

The Ground of the Unity

A doctrinal statement adopted by
the Unity Synod of the Unitas Fratrum,
or Moravian Church,
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The Ground of the Unity

The Lord Jesus Christ calls His Church into being so that it may serve Him on earth until He comes. The Unitas Fratrum is, therefore, aware of its being called in faith to serve humanity by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It recognizes this call to be the source of its being and the inspiration of its service. As is the source, so is the aim and end of its being based upon the will of its Lord.

The Belief of the Church

With the whole of Christendom we share faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We believe and confess that God has revealed Himself once and for all in His Son Jesus Christ; that our Lord has redeemed us with the whole of humanity by His death and His resurrection; and that there is no salvation apart from Him. We believe that He is present with us in the Word and the Sacrament; that He directs and unites us through His Spirit and thus forms us into a Church. We hear Him summoning us to follow Him, and pray Him to use us in His service. He joins us together mutually, so that knowing ourselves to be members of His body we become willing to serve each other.

In the light of divine grace, we recognize ourselves to be a Church of sinners. We require forgiveness daily, and live only through the mercy of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. He redeems us from our isolation and unites us into a living Church of Jesus Christ.

Personal Belief

The belief of the Church is effected and preserved through the testimony of Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit. This testimony calls each individual personally, and leads each one to the recognition of sin and to the acceptance of the redemption achieved by Christ. In fellowship with Him the love of Christ becomes more and more the power of the new life, power which penetrates and shapes the entire person. As God's Spirit so effects living belief in the hearts of individuals, He grants them the privilege to share in the fruits of Christ's salvation and membership in His body.

God's Word and Doctrine

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.

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes the Word of the Cross as the center of Holy Scripture and of all preaching of the Gospel, and it sees its primary mission, and its reason for being, to consist in bearing witness to this joyful message. We ask our Lord for power never to stray from this.

The Unitas Fratrum takes part in the continual search for sound doctrine. In interpreting Scripture and in the communication of doctrine in the Church, we look to two millennia of ecumenical Christian tradition and the wisdom of our Moravian forebears in the faith to guide us as we pray for fuller understanding and ever clearer proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But just as the Holy Scripture does not contain any doctrinal system, so the Unitas Fratrum also has not developed any of its own because it knows that the mystery of Jesus Christ, which is attested to in the Bible, cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement. Also it is true that through the Holy Spirit the recognition of God's will for salvation in the Bible is revealed completely and clearly.

Creeds and Confessions

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes in the creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the Body of Christ. These creeds aid the Church in formulating a Scriptural confession, in marking the boundary of heresies, and in exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age. The Unitas Fratrum maintains that all creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of the Holy Scriptures. It acknowledges as such true professions of faith the early Christian witness:

“Jesus Christ is Lord!” and also especially the ancient Christian creeds and the fundamental creeds of the Reformation.*

*Note: In the various Provinces of the Renewed Unitas Fratrum the following creeds in particular gained special importance, because in them the main doctrines of the Christian faith find clear and simple expression:

The Apostles' Creed

The Athanasian Creed

The Nicene Creed

The Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren of 1535

The Twenty-one Articles of the unaltered Augsburg Confession

The Shorter Catechism of Martin Luther

The Synod of Berne of 1532

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England

The Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934

The Heidelberg Catechism

The Unitas Fratrum as a Unity

We believe in and confess the Unity of the Church given in the one Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior. He died that He might unite the scattered children of God. As the living Lord and Shepherd, He is leading His flock toward such unity.

The Unitas Fratrum espoused such unity when it took over the name of the Old Bohemian Brethren's Church, "Unitas Fratrum" (Unity of Brethren). Nor can we ever forget the powerful unifying experience granted by the crucified and risen Lord to our ancestors in Herrnhut on the occasion of the Holy Communion of August 13, 1727, in Bethelsdorf.

It is the Lord's will that Christendom should give evidence of and seek unity in Him with zeal and love. In our own midst 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 churches have received many gifts. It is our desire that we may learn from each other and rejoice together in the riches of the love of Christ and the manifold wisdom of God.

We confess our share in the guilt which is manifest in the severed and divided state of Christendom. By means of such divisions we ourselves hinder the message and power of the Gospel. We recognize the danger of self-righteousness and judging others without love.

Since we together with all Christendom are pilgrims on the way to meet our coming Lord, we welcome every step that brings us nearer the goal of unity in Him. He himself invites us to communion in His supper. Through it He leads the Church toward that union which He has promised. By means of His presence in the Holy Communion He makes our unity in Him evident and certain even today.

The Church as a Fellowship

The Church of Jesus Christ, despite all the distinctions between male and female, Jew and non-Jew, white and colored, poor and rich, is one in its Lord. The Unitas Fratrum recognizes no distinction between those who are one in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are called to testify that God in Jesus Christ brings His people out of "every race, kindred and tongue" into one body, pardons sinners beneath the cross and brings them together. We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of race or standing, and we regard it as a commandment of the Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Church as a Community of Service

Jesus Christ came not to be served but to serve. From this, His Church receives its mission and its power for its service, to which each of its members is called. We believe that the Lord has called us particularly to mission service among the peoples of the world. In this, and in all other forms of service both at home and abroad, to which the Lord commits us, He expects us to confess Him and witness to His love in unselfish service.

Serving Our Neighbor

Our Lord Jesus entered into this world's misery to bear it and to overcome it. We seek to follow Him in serving His people. Like the love of Jesus, this service knows no bounds. Therefore we pray the Lord ever anew to point out to us the way to reach our neighbors, opening our heart and hand to them in their need.

Serving the World

Jesus Christ maintains in love and faithfulness His commitment to this fallen world. Therefore we must remain concerned for this world. We may not withdraw from it through indifference, pride or fear. Together with the universal Christian Church, the Unitas Fratrum challenges all with the message of the love of God, striving to promote the peace of the world and seeking to attain what is best for all people. For the sake of this world, the Unitas Fratrum hopes for and looks to the day when the victory of Christ will be manifest over sin and death and the new world will appear.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the one Lord and Head of His body, the Church. Because of this, the Church owes no allegiance to any authority whatsoever which opposes His dominion. The Unitas Fratrum treasures in its history the vital experience of the Headship of Christ of September 16 and November 13, 1741.

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes that it is called into being and has been sustained hitherto only by the incomprehensible grace of God. Thanksgiving and praise for this grace remain the keynote of its life and ministry.

In this spirit it awaits the appearing of Jesus Christ, goes forward to meet its Lord with joy, and prays to be found ready when He comes.

Essential Features of the Unity

The Unitas Fratrum and Its Congregations

The Unitas Fratrum was called into being by God as a Church which stresses fellowship. After its apparent destruction in the land of its origin, it was renewed in Herrnhut, Germany.

We recognize that it is the Lord's will to confront and call to Himself each individual through His Spirit and that formal membership in a congregation is for no one a substitute for a personal encounter with the Savior, nor does it relieve any from making a personal decision to accept Him. We learn from the Scriptures however that it has pleased God to make the Church the place where God's fellowship with humanity becomes a reality. A living Church is the clearest witness for its Lord to the world.

A Church is and remains a living one when it:

- ❖ is attentive to God's Word,
- ❖ confesses its sins and accepts forgiveness for them,
- ❖ seeks and maintains fellowship with its Lord and Redeemer by means of the sacraments,
- ❖ places its whole life under His rule and daily leading,
- ❖ ministers to its neighbor and seeks fellowship with all who confess Christ,
- ❖ proclaims to the world the tidings concerning the Savior,
- ❖ awaits wholeheartedly the coming of its Lord as King.

Within each congregation the various groups may become aware of, and participate in, the special gifts and tasks which can be drawn from the pattern of Jesus' life on earth.

Such congregations are "living stones" out of which the Lord will build His Church on earth.

Wherever such congregations exist in the various parts of the Unitas Fratrum they form a living Church — a member of the body of Christ on earth.

Communicant members of the Unitas Fratrum are those who have been received in one of the following ways:

- ❖ baptized and received into communicant membership by confirmation,
- ❖ received by adult baptism,
- ❖ received from other Christian churches by letter of transfer and by the right hand of fellowship,
- ❖ received by reaffirmation of faith.

Vocation of the Unitas Fratrum and Its Congregations

The Unitas Fratrum lives by the gifts which the Lord has given His Church on earth. His Word and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Its vocation is to proclaim His Word to its congregations and to the world and to administer the sacraments aright.

The Unitas Fratrum considers it to be its mission to emphasise especially the following truths from the fullness of the Word of God:

- ❖ the word of the cross as the testimony of the Lord who was crucified for us and who rose again (1 Cor.1:18,30);
- ❖ the word of reconciliation as God making peace with His whole creation (1 John 2:2);
- ❖ the word of personal union with the Savior as the vitalizing and molding power of the believer's life (John 15:5);
- ❖ the word of Christlike love between one another as the fellowship of members brought about by Jesus Christ, the Head of His Church (Eph.4: 15, 16).

Baptism into the death of Jesus is administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in the presence of the congregation. Customarily in the Unitas Fratrum children are baptized and later received by confirmation into the communicant membership.

In the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the congregations of the Unitas Fratrum have the assurance of being united with their Lord, enjoy the fruits of His sufferings and death for the forgiveness of sins, unite with each other anew as members of His body, and rejoice in the hope of His return in glory.

From its beginning the Unitas Fratrum has emphasized fellowship among its members. It recognizes its calling to preserve this gift both by united adoration, self humiliation and intercession, and by ordering its life and service:

- ❖ as a fellowship within the congregation and with the Unitas Fratrum,
- ❖ as a fellowship with the Universal Church of Christ on earth,
- ❖ as a fellowship with the Church Triumphant before the throne.

As a fellowship of the redeemed it extols the Lamb with joyful song. As a fellowship looking to the future it proclaims to the world the victory of Him who is to come. In the liturgical form of its services the Unitas Fratrum gives expression to its union with the whole Church of Christ on earth, and as a living fellowship it will create ever new forms within the framework of its own tradition.

In this fellowship the Unitas Fratrum has received a new and transformed congregational life,

- ❖ in which Jesus Christ is Lord of every phase of life,
- ❖ in which we live no longer unto ourselves but unto Him who died for us and rose again,
- ❖ in which we rejoice in the hope of His glorious return,
- ❖ in which the congregation and its members are willing to share the sufferings of Christ.

We recognize our responsibility to the civil authorities insofar as human commandments do not contradict the “government of the Savior.”

The life in the congregations of the Unitas Fratrum is not the fruit of its own piety but of the love of Christ which constrains those who are His to love one another.

The new life of the congregation is nourished by the cure and care of souls and the exercise of congregational discipline.

Though the cure and care of souls is the special task of the ministers and their fellow-laborers, every member who has experienced the saving love of his Redeemer is called to undertake this service.

In Church discipline the sins and errors of the individual are considered and borne as the burden of the whole congregation. The congregation stands beside the erring one under the judgment of the Cross, ever mindful of its own need of forgiveness and brings the fault before the only One who can redeem us from our guilt.

Church discipline is exercised in the confident faith that it is not the Lord’s will that a single member should be lost, nor that the clear witness of the congregation should be hindered. This discipline is especially necessary when by word or deed the gospel is falsified and the Lord denied. Therefore the main object of Church discipline is the prevention of offenses and not the punishment of the individual.

In the exercise of corrective discipline the following aspects are recognized:

- ❖ brotherly admonition by the minister, either alone or in fellowship with other members (church council, elders, etc.) in private;
- ❖ further admonition with temporary suspension from the fellowship of the congregation as it is visibly expressed in certain privileges;
- ❖ exclusion from the membership of the congregation;
- ❖ persons who are excluded shall be welcomed back into the membership of the congregation after a profession of repentance on their part.

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes the priesthood of all believers but also has specially appointed ministers who receive commission and authority for their service from the hands of Jesus Christ, whom the Church acknowledges as its Chief Elder. All members may gladly and confidently carry on their work in and for the congregation, and by their devotion and faithfulness all can render service to the whole Church.

At the same time the Unitas Fratrum gratefully acknowledges the gift of the offices of the ministry which it has received from the Lord. It recognizes and confesses that in reality it is its Lord and Head, Jesus Christ, who calls and ordains, whether in the case of the reception as an acolyte or the ordination to the office of deacon, or the consecration as a presbyter or bishop.

The same is true for the brethren and sisters who are called or elected to service in any official capacity. They can render their service well only through the grace of their Chief Elder.

The Witness of the Unitas Fratrum

The Unitas Fratrum is committed to the unity of the children of God as a reality created by God in Jesus Christ. This unity has been granted and preserved within it as a Church formed out of various peoples, languages and denominations. Its very life, therefore, is to be of service to the Church Universal.

The Unitas Fratrum is committed to the victory of the Lamb of God who was slain as the hope of the world. It accepts as its central commission the proclamation of this message in every place where the Lord Himself opens the door.

The Unitas Fratrum acknowledges its vocation to service in the homelands:

- ❖ to bring the gospel to those who are far from God;
- ❖ to serve the youth by means of schools, camps, and other agencies;
- ❖ to serve in caring for the sick, for the aged, and for those in special homes;
- ❖ and to serve by means of the printed word, especially the Daily Texts of the Moravian Church.

The Unitas Fratrum experiences in its missionary enterprise active help from wide circles throughout all evangelical Christendom through prayer, gifts, and individuals ready to serve. In this way also the unity of the children of God becomes visible.

The Unitas Fratrum appreciates the inestimable value of each human being for whom Jesus Christ gave His life and counts no sacrifice too great to “win souls for the Lamb.”

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes that its members are united by their Lord in congregations and are called to be pilgrims and messengers to carry the gospel to all people and into all human relationships. The “first fruits” of their witness are the pledge of the whole harvest.

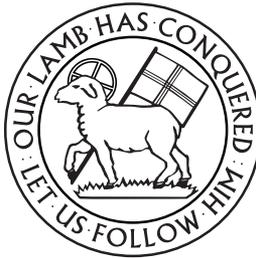
The Unitas Fratrum recognizes its duty to grant the young churches full freedom concerning the future. God’s Spirit must and will show them whether to remain a part of the Unitas Fratrum as a province of the Unity, or to become a self-dependent church, or to unite with some other indigenous church or church group.

The Unitas Fratrum looks beyond this earthly witness of the Church to the great consummation when the Lord will “draw all people unto Himself and His Kingdom be fully established.”

About the Ground of the Unity

This document is a revision of a similar statement prepared and approved by the Unity Synod of 1957, which marked the 500th anniversary of the founding of the Unitas Fratrum, and reviewed by subsequent Unity Synods.

The material contained in the 1957 statement and in this 1995 version of “The Ground of the Unity” and “Essential Features of the Unity” is based on earlier statements about the beliefs and practices of the Moravian Church.



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