

## Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf & the Moravian Church

Historical Theology  
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Don White

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### Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760)

Zinzendorf was born in the city of Dresden in Saxony on May 26, 1700.

He was the son of a nobleman, George Ludwig, a counsellor in the court of the Prince of Saxony.

Germany at that time had not been unified as a nation; it was a many-colored patchwork of hundreds of smaller states. Among these, Saxony was one of the larger and stronger.

Zinzendorf's mother was Charlotte Justine von Gersdorf (1675-1763).

Zinzendorf's father died in the sixth week of Nicolaus' life, and when he was four years old, his mother remarried.

Charlotte's new husband was a high-ranking officer in the army of Prussia, the most powerful German state, and Charlotte went to live in the Prussian capital, Berlin. She left young Nicolaus in the care of his maternal grandmother, Henrietta Catherine, the Baroness von Gersdorf (1648-1726), whose lands lay in Saxony's Upper Lusatia region.

This upbringing was to be a critical factor in Zinzendorf's spiritual development. His grandmother, the Baroness, was closely connected to the leaders of the German Pietist movement, (the widespread movement for spiritual revitalization within the German Lutheran Churches of the 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Franke (1663-1727). When Zinzendorf was baptized as a Lutheran infant, his godfather was none other than Spener himself.

This Lutheran Pietist background provides the key to understanding most of Zinzendorf's adult life. Zinzendorf described his early spiritual experience like this:

During the time I stayed with my revered grandmother, two things took place that determined my whole future. When I was six years old, my tutor, Herr Christian Ludwig Edeling, having served our family for three years, departed and said farewell to me. In this farewell, he said a few words to me concerning the Savior and His excellences, and the sense in which I belonged to Him and to Him alone. These words made so profound and vital an impression on me that I wept over and again, firmly resolving that I would live only for Him who had laid down His life for me. My much loved Aunt Henrietta tried to keep me in this state of mind by frequently speaking loving words concerning the Gospel. I opened my whole heart to her, and we spread my situation prayerfully before the Lord.... This confidential exchange of thought and feeling inspired all my efforts, in later years, to form 'bands' or 'societies' in which believers might confer with one another for mutual edification.

From 1710-16, young Zinzendorf received a Pietist education in the famous Halle Pietist Foundation established by August Franke. However, he then moved to Lutheranism's old historic headquarters at Wittenberg University, where he studied law from 1717-19. In Wittenberg he came up against Lutheran Orthodoxy and its principled hostility to Pietism.

During the time he studied at Wittenberg University Zinzendorf endeavored to promote Pietism with fiery zeal among his fellow students. To this end he started up a group called "The Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed." Those belonging to the Order promised fidelity to Christ's teaching and moral conduct befitting such fidelity which included devoting their energies to pursuing the salvation of both Jews and people of other religions. Each member wore a ring that had engraved upon it the Pauline saying, "No one lives to himself" (Romans 14:7).

After Wittenberg, from 1719-20 Zinzendorf followed the not uncommon practice, among the young men of the more affluent classes, of seeking to broaden his knowledge and experience by traveling across Europe. In the course of his travels, for the first time he had immediate encounters with both Calvinism and Roman Catholicism. This was a landmark event for Zinzendorf; it convinced him that sincere lovers of Christ could be found in both the Reformed Churches and in Rome, vilified though these Churches were by strict Lutherans. In consequence, Zinzendorf

became one of the early pioneers of a sort of 'spiritual ecumenism': he experimented with grand theoretical schemes of reunion between all Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox.

However, by far the most dramatic milestone-experience of Zinzendorf's life came to him when he was making his way through the city of Dusseldorf in Electoral Palatine (West Germany, not far from the borders with the Netherlands). Here, Zinzendorf visited the famous art gallery, established by Prince-Elector Johan Wilhelm II (1690-1716) where he saw a picture of Christ crowned with thorns, over which was written, 'All this I have done for you; what have you done for Me?' The words overwhelmed Zinzendorf; he never lost the vivid and graphic impression they made on his soul. 'From this time,' he said, 'I had but one passion, and that was Christ, only He.'

At the age of twenty-one, in the year 1721, Zinzendorf returned to his native Saxony. He took up a career in the Saxon civil service. Significantly he purchased a tract of land in Berthelsdorf, southeastern Saxony. In 1722, he married another Pietist, Erdmuthe Dorthea von Reuss-Ebersdorf (1700-1756). They married September 7, 1722.

## **Zinzendorf, Herrnhut, and the Moravians**

A key event in Zinzendorf's life came in the year of his marriage. That year he invited a group of persecuted Hussites from the region of Moravia to settle on his land in Berthelsdorf. The proper 'denominational' name of these immigrants was the *Unitas Fratrum* – which would translate *Unity of the Brethren* or *United Brotherhood*. More popularly, they are known as the Bohemian Brethren. As Hussites, they were followers of the great 15<sup>th</sup> Century Bohemian Reformer and martyr John Huss, often and rightly hailed as a forerunner of the Reformation. Persecution by Roman Catholic authorities led to Moravian Hussite immigration in the 16<sup>th</sup> and (especially) 17<sup>th</sup> Century, into Hungary, Poland, Saxony, Holland, and England. In 1722, a group of ten Moravian Hussites emigrated to Berthelsdorf at the invitation of Zinzendorf. This proved to be the first stream of a significant Moravian influx into Berthelsdorf over the next ten years. Within a mere three years, by 1725, Berthelsdorf already had a community of ninety Moravian settlers.

The Moravian refugees, however, were not the only body with distinctive religious convictions to settle in Berthelsdorf. The others were mostly Lutheran, sharing Zinzendorf's faith; but there were also some Calvinist, and some Anabaptists seeking refuge in Zinzendorf's land from religious persecution elsewhere. This was made possible by Zinzendorf's previously mentioned 'ecumenism' and religious tolerance. The Moravian Community in Berthelsdorf gave itself the name 'Herrnhut' (meaning 'The Lord's Watch', 'Protected by the Lord').

In 1727 Zinzendorf stepped down from his position at the Saxon court, in order to give himself single-mindedly to the spiritual concerns of Berthelsdorf in general, and the Moravian immigrant community at Herrnhut in particular. He was first and foremost overflowing with 'catholic' desire to bring peace and unity amid the unedifying clash between Moravians and Lutherans over church life. (By now, the adult population of Berthelsdorf had reached about three hundred, roughly half of whom were Moravians.)

Two months after Zinzendorf and Rothe (Lutheran pastor at Berthelsdorf) had restored peace and unity to Berthelsdorf through the Statutes of the Congregation, an intense spiritual awakening and revival took place among the Moravians. The human instrument was a public prayer offered at Herrnhut by Zinzendorf, on July 16, 1727, when he 'poured out his soul in a heart-touching prayer, delivered with gushing tears; this prayer made an extraordinary impact, and it was the origin of the activities of the life-giving and dynamic Spirit of God that followed thereafter'.

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, ten Moravians met to engage in hymn-singing and prayer; once again, extraordinary experiences were manifest, which they emphatically interpreted as an unusual powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit on their gathering. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, Zinzendorf and twelve others assembled for a prayer-meeting that lasted a whole night. The following midnight, a larger prayer meeting took place; the meeting was overwhelmed by astonishingly deep and vibrant religious feelings, especially sorrow for sin and rejoicing in salvation. Over the next few days, according to accounts written at the time, 'a truly distinctive and overwhelming power of God was experienced at the evening meetings for hymn-singing.'

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, Berthelsdorf's Lutheran pastor Rothe personally experienced and accepted the awakening which resulted in the religious divide between Lutheran and Moravian was decisively removed in Berthelsdorf. This union of once divided brethren was sealed on August 13<sup>th</sup> at a communion service held at Berthelsdorf, among the gathered Moravians and Lutherans. Zinzendorf himself named this communion service as the 'Moravian Pentecost'

The Moravian Pentecost, at least a decade before John Wesley and George Whitfield proclaimed a similar life-changing message in Britain, brought about an enduring transformation of the spiritual life of Berthelsdorf's Moravian community.

John Piper writes:

"In 1727 the community started a round the clock "prayer watch" that lasted unbroken for 100 years. There were about 300 persons in the community at the beginning, and various ones covenanted to pray for one of the 24 hours in the day. In 1792, 65 years later, with the lamp of prayer still burning, the little community had sent out 300 missionaries to the unreached peoples of the West Indies, Greenland, Lapland, Turkey, and North America. They were utterly, and radically dedicated to making Jesus known."

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/at-the-price-of-gods-own-blood>

"Two young Moravians heard of an island in the West Indies where an atheist British owner had 2000 to 3000 slaves. And the owner had said, "No preacher, no clergyman, will ever stay on this island. If he's shipwrecked we'll keep him in a separate house until he has to leave, but he's never going to talk to any of us about God, I'm through with all that nonsense." Three thousand slaves from the jungles of Africa brought to an island in the Atlantic and there to live and die without hearing of Christ.

Several thousand black slaves toiled in the sugar cane fields under the burning sun. 3000 slaves were doomed to live and die without hearing of Christ.

Two young Germans in their 20's from the Moravians sect heard about their plight. They [were willing to sell themselves] to the British planter for the standard price for a male slave [if necessary.]

The Moravian community from Herrnhut came to see the two lads off, who would never return again, having freely sold themselves into a lifetime of slavery. As a member of the slave community they would witness as Christians to the love of God.

Family members were emotional, weeping. Was their extreme sacrifice wise? Was it necessary? The housings had been cast off and were curled up on the pier. As the ship slipped away with the tide and the gap widened, the young men linked arms, raised their hands and shouted across the spreading gap, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering."

This became the call of Moravian missions. And this is our only reason for being...**that the Lamb that was slain may receive the reward of His suffering!** Amen.

--Paris Reidhead (May 30, 1919 - March 23, 1992, Christian missionary, teacher, writer, and advocate of economic development in impoverished nations).

[TBC: These two men ministered for several years with some success. Both eventually came back and served the Moravian church as leaders. Their act, however, inspired a wave of Moravian missionaries that greatly impacted the world.]" <https://www.theberean.org/content/may-lamb-was-slain-receive-reward-his-sufferings?>

**On August 27, 1727, a prayer meeting started in Herrnhut, Germany, that lasted for over 100 years and went on to change the world.**

Its story begins when Protestant refugees from the Catholic country of Moravia, the legacy of reformer John Hus, came to Germany and settled on the land of Count Zinzendorf. The community was soon attacked by division and disagreement, and the 27-year-old Zinzendorf cried out to God for reconciliation and revival. God spoke to him Leviticus 6:13: "Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out."

Days later, on August 13, 1727, a wave of repentance and revival swept through the community. The Holy Spirit was dramatically poured out with signs and wonders and supernatural love for each other, for the Scriptures, and most supremely for Jesus. His glory became their urgent desire. The community adopted a radical new model for community life, which included a perpetual corporate prayer assembly in the spirit of Leviticus 6:13. They all committed to hourly "prayer watches" by which they arranged the community to cover the entire 24 hours in a day.

Let me say that again: **as a result of this dramatic move of the Holy Spirit, this small refugee community started 24/7 prayer that lasted over 100 years.**

The impact of this 100-year prayer meeting reached far beyond the small settlement of Herrnhut. The radical love for Jesus and fire of the Spirit that was rooted in them during those 24/7 prayer meetings gave birth to one of the most prolific missionary movements of history and became an inspiration and challenge to the modern missions movement that would soon be born. They sent out hundreds of missionaries to every corner of the globe and saw dramatic success. Their methods are not unlike the best of modern missionary strategies: they focussed pointedly on preaching the simple gospel of "Christ and Him crucified," they learned the local language, won the respect of the people, and contextualized their preaching, they didn't expect their converts to become Westernized, and they made prayer their foundation and relied on the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. (This is an incredible article about the Moravian mission strategy.)

William Carey, who is known as the father of modern missions, was deeply inspired by the example of the Moravians and took their prolific missions activity as a personal challenge: "See what the Moravians have done! Cannot we follow their example and in obedience to our Heavenly Master go out into the world, and preach the Gospel to the heathen?"

The Moravians had a powerful influence on the birth of the Great Awakening, too. John Wesley, one of the leaders of this revival that hit the UK and the American colonies in the 1730s and 40s, was shocked and marked by witnessing the faith of the Moravians amid a storm at sea, and went on to fully trust Christ for salvation under their preaching (when his heart was "strangely warmed," if you've heard that story). He had already been a priest, but until his encounter with the genuine, personal faith of the Moravians, Wesley didn't have his own personal relationship with Jesus. Wesley lived with the Moravians at Herrnhut for several months, and the impact they had on him was carried over into his leadership of the Methodist Revival and the Great Awakening alongside Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, in which tens of thousands were powerfully convicted of sin and surrendered to Jesus.

The Moravian emblem, based on Revelation 5:5-6, 14:4. (stained glass window in the Rights Chapel at Trinity Moravian Church, Winston-Salem, NC)



<https://fragrancearise.com/2018/02/23/may-the-lamb-that-was-slain-receive-the-reward-of-his-suffering/>