

Editorial
“*The Hobbits of Christianity*”

Sometimes you make an off-hand remark that strikes such a chord with people that you find that you are compelled to follow-up on what you yourself suggested in jest. So it is with this brief essay on Moravian identity and theology. When I was asked what the title would be for the 2004 Moses Lectures at Moravian Theological Seminary, I glibly replied, “Moravians as the Hobbits of Christianity” and was taken seriously. I told this to my class on Moravian theology at Home Church and several people asked for copies of the lecture that I never planned to write.

Clearly something about Moravians and hobbits resonated with people and deserved deeper thought. As it turned out, the Moses Lectures proved far too serious for such a bit of fun, so I discussed it with the editor of *The Hinge* over a cup of coffee during the holidays, and I agreed to publish what I wrote while folks could still watch hobbits on the big screen.

Those of you who have never heard of hobbits, read about them, or seen the new Lord of the Rings movies are probably no longer reading this essay. But just in case you are, a word of explanation might be in order. Hobbits, like many things far more threatening to the peace of the world, are fictional. Tolkien, who later claimed to be a hobbit himself, invented them to entertain and teach his children (and us) about what is most important in the world. The lessons eventually grew into the great epic of the modern age. Unfortunately, few have learned his lesson that evil cannot be defeated by its own weapons.

Hobbits represent a time “long ago in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green.” The hobbits help preserve some of the goodness of that time as the world changes even though they are small and easily overlooked. They do not appear in the long lists of all living things. No names of Hobbit heroes were sung in the songs of great deeds of conquest and war, at least not until the day when two small hobbits named Frodo and Sam left their comfortable

homes and journeyed alone into the darkest realm of evil and threw down the dark lord by renouncing and destroying his ring of power.

So, you see, hobbits could become heroes. In general, though, they preferred gardening, giving gifts to each other, playing with children, laughing, and eating. They produced few books, little wealth, no magic, and no wars, but they did make faithful friends. And the Shire where they lived was worth preserving, not because it was perfect, but because it was good. Those raised in the Shire also knew that when you are sitting on the ruin of the world, you can still have a picnic and remember what the world can be like again. What better time to have a lovefeast than when all the world seems to be falling down around you?

What has this got to do with Moravians, you are no doubt asking yourself, assuming that you haven’t already angrily thrown away this issue of *The Hinge* and are ready to plunge back into the theological controversies of this third age of the church. Before you pick up the weapons of ecclesiastical combat, though, take a moment to think about Moravians and hobbits. It is true that we are often overlooked in the great histories of Christianity and even in the church today. We are small, and have always been small. There are far more Moravians in the world today than at any time in our history, but that still hardly registers for the list makers. We prefer food and good cheer to hoarded gold, heroic deeds, or grand theologies. We love children and know how to laugh and be merry.

For over five hundred years, Moravian theology has focused on the everyday rather than wasting time speculating about the end time, conjuring up visions of the afterlife, or seeking mystical revelations. We have sent our missionaries to the remotest corners of the world without soldiers or imperialist plans in order to bring people the simple message that the Creator is benevolent and is reconciling all peoples, races, and tongues. We have also tried to live by the simple truth that though

Reproduced with permission from *The Hinge: A Journal of Christian Thought for the Moravian Church*, 10:3 (Winter 2003-2004).

this world is not our final destination, we are stewards of what God has made good. If creation is good, we know we are called both to enjoy it and to protect it from evil. Unlike many other Christians in the long years of pilgrimage and struggle, Moravians have generally understood that moderation and consideration make it possible to enjoy what God has given.

What some of the hobbits learn in the Tolkien epic is that hobbits can go without food or comfort when there is need. They find they can endure suffering and face death bravely, just as many Moravians have been called upon to do through the ages. They are not so bound to food and home that they became greedy and selfish. They know the secret that cheerfulness is a matter of the heart, not the stomach. In the grimmest times, a hobbit has hope in what is good and right and true. And even when hopes fade and the end comes, Frodo and Sam find they can continue their journey because they carry the Shire in their hearts. Most of all, they know that no one should face the trials of this world without a good friend and a wise counselor.

Moravians have also known what it is to “hope against hope” and carry on in the face of certain defeat. There have been times when this small, overlooked church has been entrusted with the task of preserving something good and right and true in Christianity in the midst of oppression and war. It happened when Moravians risked death in order to give the chalice back to the laity. It happened when Comenius offered the whole world the Moravian vision of peace and simple faith. It happened when Moravian refugees inspired Zinzendorf with their faith and courage. It happened when Moravians were massacred at Gnadenhuttens in America, but did not give up their quest to preach the reconciling love of God to all races. It happened when the simple Moravian Daily Texts

helped inspire Bonhoeffer to return to Nazi Germany to try to preserve what is good and beautiful and true. It happened when Moravians in South Africa opposed apartheid by uniting their black and colored provinces. It may be happening today if we have eyes to see.

The strength of the Moravian Church is different from other churches that dominate the skylines and airwaves. Our strength is the fact that we have usually resisted the temptation to become great in the things the world values. We have not sought growth in numbers for the sake of becoming large. We do not have grand cathedrals or universities or television networks. No government fears opposition from the Moravians or even notices there are Moravians. No best sellers, no appearances on talk shows. Often misunderstood and misinterpreted, the Moravians have still tried to preserve something green and life giving in a world bent on domination and destruction. Sometimes, we have even had to preserve what is green and life giving in a Christianity bent on self-destruction and malicious oppression.

This is not written to make us proud, because pride in a hobbit or a Moravian is a silly thing. Rather, it is my attempt to restore some “plain hobbit sense” to our discussions about our future. There are things in the Moravian Church that are admired and desired by many in Christendom. We owe it the greater kingdom of God to preserve them, enjoy them, and share them without being tempted by the desire of becoming great.

In thinking about Moravian doctrine and theology, it might be wise to paraphrase Tolkien. Our church is not a nasty, dark, scary church, filled with the end of the world and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy church with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it is a hobbit-church, and that means comfort (Isaiah 40:1).

Craig D. Atwood