brotherly Agreement included rules for living together in a community as well as specific economic instructions and legal matters in Herrnhut. All of the Moravian settlements, such as Bethlehem and Salem, developed their own Brotherly Agreements. Since these settlements were closed communities rather than congregations in our sense of the word, their Brotherly Agreements also included economic and legal matters. With the dissolution of the communities in the middle of the 19th century, the old Brotherly Agreements were obsolete. There was a sense that the church should have some type of statement and in the 1860s both of the American provinces established new Brotherly Agreements to guide their members. There were slight differences between the two Brotherly Agreements, but they were similar in most respects.

The Northern Provincial synod of 1946 proposed that the Brotherly Agreement be recast in a more contemporary style with a closer conformity with Scripture. The Sunday nearest May 12 each year was to be a day for educating congregations about the document. Few changes were actually made at that time, so the issue came up again in 1961 in a proposal to the Synod. "It is the feeling of many in the Church that the present form of the 'Brotherly Agreement' has lack of organization, no particular thought being given to an organized statement of the Christian life and discipline, but rather items being added on as they were felt necessary. It is also felt that some of the language used is outmoded and that some of the thought expressed reflects attitudes of the 19th century." A committee consisting of bishops, pastors, theologians and laity was assigned to compose a new Brotherly Agreement. Their work was approved, with some revisions, by the Northern Provincial Synod of 1966.

There was also growing dissatisfaction with the Southern Province's Brotherly Agreement in the 1960s. The special synod of 1969 that had been called to deal with the social unrest of the period instructed the Provincial Elders' Conference to appoint a committee to revise the Brotherly Agreement. That committee in turn proposed that the Southern Province should adopt the Northern Province's Brotherly Agreement. This was part of the planned merger of the provinces

which did not take place. Synod also instructed the pastors to lead their congregations into study of the Brotherly Agreement.

In 1986 a number of revisions to the Brotherly Agreement were made by both provinces. Most of them related to the use of non-sexist language. Thus “mankind” became “all people,” “Brethren’s Unity” became “Moravian Unity,” and “brotherly love” was changed to “Christian love.” Most significantly, the title of the document itself was changed to The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living. The last revision to the Covenant came in 1995 when the statement on Scripture was changed to conform to the revised Ground of the Unity.

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Part I: The Ground of Our Witness

Called Into Fellowship

Paragraph 1:

We are called into a Christian fellowship by the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the eternal purpose of God the Father (Ephesians 3:11) by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18-21), and as members of Christ's Body, the Church, to serve all people by proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to our faith by word and deed.

Commentary:

The opening paragraphs of the Covenant conform closely to the Ground of the Unity in order to emphasize that we are part of a worldwide church. It is also appropriate that we are reminded that this Covenant is not based on our desires but on our calling. We believe that our church, as imperfect as it is, exists because the Lord has called us together to serve the world. Within our fellowship we offer a model of Christian community for the world to see. Outside the walls of our church we reach out in love to our neighbors. It is important to recognize that our fellowship is worldwide and so is our outreach.

Questions:

- What does it mean to be called by Christ?
- What does it mean to you that your congregation is part of the Body of Christ in the world?
- Why is it important to see our connection to all followers of Christ?
- What does it mean to serve people by proclaiming the Gospel?
- Why do we say we do this in "word and deed"?
- How do you proclaim the Gospel? How does your congregation?

Scripture

Paragraph 2:

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 [Moravian Church] and therefore shapes our life.

Commentary:

There has been much controversy in the history of Christianity over the Scriptures, even in early Christianity. The early church, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, established the Bible as we know it today (although in Greek) and encouraged a figurative (or spiritual) reading of much of the Old Testament. Over the centuries the Catholic Church developed a long tradition of biblical interpretation that was the basis of doctrine and church life and which had as much authority as the Bible itself. Beginning with John Wyclif (d. 1384) and Jan Hus (d. 1415), reformers called for Scripture rather than tradition to be the final authority in the Church. The Moravian Church was part of this biblical reformation and encouraged the reading of the Bible in the common language of the people. The Covenant reflects the 500-year understanding of the Moravian Church that Scripture is the standard of our faith and practice, but God is the source of our life and salvation. Scripture is sacred to us because it points us to God.

Questions for consideration:

- What parts of the Bible do you read most often? Why?
- How do you think that Scripture shapes your life as a Christian?
- How does Scripture shape the life of the Moravian Church?
- What do you learn about God from reading the Bible?
- Do you think it is helpful to read the Bible in light of what we know about its original historical context?

A Church Among Churches

Paragraphs 3 and 4:

With the universal Christian Church, we share our faith in the Triune God, who revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Savior of all people. We particularly declare His living presence and Lordship over the Church, joy in the benefits of His life, sufferings, death and resurrection and emphasize a close bond of fellowship with each other in His name. We believe that Christ is present with us in Word and Sacrament. We decline to determine as binding what the Scriptures have left undetermined, or to argue about mysteries impenetrable to human reason. In this regard, we hold to the principle "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity." [This is sometimes called the Moravian motto.]

We thankfully recognize the value of the historic creeds of the Christian Church in calling upon believers in every age to give an obedient and fearless testimony, recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord. A Moravian confession of faith is to be found in the Easter Dawn Liturgy.

Commentary:

This section of the MCCL reflects The Ground of the Unity and it points to the Easter Dawn Liturgy (Note: see story on page 15 for the Liturgy). It is important to notice that the Moravian Church does not have a doctrine that separates it from the rest of the Christian Church. We affirm the basic doctrines of Christianity, but we do lay particular stress on Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior. This is what is often described as Christocentrism. Notice as well that the Sacraments are as important to Moravians as the Word. Both communicate the presence of Christ within and among us. The MCCL also sets forth a guiding principle that is evident in Moravian doctrine and practice: we respect the complexity of Scripture and do not attempt to force a single interpretation on the Scripture. We acknowledge that there are things in Christian doctrine and practice that remain mysteries. The statement on essentials and non-essentials reminds us that we are ultimately defined by our love. We are called to love and serve God, not to define and confine God by our limited understanding and vision.

Questions for consideration:

- What does it mean to you that Jesus is the Savior?
- How do you see this paragraph lived out in the Moravian Church?
- How does Christ remain a living presence in the church?
- How does devotion to Christ lead us into a deeper understanding of the Triune God and our responsibility as followers of Christ?
- What does the principle of "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love" (the Moravian motto) mean to you?

Part 2: The Witness of the Christian Life

The Witness of the Christian Life

Paragraphs 5 and 6:

We believe that as in baptism we have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection, so we have died to sin and should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1–11).

When seeking guidance we find that the simplest expression of Christian living is contained in the earliest of Christian confessions, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” This implies that obedience is due him as the absolute Ruler and Lord of our lives. Not only his teachings (e.g., Matthew 5–7) but, even more, the example of his life (Philippians 2:5; Ephesians 4:20) provide an understanding of the obedience that he desires. Although the early Church, guided by the Spirit of Jesus, did not develop a code covering all issues, it offered guidance in various areas of Christian living. (e.g. Colossians 3:1–46; 1 Peter 2:11–3:12; Ephesians 4:1–6:20).

Commentary: Baptism is one of the most sacred moments in the Christian life even if we do not remember our own baptism as infants, just as birth is the most important moment of our life although we do not remember it. In baptism, including baptism of infants, we make a public profession of our conviction that Christ leads us into a new and better life than we would live on our own.

Baptism is a seal of our intention to live as followers of Christ rather than following our own appetites and confused desires. Baptism gives us a distinct identity as children of God and gives us the name “Christian.” The Covenant wisely identifies baptism as the beginning of our Christian life and connects it to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Moravian Church also acknowledges that we have learned through the centuries that we cannot develop a binding code of Christian behavior that will apply for all people in all places in all ages for all circumstances. What follows in the Covenant is our mutual understanding of the teaching of Scripture concerning Christian living. Ultimately, in Moravian teaching, the ethical life is the joyful life because there is joy in following Christ.

Questions for consideration:

- What do you think is the significance of baptism?
- How does baptism acknowledge that we are called to live a life under the lordship of Christ?
- What does it mean to die to sin and walk in newness of life? Does this mean that Christians do not sin?
- Why does the Covenant state that the example of Jesus’ life is even more important than his teachings?
- What lessons have you learned about Christian living from the example of Jesus?
- In what ways does the Bible offer guidance for how people should live their lives?
- What is the danger in giving a rigid statement of Christian behavior?

Living by Grace

Paragraphs 7 and 8:

Living the Christian life depends not only on our own effort but upon God our Father, who in Jesus Christ accepts us as heirs of God (Galatians 4:4–7) and strengthens and sustains us (Philippians 4:13).

We realize that our Christian faith must continually be nourished if it is to remain living and vital. Therefore, we desire to grow in our Christian lives through family devotions, personal prayer and study and the opportunities for spiritual development offered by the Church.

Commentary:

The Moravian Church has always understood that Christian living does not come naturally. We also know that it is not simply a matter of teaching and discipline. Christian living ultimately comes from being in relationship with the living Christ who works with us to shape our lives into images of his life. We also recognize that Christ works with people as individuals and that we are to represent Christ in different ways in the world. This means first of all that we must nourish our relationship to Christ by using all of the resources he has provided through the Church, but it also means that we will continue to grow. Ideally, according to Moravian teaching, we should be better Christians at the end of life than we were when we became Christian. In light of the fact that we are growing in our knowledge and ability to live according to Christ's teachings, it is important that we recognize that other Christians are also "works in progress," and we should give them the same grace that we have needed and continue to need.

Questions for consideration:

- Have you tried to follow the teachings of Christ on your own will and strength?
- Shouldn't people be expected to be good on their own?
- Why is it important to nourish your faith? Why isn't conversion and belief in God enough?
- What happens if you don't engage in Christian practices, such as devotions, worship, prayer and study?
- What resources does your congregation offer you for spiritual development?
- What other resources would be helpful to you?

Part 3a: The Witness of a Living Church

Membership

Paragraph 9:

As members of the Moravian Church we will abide by the decisions made by the official boards of our congregations, and agree to be governed, both as individuals and as a congregation, by the enactments of the Unity Synod of the Moravian Church and of the Synods of the Province to which our congregation belongs.

Commentary:

This paragraph points to one of the continual sources of conflict and difficulty in the Moravian Church, particularly in the American setting where anti-authority sentiments have abounded since the 1960s. The American mystique includes the lone rebel or cowboy who makes his or her own rules. The Moravian Church has traditionally stood for a different value system.

Historically we have understood that people actually develop their full personality and potential best when they are connected to other people in a living and supportive community that holds them responsible for their actions. Such communities do not exist without some type of structure and leadership. Therefore, we have always organized our church as congregations within a larger church. Congregations are led by boards, and provinces are governed by synods.

Furthermore, the Moravian Church is a world-wide church that remains a single church connected through our Unity Synod. The North American provinces have a great deal of independence, but we are ultimately responsible to the other Moravian provinces. This whole organization, however, only works if the individuals within it agree to live with the decisions made by the governing bodies. Without the commitment of individual members, the clergy and church boards to the greater Moravian Church, this worldwide community of faith will collapse.

Questions for consideration:

- What do you think holds us together as Moravians?
- Why is it important that members of the Church abide by the decisions made by the governing bodies?
- What should people do if they disagree with a decision made by their local board or by their provincial synod?
- What are constructive ways that the Moravian Church can deal with conflict?
- Is it important to you that you are part of a province of the worldwide Moravian Unity?
- What, if anything, makes you feel connected to the larger Moravian Church?
- Could the Moravian Church improve its structure?

Stewardship

Paragraphs 10, 11 and 12:

We deem it a sacred responsibility and genuine opportunity to be faithful stewards of all God has entrusted to us: our time, our talents and our financial resources. We view all of life as a sacred trust to be used wisely.

We will support, according to our ability, the financial needs of the local congregation, the District, the Province, and the Unity. We will consider the support of the benevolent causes of the Moravian Church, both at home and abroad, as a privilege, an opportunity and a responsibility.

We will also recognize the support of worthy causes outside of the Church as part of our stewardship.

Commentary:

Stewardship is not a popular topic in most churches, but this is one area where Christian commitment takes a very concrete and practical form. The Covenant calls us to view stewardship both as a responsibility and an opportunity to express our devotion to Christ. The theology that underlies the Moravian attitude toward stewardship is that all of life is a gift from God. It is not because of our efforts that we have most of what we have. Our bodies, our minds, our talents, and many of our opportunities were given to us. Those who have received gifts have the obligation of gratitude toward the giver and the responsibility to care for the gift given.

It is important to understand that every Moravian has the opportunity to contribute to the entire ministry of the Moravian Church through their congregational giving. There are many things that we cannot do alone, but we can do them together. Every active Moravian contributes to evangelism, world mission, theological education, care for the elderly, social ministries, and many other causes. Some churches teach that members should only contribute to their ministries, often in terms of a tithe of their income, but the Moravian Church encourages many forms of charitable giving consistent with its mission of serving humanity. The Covenant also emphasizes that stewardship involves much more than giving money to the Church (although it includes that); it is an attitude toward living. Even the ways we pursue our secular vocations are a form of stewardship.

Questions for consideration:

- Why is stewardship included in a covenant for Christian living?
- Why is stewardship to the Moravian Church an important part of being a member?
- What do you know about the benevolences and causes of the Moravian Church?
- Why do you contribute to these efforts?
- What would happen to our mutual ministry if individuals or congregations decided to violate this portion of the covenant?
- What types of charities outside of the Church do you think would be the most worthy of support?
- How can your congregation encourage a lifestyle of stewardship?

Love

Paragraph 13:

Since disciples of Jesus are to be known by the love they have to one another (John 13:35), we will cherish Christian love as of prime importance.

Commentary:

Originally this paragraph referred to “brotherly” love rather than “Christian” love, but the wording was changed to make it inclusive of “sisterly” love as well. The Bible verse quoted here comes from Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples in John. Disciples of Christ are to love each other as Christ has

loved us. For many centuries, the church officially proclaimed that the essentials of our church included our response to God's salvation through "faith, love and hope." In other words, for Moravians, love is an "essential." In fact, it is the most essential thing.

Questions:

- What does "Christian love" mean to you? How does it differ from other forms of love?
- Is Christian love the same as "brotherly" or "sisterly" love?
- What happens to a congregation or a denomination when Christians stop acting in love toward one another?
- Is there a connection between love and stewardship?
- What are concrete ways in which we express love?
- How do we express love even when we disagree about doctrine?
- Is it important that we allow our brothers and sisters to love us as we love them?

Unity and Diversity

Paragraph 14:

We will be eager to maintain the unity of the Church. Realizing that God has called us from many and varied backgrounds, we recognize the possibility of disagreements or differences. Often these differences enrich the Church, but sometimes they divide. We consider it to be our responsibility to demonstrate within the congregational life the unity and togetherness created by God who made us one. How well we accomplish this will be a witness to our community as to the validity of our faith.

Commentary:

Some things are easier said than done and this may be one of them. However, the call to unity in the Moravian Church is a common thread that runs through all the earlier versions of the Brotherly Agreement. According to Moravian doctrine, unity is one of the signs that a church is really Christian. According to Acts, chapter 4, from the beginning, the Christian Church included people from many different cultures who spoke many different languages and observed many different customs. Being Christian does not erase our distinctiveness; it may enhance it by giving us the grace and freedom to be who God created us to be.

One way of understanding the Moravian perspective is to imagine heaven as the perfect community. Who will you expect to see in heaven? Will it only be people who have the same skin color, economic status, language, accent, educational background, theology and gender as you? The Christian Church is called to reflect the heavenly vision on earth, but in the world we see that these same differences are the source of much hatred, conflict and bloodshed. Humans tend to hate what they do not understand and reject that which is different. The Moravian Church has seen the overcoming of barriers to be a particularly important part of its mission in the service of Christ. Therefore, we have been tolerant of differences within our unity.

Questions:

- How do differences enrich the Christian community?
- What differences do you see among the people in your congregation?
- Does this ever cause divisions?
- Are there concrete ways in which we can work through our disagreements and come to a deeper appreciation for the differing gifts all of God's children bring?

- How can we as a Church reconcile when conflict has divided us?
- Is there a danger in pursuing a false sense of unity that masks rather than confronts our differences?

Settling Differences

Paragraph 15:

We will endeavor to settle our differences with others in a Christian manner (Galatians 6:1), amicably and with mediation and, if at all possible, avoid resort to a court of law (Matthew 18:15–17).

Commentary:

Many Moravians are surprised to find a statement about lawsuits in one of our doctrinal statements. It runs counter to the prevailing wisdom in American society where lawsuits are common. You might say that this provision in our Covenant is our version of “tort reform.” In general, our church has tried to live according to this rule, but there have been times when the courts were the only way to reach an agreement in particularly difficult cases. Lawsuits tend to sever relationships, but Moravians try to settle disputes in a way that does not lead to hurt feelings. We have also been suspicious of lawsuits that are intended to harm one person or enrich ourselves. Sacrificial love and the willingness to accept loss are part of the Moravian understanding of the Christian faith.

Questions:

- Does this statement in the Covenant mean that Moravians should not be lawyers?
- Have you ever been tempted to sue someone? Did you want to do this out of love for the other person or out of anger?
- What would have happened if you had sued?
- What are other ways that we can settle our grievances without resorting to law courts?
- Are there any advantages in pursuing these paths?

Worship

Paragraphs 16 and 17:

Remembering that worship is one of our proper responses to Almighty God, an experience designed for our benefit and a part of our Christian witness, we and our children will faithfully attend the worship services of the Church.

We, therefore, will be careful to avoid unnecessary labor on Sunday and plan that the recreations in which we engage on that day do not interfere with our own attendance or that of others at divine worship.

Commentary:

The most basic activity of the Christian Church is worship of God. This statement does not diminish other important Christian activities, such as evangelism and acts of mercy, but it does remind us that the Church is first and foremost a worshipping community. This is evident in the Old and New Testaments where God’s people come together to worship him.

When we separate ourselves from the worship of the community, we are separating ourselves from the community of faith. Notice that the Covenant reminds us, though, that worship is not an obligation imposed on us; it is a blessing that we have received from God. The Moravian Church has generally recognized that Sunday is not the exact equivalent of the Jewish Sabbath in part because Jesus reinterpreted the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament; however, the Covenant for Christian Living does highlight the traditional understanding that Sunday is not a free day for Christians. Sunday is intended to be a day for worship and study.

Questions:

- What does worship mean to you?
- What benefits do you experience by actively participating in the worship of your congregation?
- How would you respond to the comment, "I can worship God without going to church?"
- What do you think worship should be like in the Moravian Church?
- Why is it important to bring children to church services?
- What should people do if they do not feel they are benefiting from worship?

Holy Communion

Paragraph 18:

Holy Communion: In the celebration of this Sacrament we receive the renewed assurance of the forgiveness of our sins and of our fellowship with Christ; unite with one another as members of His Body; and rejoice in the hope of His return in glory. Therefore, we will commune faithfully and thus renew our pledge of allegiance to Him.

Commentary:

Our community of faith traces its origins to a reform movement in Bohemia that centered on frequent communion for the laity. We broke away from the Roman Catholic Church primarily over the issue of giving the cup (chalice) to the laity in Communion. Many of our ancestors were imprisoned or executed for sharing in Holy Communion according to the simple teaching of the New Testament.

Through the centuries, frequent and reverent sharing in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ remained the holiest aspect of Moravian worship. Our ministers typically wear a white robe called a surplice in communion to emphasize that it is really Christ who gives us this sacred meal and that the personality and flaws of the minister do not affect the holiness of the sacrament.

According to Moravian teaching, if we refuse to take communion from one of our clergy, we are separating ourselves from Christ. The sacrament is about Communion with our Lord and Savior and our membership in the mystical body of Christ that transcends our divisions.

Questions:

- Why do you think Jesus instructed his disciples to observe this ritual?
- How does Communion give us "assurance of the forgiveness of our sins"?
- What do you experience when you take Communion? Should others experience the same feeling?
- What do you think of the Moravian approach to Communion? Is it different than what you have experienced in other churches?
- What do Moravians emphasize about Communion in our ceremony?

Part 3b: The Unity We Seek

Relations with Other Churches

Paragraphs 19 and 20:

We will have fellowship, in all sincerity, with children of God in other Christian churches, and will carefully avoid all disputes respecting opinions and ceremonies peculiar to one or another church. In this fellowship we will cooperate with other churches in the support of public charities or Christian enterprises, which have a just claim upon us as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We realize that it is the Lord's will that the Church of Jesus Christ should give evidence of and seek unity in Him with zeal and love. We see how such unity has been promised us and laid upon us as a charge. We recognize that through the grace of Christ the different denominations have received many gifts and that the Church of Christ may be enriched by these many and varied contributions. It is our desire that we may learn from one another and rejoice together in the riches of the love of Christ and the manifold wisdom of God. We welcome every step that brings us nearer the goal of unity in Him.

Commentary:

One of the most important passages of Scripture to Moravians is Jesus' High Priestly prayer in John 17, sometimes called his Last Will and Testament. In that prayer, Jesus prays that all of his followers will be one, just as he is one with the Father. However, since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have separated from each other over matters of doctrine, practice, politics, language, and many other things. Some of these divisions have marred the Body of Christ. The Moravian Church is unusual in the history of Christianity in that our church has always understood itself as a fellowship of believers within the Body of Christ rather than being the only true church. We have also been unusual in our attitude toward theological controversies that have divided the Body of Christ. We believe that all Christian churches serve Christ in the world and that the Holy Spirit grants differing gifts to churches. Rather than being threatened by the different practices of the churches, Moravians have traditionally seen this as an enriching of the Body of Christ. On controversial matters, such as Holy Communion, Moravians have found that the simple teaching of Scripture and tolerance for differing interpretations have been a blessing to us spiritually and have benefited our work in the world

Questions:

- What opinions or ceremonies are peculiar to Moravians?
- What is the danger in religious disputes?
- Why do we need to be tolerant of other churches in order to better serve Christ?
- What are the advantages of engaging in cooperative ministries and public charities rather than trying to do all things alone?
- What do you think the Moravian Church could learn from contact with other Christian bodies?
- What unique gifts does the Moravian Church offer the Body of Christ?
- Is this statement calling us to create a new church that unites all Christian churches or to an increased appreciation for the distinctiveness of the different churches?

Part 4: The Witness of the Christian Home

A: Marriage

Paragraphs 21, 22 and 23:

We regard it as a sacred obligation to hold to the ideal of Christian marriage as a lifelong commitment given by our Lord in His teaching. We consider it essential, therefore, that all persons contemplating marriage should receive premarital counseling and that our young people should be instructed, beginning in adolescence, in the meaning and obligation of Christian marriage. This instruction should be given through the Church and home.

We regard Christian marriage as a lifelong covenant before God (an indissoluble union) which requires the continuous loyalty of the man and the woman toward each other. Any breaking of the marriage bond is a result of sin (involves sin against God) and causes human suffering; therefore, it is the duty of husband and wife to meet all frictions, offenses, and disagreements with a humble, forgiving spirit that persistently works for reconciliation. If at any time the stability of their marriage is threatened, the couple is to seek the counsel of a pastor, of other spiritual leaders in the Church, or of other professional Christian counselors as soon as possible before any other action is taken.

Following the example and teaching of our Lord, we acknowledge the responsibility to deal compassionately and redemptively with human frailty and sin in every area of life, including the failure of marriage. As ambassadors of Christ we are called to be agents of reconciliation, we recognize that persons of sincere faith and with good counsel may still decide or be forced to divorce. We believe it our Christian responsibility to pray for, support, and encourage those who have divorced, the children of the divorced, and all who are wounded by divorce.

Commentary:

This is one of the longer sections of the Covenant, and it is the one that has been changed the most through the years. In the Moravian communities of the 18th century, marriages were arranged by the church rather than the couple or their parents. At that time the church stressed the idea that marriage is a serious and sacred matter. As the community system dissolved, Moravian young people adopted the modern practice of arranging their marriages on the basis of love and romance; however, the church continues to expect couples to think seriously about their marriages and how marriage is part of their Christian life.

In the 20th century, people began to live longer and the pressures on marriage increased as society changed. In the decades following World War II, it became evident to the church that the new social reality included divorce. Marriages were increasingly likely to end in divorce, and the church gradually recognized that the earlier practice of not blessing remarriages was driving many people out of the church, including many people who were sincere in their faith and commitment.

The church gradually recognized that divorce is rarely a simple matter where one party is guilty and one is innocent. The church also realized that the practice of telling women suffering in abusive marriages that they should remain with their husbands merely added to the abuse. Eventually, the Covenant was altered to reflect the reality that many Christians have suffered from divorce. The Covenant sets out the contemporary Moravian understanding that marriage is indeed a sacred bond that is sometimes broken, but that God's covenant never is.

Questions:

- Why do we teach that marriage should last “as long as you both shall live” instead of “as long as your love shall last”?
- What do you think are the most important things in marriage?
- What advice would you give two people thinking of uniting in marriage?
- What makes a marriage a Christian marriage?
- Do you think that the church was right to change the Covenant or should the Moravian Church forbid remarriage?
- Is divorce ever the right thing to do?
- How should the church minister to people who have suffered from divorce, including children?

B. Family Life

Raising Children

Paragraph 24:

As parents, remembering that our children are the property of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 1:19), we will bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4) and take all possible care to preserve them from every evil influence. For this reason we will seek to approve ourselves as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, setting an example for our children. We will give faithful attention to the spiritual development of our children, both in the home and in the church. We will endeavor to conduct regular family devotions.

Commentary:

At one time the Moravian Church reserved the right to raise children for people if it was deemed that the parents were not raising them in a proper Christian fashion or were abusing them. That is no longer the practice, but the church continues to offer guidance and counsel to parents. The Moravian Church in every province of the Unity and in every congregation (since the earliest days of the church) baptizes infants as a witness to our conviction that children share in the redemptive work of Christ. We have always taught that children should be raised in such a way that they know that they are children of God and that they should value their relationship to God. Not every church shares this conviction, and we do not judge others, but infant baptism has been precious to Moravians for centuries and it influences our Christian education efforts. The Moravian Church also condemns all forms of child abuse, even if conducted in the guise of Christian discipline. We understand that it takes work and prayer to build strong families where Christian values are evident.

Questions:

- Would it change our treatment of children if we recognize that they are the property of the Lord instead of belonging to us?
- What responsibility does this place on parents?
- How do we preserve children from evil influences without withdrawing from society?
- What is the difference between discipline, punishment, and abuse in families?
- Why does the Covenant call parents to set an example of Christian behavior for children?
- How can you assist in the spiritual development of the children in your congregation?

Part 5: The Witness of a Christian Citizen

Recognition of a Civil Authority, Responsibilities, A Higher Loyalty

Paragraphs 25, 26, and 27:

We will be subject to the civil authorities as the powers ordained of God, in accordance with the admonitions of Scripture (Romans 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13– 14) and will in nowise evade the taxes and other obligations which are lawfully required of us (Romans 13:7).

Considering it a special privilege to live in a democratic society, we will faithfully fulfill the responsibilities of our citizenship, among which are intelligent and well-informed voting, a willingness to assume public office, guiding the decisions of government by the expression of our opinions, and supporting good government by our personal efforts.

Though giving our loyalty to the state of which we are citizens, we do recognize a higher loyalty to God and conscience (Acts 5:29).

Commentary:

Romans 13 has a long and sometimes painful history in the Christian Church. This passage caused problems for our ancestors when they violated the laws of the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Holy Roman Empire by separating themselves from the worship of the Catholic Church. Many were persecuted by the state and told they must be obedient because of Romans 13. At times, our church has simply withdrawn from governments and established separate communities where we would not have to face difficult decisions. There have been many occasions when Moravians refused to take up arms even in defense of their nation. It took a long time for Moravians to adjust to life in a democratic society that guarantees freedom of religion.

Through the years we came to realize that there is a special opportunity and even calling for Christians to influence the laws of the land so that they may reflect Christian values without violating the separation of church and state. Even so, we recognize the right to resist evil laws. We endorse the Barmen Declaration that was written in 1934 in Germany in opposition to the actions of the Nazi government. The Barmen Declaration reaffirmed the Christian conviction that God rather than the State is sovereign.

Moravians have sometimes refused to cooperate with laws that we have seen as a violation of the most basic aspects of justice. However, the Moravian church has not preached violence or rebellion. Moravians who live in America enjoy the blessings of a government based on the idea of a social contract, and the Covenant reminds us that we need to fulfill our part of the contract. Many Moravians now serve in public office as part of their Christian vocation.

Questions:

- Why is it a duty for Christians to pay what is justly required of them by their governments?
- How does this statement in the Covenant reflect the understanding of a social contract as part of God's design for human society?
- What are your responsibilities as a citizen in a free society?
- Do you think Moravian ministers and Sunday School teachers should try to influence people's votes before elections?

- Should the church as a whole express its views to elected officials through letters and other means?
- What do you think it means to be loyal to the state or the nation? Does this mean not criticizing the government's actions or attitudes?
- Can you think of times in world history when it would have been good if Christians had resisted the laws or actions of their governments?

Peace

Paragraph 28

For the sake of the peace which we have with God, we earnestly desire to live peaceably with all people and to seek the peace of the places where we dwell.

Commentary:

The Moravian Church has an ancient and respected commitment to peace. At times this has meant that the church required pacifism, but today we leave the question of military service up to the conscience of each individual. Even for members of the military, however, we encourage them not to embrace a culture of violence and oppression but at all times to seek to mitigate suffering even in the midst of armed conflict. The Moravian commitment to peace goes beyond military issues, though. It is one of our core convictions. We believe and teach that God intends for all people to live in peace and avoid harming other people. Though conflicts are inevitable and are sometimes required by our Christian witness, our goal is always one of reconciliation and the promotion of a higher justice. We have traditionally taught that we should not stir up trouble with our neighbors and that we should pray for the peace of the lands in which we minister.

Questions:

- Do you think that the world values peace or does it encourage conflict and destruction? Why do you think that?
- What are the advantages of a peaceful way of life? How is this consistent with the Gospel's teaching?
- Can there be peace without justice?
- Are there times when Moravians must create conflict with our neighbors
- How can your congregation be a peacemaker in the world? How can you?
- How should we teach this Christian commitment to children as part of their moral and spiritual development?

Part 6: Our Witness in the World

Love Towards All

Paragraph 29:

We will not hate, despise, slander, or otherwise injure anyone. We will ever strive to manifest love towards all people, to treat them in a kind and friendly manner, and in our dealings with them to approve ourselves upright, honest, and conscientious, as becomes children of God. Together with the universal Christian Church, we have a concern for this world, opening our heart and hand to our neighbors with the message of the love of God, and being ever ready to minister of our substance to their necessities (Matthew 25:40).

Commentary:

In many ways this paragraph is a summary of the entire Covenant for Christian Living. Here we see the Moravian understanding that doctrine is meaningless without practical application in our lives. We also see the Moravian understanding that our ethics flow from the inner disposition of our hearts. Because we have been redeemed and brought into a loving relationship with the Father through our Lord and Savior, we are able to give others the same grace we have received. We understand that the entire biblical law is summed up in the commandment to “do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” This applies to our way of doing business, pursuing our careers, living in our communities, and spreading the Gospel.

Questions:

- Why is it wrong for Christians to “hate, despise, slander or injure” anyone?
- Should we make a distinction between our behavior toward righteous people and sinners? Why or why not?
- If all Moravians took this paragraph seriously, how would it affect our preaching, teaching, fellowship, and actions in the world?
- Why should children of God be “upright, honest, and conscientious”?
- What does this mean in practical terms?
- Is it legitimate to use deception to further the cause of Christ?
- How do you show concern for the world as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Our Manner of Faith - Witnessing to our Faith

Paragraphs 30

We will at all times be ready cheerfully to witness to our faith (1 Peter 3:15,16) and if need be, to suffer reproach for Christ's sake (Luke 6:22,23). Being aware that our witness is made by both what we do and what we avoid doing, we will endeavor to let our manner of life “be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27), “not being conformed to this world” (Romans 12:2). But in our yearning for the redemption of the whole creation, we will seek to meet the needs of the world in self-giving love, and as true yokefellow of Jesus Christ, willingly share in the fellowship of his sufferings, walking in his strength, by whom all things “are given us that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

Commentary:

Many people, including many Moravians, report that they are uncomfortable witnessing to others about their faith in Christ. This may be because of how some churches use the word “witness.”

Many times witnessing to faith seems like an effort to convince other people that they are wrong for believing what they believe and that they must join a particular church. The Covenant understands witnessing to our faith to be a cheerful sharing with others the joy and comfort we have in following Jesus Christ.

Notice that witnessing is not simply verbal; it includes our behavior in the world. Sometimes our strongest witness is when we do not participate in the petty cruelties and violence we see daily in our world. That is not all, though. Like the preceding paragraph, this one calls us into active expressions of our faith formed in love.

Theologically, we recognize that this is a fallen and sinful world, but that all of creation is in a process of redemption. Moravians understand Christian love to mean self-giving love modeled on the love of Christ who shared in the sufferings of the world. We see here the paradox of the New Testament: by sharing in the sacrifice and suffering of Christ on behalf of the world we experience the joy and peace of Christ while we are in the world.

Questions:

- Have you ever “cheerfully witnessed” to your faith? What does this mean for you? Is this different from other forms of witnessing that you have experienced?
- Have you ever been rejected or criticized for being an active follower of Christ? What happened? How did you respond?
- What are things that we can do as part of witnessing to our faith? What are things that we should avoid doing simply because others know that we are Christian?
- What does it mean to you to share in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ and walk in his strength?

Temperance in All Things

Paragraphs 31

Remembering the admonition of Scripture to be temperate in all things (1 Corinthians 9:25), we shall endeavor to look upon our bodies as temples of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). We must also remember to respect the welfare of others who may be affected by our actions (Romans 14:20,21). We are aware of the problems that can be caused by the intemperate use of such things as alcoholic beverages, food, tobacco, drugs, and other things. We consider it the responsibility of every Christian to decide most carefully how they can be used in good conscience. We regard intemperance in any area of living as being inconsistent with the Christian life.

Commentary:

Much of the Covenant deals with our responsibilities toward brothers and sisters in Christ and the world in general, but this chapter concerns our own bodies. If we acknowledge that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, then we acknowledge that they ultimately belong to God not us. Self-abuse is therefore an offense against God. According to the Covenant we are to treat ourselves and our bodies with the same loving care we show to others in the world.

A central feature of the Moravian Church in its early days was a focus on living a disciplined and temperate life. This was continued into the Moravian communities of the 1700s. Moravians were expected to maintain control over their desires and avoid a lifestyle of excess and greed. For a time in the late 19th and 20th centuries this general attitude of common sense and temperance slipped

into an attitude of prohibition of alcohol and tobacco. With the writing of the current Covenant, there was a move toward moderation and personal decision rather than prohibition.

Questions:

- What does it mean that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Does this mean that we are to worship our bodies and care only about our own health?
- What does “intemperance” mean to you? What are the dangers in intemperance?
- What are your views on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other things? What is the difference between moderate use and addiction?
- How do our actions affect the welfare of others when it comes to what we eat, drink, or use?
- How do you think the church should deal with the issue of addiction? Is condemnation enough?

Unity

Opposition to Racism

Paragraphs 32 and 33:

We recognize no distinction between those who are one in the Lord. We believe that God in Jesus Christ calls his people out of “every race, kindred, and tongue,” pardons them beneath the Cross, and brings them into a living fellowship with himself. We regard it as a commandment of our Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are one in Christ.

Because we hold that all people are God’s creatures (Genesis 1:27) and that he has made of one blood all nations (Acts 17:26), we oppose any discrimination based on color, race, creed, or land of origin and declare that we should treat everyone with love and respect.

Commentary:

This statement is in conformity with The Ground of the Unity’s statement against racial prejudice. It is important for Moravians to recognize that our church’s doctrine condemns all forms of racism and discrimination. This is not left to individual conscience but is a point of doctrine. For us, racial discrimination is a violation of the Gospel. This is consistent with our church’s practice for centuries.

Moravian missions began with bringing the Gospel to Africans enslaved on the island of St. Thomas. Though their masters told them they were worthless and did not have souls, Moravian missionaries brought the message that they were so precious to God that he died for them. Because of Christ, African slaves could be brothers and sisters with Europeans. Although we have failed to live up to our ideals in the past, our church has never justified racism theologically. Notice that in paragraph 33 we extend our condemnation of discrimination to include persons who are not Christian. The Moravian Church opposes anti-Semitism and other forms of oppression based on religion as an offense against the God who made us all.

Questions:

- Why does the Church need to have a statement that “we recognize no distinction between those who are one in the Lord”?
- Do we live up to this statement in practice?
- In what ways do we as a church bear “public witness” to the fact that we are all one in Christ? In what ways do you do this?

- Is racism and discrimination one of those areas where we should keep in mind that we are bearing witness to Christ in what we do and refrain from doing?
- If you believe that all humans have one Creator and are all related, would this change how you treat people outside of your own circle of friends and family?
- What are concrete ways we show respect to people who do not look and talk like we do?

Discipline - Conclusion

Paragraphs 34 and 35:

We realize that all areas of Christian life and conduct cannot be covered in this statement of principles by which we live and bear our witness, and we call attention, therefore, to the Christian's responsibility to follow Christ as Lord of all areas of life.

We make it a duty of the Board of Elders, which is charged with the spiritual welfare of the congregation, to see that this Moravian Covenant be adhered to and faithfully observed; and we will cooperate with the Board of Elders in its efforts to maintain the discipline of the congregation. As a redemptive community we will be much more concerned in aiding than censuring those who falter, being conscious of our own need for correction and forgiveness.

Commentary:

This is a catch-all statement to cover areas not specified in the Covenant, but it is consistent with the Moravian Church's traditional teaching that all of life should be held in sacred trust. We do not believe that there is a difference between our secular life and our religious life, but all of our activities are part of our worship and service to the Lord. The final paragraph recalls the ancient tradition of our Church that our church leaders have the responsibility to see to the discipline of the congregation. At certain times in our history, and in some provinces of our Unity today, this practice of church discipline has been rigorously enforced. In the North American provinces today, elders tend to leave members of the congregation to follow their own conscience unless their behavior is affecting the life of the community.

Discipline should not be confused with punishment or judging others. In fact, discipline is a process that renders punishment unnecessary. Moreover, the Church's concern is not to condemn but to help brothers and sisters. It is appropriate that the Covenant end with the final observation that in following this Covenant we are aware of our need for both correction and forgiveness. In the Moravian tradition, we are much more concerned about our own short-comings than the faults of others.

Questions:

- What areas of the Christian life do you think the Covenant does not address?
- Are there areas of your life that you think the Church should leave alone?
- Does the Covenant present any challenges to you in your life?
- What do you think of the idea of the Elders being in charge of discipline? Are there any dangers in this? What are the benefits?
- How should the Elders perform this duty?
- How would you sum up the teaching of the Covenant?
- Do you think the Covenant is consistent with the teaching of Jesus? Why or why not?

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