

# Europe's Moravians: A Pioneer Missionary Church

Colin A. Grant

Sixty years before Carey set out for India and 150 years before Hudson Taylor first landed in China, two men, Leonard Dober, a potter, and David Nitschmann, a carpenter, landed on the West Indian island of St. Thomas to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ. They had set out in 1732 from a small Christian community in the mountains of Saxony in central Europe as the first missionaries of the Moravian Brethren, who in the next 20 years entered Greenland (1733), North America's Indian territories (1734), Surinam (1735), South Africa (1736), the Samoyedic peoples of the Arctic (1737), Algiers and Ceylon, and Sri Lanka (1740), China (1742), Persia (1747), Abyssynia and Labrador (1752).

This was but a beginning. In the first 150 years of its endeavor, the Moravian community was to send no less than 2,158 of its members overseas! In the words of Stephen Neil, "This small church was seized with a missionary passion which has never left it."

The *Unitas Fratrum* (United Brethren), as they had been called, have left a record without parallel in the post-New Testament era of world evangelization, and we do well to look again at the main characteristics of this movement and learn the lessons God has for us.

## Spontaneous Obedience

In the first place, *the missionary obedience of the Moravian Brethren was essentially glad and spontaneous*, "the response of a healthy organism to the law of its life," to use Harry Boer's words. The source of its initial thrust came as a result of a deep movement of God's Spirit that had taken place among a small group of exiled believers. They had fled the persecution of the anti-Reformation reaction in Bohemia and Moravia during the 17th century and had taken shelter on an estate at Berthesdorf at the invitation of Nicolas Zinzendorf, an evangelical Lutheran nobleman.

The first tree for their settlement, which was later to be named Herrnhut ("The Lord's Watch"), was felled by Christian David (himself to go overseas as a missionary at a later stage) in 1722 to the strains of Psalm 84. Five years later, so deeply ran the new tides of the grace and love of God among them that one of their number wrote: "The whole place represented truly a tabernacle of God among men. There was nothing to be seen and heard but joy and gladness."

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This was God's preparation for all that was to follow. Challenged through meeting with Anton, an African slave from St. Thomas during a visit to Denmark for the coronation of King Christian VI, Dober and Nitschmann volunteered to go and were commissioned. To them it was a natural expression of their Christian life and obedience.

Dr. A. C. Thompson, one of the main nineteenth century recorders of the early history of Moravian missions, wrote: "So fully is the duty of evangelizing the heathen lodged in current thought that the fact of anyone entering personally upon that work never creates surprise...It is not regarded as a thing that calls for widespread heralding, as if something marvelous or even unusual were in hand."

What a contrast to the hard worked for interest that characterizes much of the missionary sending scene today! Rev. Ignatius Latrobe, a former secretary of the Moravian missions in the United Kingdom during the last century, wrote: "We think it a great mistake when, after their appointment, missionaries are held up to public notice and admiration and much praise is bestowed upon their devotedness to their Lord, presenting them to the congregations as martyrs and confessors before they have even entered upon their labours. We rather advise them quietly to set out, recommended to the fervent prayers of the congregation..." No clamor, no platform heroics, no publicity, but an ardent, unostentatious desire to make Christ known wherever his name had not been named. This became knit into the ongoing life and liturgy of the Moravian Church, so that, for example, a large proportion of public prayer and subsequent hymnology was occupied with this subject.

### Passion for Christ

In the second place, this surging zeal had as its prime motivation a *deep, ongoing passion and love for Christ*, something that found expression in the life of Zinzendorf himself. Born in 1700 into Austrian nobility, he came early under godly family influences and soon came to a saving knowledge of Christ. His early missionary interest was evidenced in his founding, with a friend, in his student days of what he called "The Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed" for the spread of Christ's kingdom in the world.

He became not only host to, but the first leader of the Moravian believers and himself made visits overseas in the interests of the gospel. "I have one passion, and it is Him, only Him," was his central chord and it sounded through the more than 2,000 hymns he wrote.

William Wilberforce, the great evangelical English social reformer, wrote of the Moravians: "They are a body who have perhaps excelled all mankind in solid and unequivocal proofs of the love of Christ and ardent, active zeal in his service. It is a zeal tempered with prudence, softened with meekness and supported by a courage which no danger can intimidate and a quiet certainty no hardship can exhaust." Today, we need a full theological formulation of our motivation in mission and an adequate grasp of what we believe. But if there is no passionate love for Christ at the center of everything, we will only jingle and jangle our way across the world, merely making a noise as we go.

### Courage in the Face of Danger

As Wilberforce indicated, a further feature of the Moravians was that *they faced the most incredible of difficulties and dangers with remarkable courage*. They accepted hardships as part of the identification with the people to whom the Lord had sent them. The words of Paul, "I have become all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:22), were spelled out with a practicality almost without parallel in the history of missions.

Most of the early missionaries went out as "tentmakers," working their trade (most of them being artisans and farmers like Dober and Nitschmann) so that the main expenses involved were in the sending of them out. In areas where white domination had bred the façade of white superiority (e.g. Jamaica and South Africa) the way they humbly got down to hard manual work was itself a witness to their faith. For example, a missionary named Monate helped to build a corn mill in the early days of his work in the Eastern Province of South Africa, cutting the two heavy sandstones himself. In so doing, he not only amazed the Kaffirs among whom he was working, but was enabled to "chat" the gospel to them as he worked!

To go to such places as Surinam and the West Indies meant facing disease and possible death; the early years took their inevitable toll. In Guyana, for instance, 75 out of the first 160



missionaries died from tropical fevers, poisoning and such. Men like Andrew Rittmansberger died within six months of landing on the island. The words of a verse from a hymn written by one of the first Greenland missionaries expresses something of the fibre of their attitude: "Lo through ice and snow, one poor lost soul for Christ to gain; Glad, we bear want and distress to set forth the Lamb once slain."

The Moravians resolutely tackled new languages without many of the modern aids, and numbers of them went on to become outstandingly fluent and proficient in them. This was the stuff, then, of which these men were made. We may face a different pattern of demands today, but the need for a like measure of God-given courage remains the same. Is our easy-going, prosperous society producing "softer" men and women?

### Tenacity of Purpose

We finally note that *many Moravian missionaries showed a tenacity of purpose that was of a very high order*, although it must immediately be added that there were occasions when there was a too hasty withdrawal in the face of a particularly problematical situation (e.g., early work among the Aborigines in Australia in 1854 was abandoned suddenly because of local conflicts caused by a gold rush).

One of the most famous of Moravian missionaries, known as the "Eliot of the West," was David Zeisberger. From 1735, he labored for 62 years among the Huron and other tribes. On one occasion, after he had preached from Isaiah 64:8, one Sunday morning in August, 1781, the church and compound were invaded by marauding bands of Indians. In the subsequent burnings, Zeisberger lost all his manuscripts of Scripture translations, hymns and extended notes on the grammar of Indian languages. But like Carey, who was to undergo a similar loss through fire in India years later, Zeisberger bowed his head in quiet submission to the overruling providence of God and set his hand and heart to the work again.

Are we becoming short on missionary perseverance today? By all means let us acknowledge the value in short-term missionary assignments and see the divine purpose in many of them. But where are those who are ready to "sink" themselves for God overseas? Let us look at such problems as children's education and changing missionary strategy under the Lord's direction full in the face; but if men are to be won, believers truly nourished, and churches encouraged into the fullness of life in Christ, a great deal of "missionary staying power" of the right sort is going to be needed in some places.

Of course, these Moravians had their weaknesses. They concentrated more on evangelism than on the actual planting of local churches and they were consequently very weak on developing Christian leadership. They centered their approach on "the missionary station," even giving them a whole succession of biblical place names, such as Shiloh, Sarepta, Nazareth, Bethlehem, etc. Since most of the early missionaries went out straight from the "carpenter's bench" because of the spontaneous nature of their obedience, they were short on adequate preparation. In fact, it was not until 1869 that the first missionary training college was founded at Nisky, 20 miles from Herrnhut.

Despite all this, the words of J. R. Weinlick bring home the all-pervading lesson we have to learn from the Moravians today. "The Moravian Church was the first among Protestant churches to treat this work as a *responsibility of the Church* as a whole (emphasis mine), instead of leaving it to societies or specially interested people." True, they were a small, compact and unified community, and therefore it may be said that such a simple missionary structure as they possessed was natural. It is doubtful, however, if this can ever be made an excuse for the low level of missionary concern apparent in many sectors of God's Church today, or for the complex, and often competing, missionary society system we struggle with at the present time. Have we ears to hear and wills to obey?

### Study Questions

1. Which of the characteristics of the Moravians is most absent from the Christian Church today? Which is most evident?
2. What is your answer to the question posed at the end of this article? Why?

