Power from on High – the Moravians and Count Zinzendorf

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A modern Pentecost

A Moravian historian wrote that Church history abounds in records of special outpourings of the Holy Ghost, and verily the thirteenth of August 1727, was a day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We saw the hand of God and His wonders, and we were all under the cloud of our fathers baptized with their Spirit. The Holy Ghost came upon us and in those days great signs and wonders took place in our midst. From that time scarcely a day passed but what we beheld His almighty workings amongst us. A great hunger after the Word of God took possession of us so that we had to have three services every day, viz. 5.0 and 7.30 a.m. and 9.0 p.m. Everyone desired above everything else that the Holy Spirit might have full control. Self love and self will, as well as all disobedience, disappeared and an overwhelming flood of graces wept us all out into the great ocean of Divine Love (1927:14).

No one present could tell exactly what happened on that Wednesday morning, 13 August 1727 at the specially called Communion service. They hardly knew if they had been on earth or in heaven. Count Nicholas Zinzendorf, the young leader of that community, gave this account many years later: We needed to come to the Communion with a sense of the loving nearness of the Saviour. This was the great comfort which has made this day a generation ago to be a festival, because on this day twenty seven years ago the Congregation o Herrnhut, assembled for communion (at the Berthelsdorf church) were all dissatisfied with themselves. They had quit judging each other because they had become convinced, each one, of his lack of worth in the sight of God and each felt himself at this Communion to be in view of the noble countenance of the Saviour. O head so full of bruises, So full of pain and scorn. In this view of the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, their hearts told them that He would be their patron and their priest who was at once changing their tears into oilof gladness and their misery into happiness.

This firm confidence changed them in a single moment into a happy people which they are to this day, and into their happiness they have since led many thousands of others through the memory and help which the heavenly grace once given to themselves, so many thousand times confirmed to them since then. Zinzendorf described it as 'a sense of the nearness of Christ' given to everyone present, and also to others of their community who were working elsewhere at the time. The congregation was young. Zinzendorf, the human leader, was 27, which was about the average age of the group.

Out of persecution..

The Moravian brethren had sprung from the labours and martyrdom of the Bohemian Reformer, John Hus. They had experienced centuries of persecution. Many had been killed, imprisoned, tortured or banished from their homeland.

This group had fled for refuge to Germany where the young Christian nobleman, Count Zinzendorf, offered them asylum on his estates in Saxony. They named their new home Herrnhut, 'the Lord's Watch'. From there, after their baptism in the Holy Spirit, they became evangelists and missionaries. Fifty years before the beginning of modern Foreign Missions by William Carey, the Moravian Church had sent out over 100 missionaries. Their English missionary magazine, Periodical Accounts, inspired William Carey. He threw a copy of the paper on a table at a Baptist meeting, saying, '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?'

That missionary zeal began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Count Zinzendorf observed: 'The Saviour permitted to come upon us a Spirit of whom we had hitherto not had any experience or knowledge. ... Hitherto we had been the leaders and helpers. Now the Holy Spirit Himself took full control of everything and everybody' (1927:21). When the Spirit came Prayer precedes Pentecost. The disgruntled community at Herrnhut early in 1727 was deeply divided and critical of one another. Heated controversies threatened to disrupt the community. The majority were from the ancient Moravian Church of the Brethren. Other believers attracted to Herrnhut included Lutherans, Reformed, and Baptists. They argued about predestination, holiness, and baptism.

The young German nobleman, Count Zinzendorf, pleaded for unity, love and repentance. Converted in early childhood, at four years of age he composed and signed a covenant: 'Dear Saviour, do Thou be mine, and I will be Thine.' His life motto was, 'I have one passion: it is Jesus, Jesus only. 'Count Zinzendorf learned the secret of prevailing prayer. He actively established prayer groups as a teenager, and on leaving the college at Halle at sixteen he gave the famous Professor Francke a list of seven praying societies he had established. After he finished university his education was furthered by travel to foreign countries. Everywhere he went, his passion for Jesus controlled him. In the Dusseldorf Gallery of paintings he was deeply moved by a painting of the crucifixion over which were the words: Hoc feci pro te; Quid facis pro me? This have I done for thee; What hast thou done for me?

A covenant and a 100 Year Prayer meeting!

At Herrnhut, Zinzendorf visited all the adult members of the deeply divided community. He drew up a covenant calling upon them 'to seek out and emphasise the points in which they agreed' rather than stressing their differences.

On 12 May 1727 they all signed an agreement to dedicate their lives, as he dedicated his, to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Moravian revival of 1727 was thus preceded and then sustained by extraordinary praying. A spirit of grace, unity and supplications grew among them. On 16 July the Count poured out his soul in a prayer accompanied with a flood of tears. This prayer produced an extraordinary effect. The whole community began praying as never before. On 22 July many of the community covenanted together on their own accord to meet often to pour out their hearts in prayer and hymns.

On 5 August the Count spent the whole night in prayer with about twelve or fourteen others following a large meeting for prayer at midnight where great emotion prevailed. On Sunday, 10 August, Pastor Rothe, while leading the service at Herrnhut, was overwhelmed by the power of the Lord about noon. He sank down into the dust before God. So did the whole congregation. They continued till midnight in prayer and singing, weeping and praying.

On Wednesday, 13 August 1727, the Holy Spirit was poured out on them all. Their prayers were answered in ways far beyond anyone's expectations. Many of them decided to set aside certain times for continued earnest prayer. On 26 August, twenty four men and twenty four women covenanted together to continue praying in intervals of one hour each, day and night, each hour allocated by lots to different people. On 27 August, this new regulation began. Others joined the intercessors and the number involved increased to seventy seven. They all carefully observed the hour which had been appointed for them. The intercessors had a weekly meeting where prayer needs were given to them.

The children, also touched powerfully by God, began a similar plan among themselves. Those who heard their infant supplications were deeply moved. The children's prayers and supplications had a powerful effect on the whole community.

That astonishing prayer meeting beginning in 1727 went on for one hundred years. It was unique. Known as the Hourly Intercession, it involved relays of men and women in prayer without ceasing made to God. That prayer also led to action, especially evangelism. More than one hundred missionaries left that village community in the next twenty five years, all constantly supported in prayer. The Spirit's witness One result of their baptism in the Holy Spirit was a joyful assurance of their pardon and salvation. This made a strong impact on people in many countries, including the Wesleys.

John and Charles Wesley

In 1736 John and Charles Wesley sailed to America as Anglican missionaries. A company of Moravian immigrants were also on the vessel. During a terrible storm they all faced the danger of shipwreck. John Wesley wrote in his journal: At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behaviour. Of their humility they had given a continual proof by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, 'It was good for their proud hearts,' and 'their loving Saviour had done more for them.' And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness, which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. Here was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge. In the midst of the Psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up .A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards: 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked: 'But were not your

women and children afraid?' He replied mildly: 'No, our women and children are not afraid to die'.

In Georgia, John Wesley sought spiritual counsel from the Moravian Bishop, A. G. Spangenberg. Back in England in 1738 the Wesley brothers became intimately acquainted with the Moravians, especially Peter Boehler who later became a leading Moravian bishop. On 4 March, 1738, Wesley wrote in his diary: I found my brother at Oxford recovering from his pleurisy; and with him Peter Boehler: by whom (in the hand of the great God) I was, on Sunday, the 5th, clearly convicted of unbelief; of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved. Immediately it struck into my mind, 'Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others who have not faith yourself?' I asked Boehler whether he thought I should leave it off, or not. He answered, 'By no means.' I asked: 'But what can I preach? He said: 'Preach faith till you have faith.' Accordingly, Monday, 6, I began preaching this new doctrine, though my soul started back from the work. The first person to whom I offered salvation by faith alone, was a prisoner under sentence of death..

Eventually John Wesley came to assurance of salvation. His own testimony reads:

Wednesday, May 3, 1738. My brother had a long and particular conversation with Peter Boehler. And it now pleased God to open his eyes; so that he also saw clearly, what was the nature of that one true living faith, whereby alone 'through grace' we are saved. Wednesday, May 24. In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. Friday, May 26. My soul continued in peace, but yet in heaviness, because of manifold temptations. I asked Mr.Telchig, the Moravian, what to do. He said: 'You must not fight with them as you did before, but flee from them the moment they appear, and take shelter in the wounds ofJesus".

The Methodists and Moravians often met together then for Bible study and prayer. George Whitefield's biographer wrote: Whitefield began the New Year (1739) as gloriously as he ended that which had just expired. He received Sacrament, preached twice, expounded twice, attended a Moravian love feast in Fetter Lane, where he spent the whole night in prayer to God, psalms and thanksgivings; and then pronounced 'this to be the happiest New Year's Day he had ever seen .'This love feast at Fetter Lane was a memorable one. Besides about sixty Moravians, there were present not fewer than seven of the Oxford Methodists, namely John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Wesley Hall, Benjamin Ingham, Charles Kinchin and Richards Hitchins, all of them ordained clergymen of the Church of England. Wesley writes: 'About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His Majesty, we broke out with one voice 'We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord!' (1927)

What the Moravians imparted to John Wesley is summarised by one of his

biographers, W. H. Fitchett: In substance it was three things which lie in the very alphabet of Christianity, but which somehow the teachings of a godly home, of a great University, and of an ancient Church, and of famous books, had not taught Wesley. These are:

- that salvation is through Christ's Atonement alone, and not through our own works;
- that its sole condition is faith; and
- that it is attested to the spiritual consciousness by the Holy Spirit.

These truths today are platitudes; to Wesley they were, at this stage of his life, discoveries. Wesley's estimate of the Moravian revival which resulted in his own conversion was prophetic. When Peter Boehler, nine years his junior, left England for America after several months, Wesley recorded in his journal: Peter Boehler left London to embark for Carolina. Oh what a work hath God begun since his coming into England! Such an one as shall never come to an end, till Heaven and earth pass away! Peter Boehler wrote to Count Zinzendorf, saying: 'The English people made a wonderful to do about me; and though I could not speak much English they were always wanting me to tell them about the Saviour, His blood and wounds, and the forgiveness of sins'.

Impacting all sections of Society

Zinzendorf's speaking, preaching and letters were full of Christ. Everywhere the Moravians went they spoke of their Lord, sang of him, and witnessed naturally. The Holy Spirit had filled them, as in the early church, with great love for their Lord. Their Bishop Spangenberg, for example, told how Johannes, an Indian chief who had been a very wicked man, was converted. The chief said that once a preacher came to their tribe and proved to them that there was a God. They informed him that they were not ignorant of that and told him to go away. Another preacher came and told them not to steal, drink too much, or lie. They regarded him as a fool because they already knew that, and they sent him off to preach to his own people who were worse than the Indians in those vices. Then Christian Henry Rauch, one of the Moravian Brethren, came to his hut, sat with him and told him about Jesus. Then fatigued from his journey, Christian Henry lay down and slept, unafraid of the chief. Johannes could not get the Moravian's words out of his mind. He dreamt of the cross. He told his tribe about Jesus and they repented as the Holy Spirit moved their hearts. Johannes said to the bishop, 'Thus, through the grace of God, the awakening among us took place. I tell you therefore, brethren, preach to the heathen Christ and His blood and death, if you would wish to produce a blessing among them.'

In Europe, a Countess with close friends among kings, emperors and princes, famous for her brilliant gifts and witty conversation, found that none of her amusements and recreations satisfied her any longer. A humble Moravian shoemaker came into her presence and she was struck with his remarkable cheerfulness. She asked him why he was so happy and he replied that 'Jesus has forgiven my sins. He forgives me every day and He loves me and that makes me happy through all the hours.' The Countess thought about that and began to pray. Conviction led her into the same joyful faith and she became a great witness for Christ among titled people, especially in the court of the

Emperor of Russia, Alexander I, her close friend.

A new song

Then, as now, the baptism in the Holy Spirit upon the Moravians and then the Methodists, produced a flood sacred song. Many of the best hymns may be traced to this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Moravian hymns were filled with praise to Christ, adoration of him as God, and proclamation of His virtues and work. Moravian hymns were generally prayers to Christ. It was a Moravian characteristic that their prayers were generally addressed to their Saviour. Honouring the Son they honoured the Father who had sent him as well as the Holy Spirit who glorified Christ. A truly converted Catholic or Protestant, Calvanist or Lutheran, Moravian or Arminian, Baptist or Quaker, when baptised in the Holy Spirit and with fire often breaks out into sacred song that is prayer or praise addressed to Jesus. This was so in Herrnhut. The chief singer then was the godly young nobleman Count Zinzendorf. He became the prince of German hymn writers. England saw similar developments.

One of the many spiritual children of Peter Boehler was John Gambold, a young clergyman of the Church of England, an Oxford graduate and a friend of the Wesleys. He joined the Moravian Church and became its first English Bishop. Some of his hymns and sacred songs became well known. Another of Peter Boehler's English converts was James Hutton, a famous book seller. He also wrote some precious hymns. The best known English Moravian hymn writer during the Great Revival was John Cennick. At one of Cennick's famous open-air meetings a young Scottish labourer, John Montgomery, was converted. He joined the Moravian Church and John and Mary Montgomery become Moravian missionaries in the West Indies where they died and were buried. Their son James was educated in the Moravian school at Fulneck. James Montgomery ranks with great hymn writers of that era. Charles Wesley had more than 6,000 hymns published after his conversion in 1738 through the witness and prayers of Peter Boehler. The majority of his hymns testify to his great experience of salvation. Peter Boehler had told him: 'If I had a thousand tongues I would praise Jesus with every one of them.' This prompted Wesley shortly after his conversion to write the immortal lines:

Oh for a thousand tongues to sing My dear Redeemer's praise The glories of my God and King The triumphs of His grace. He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free; His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.

Fruit that abides

A traveller of that period wrote this striking testimony, 'In all my journeys I have found only three objects that exceeded my expectations, viz.: the ocean, Count Zinzendorf, and the Herrnhut congregation' . Herrnhut had become a spiritual centre visited by people from all parts of Europe seeking to be saved or to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and with fire. John Wesley's visit to Herrnhut was typical of thousands of others. 'God has given me at length,' he wrote to his brother Samuel, 'the desire of my heart. I am with a Church whose conversation is in Heaven; in whom is the mind that was in Christ, and who so walk as He walked'. In his journal he wrote, 'I would gladly have spent my life here; but my Master called me to labour in another part of His vineyard. O when shall this

Christianity cover the earth, as the waters cover the sea?'

At the end of his life Count Zinzendorf could triumphantly say:I am going to my Saviour. I am ready. There is nothing to hinder me now. I cannot say how much I love you all. Who would have believed that the prayer of Christ, 'that they all may be one,' could have been so strikingly fulfilled among us! I only asked for firstfruits among the heathen, and thousands have been given me. Are we not as in Heaven! Do we not live together like the angels! The Lord and His servants understand each other. I am ready.

Over four thousand people followed his body to its resting place on the Hutberg, including Moravian ministers from Holland, England, Ireland, North America and Greenland. His tombstone bore this inscription: “Here lie the remains of the immortal man of God, Nicholas Lewis, Count and Lord of Zinzendorf and Pattendorf; who through the grace of God and his own unwearied service, became the ordinary of the Brethren's Church, renewed in this eighteenth century. He was born in Dresden on May 26,1700, and entered into the joy of his Lord at Herrnhut on May 9, 1760. He was appointed to bring forth fruit, and that his fruit should abide”.

Renew our days

The renewal of the Moravian Church can stir our hearts to pray, 'Renew our days as of old. 'In 1927, 200 years after the revival in of the Moravian Church, the editor of The Biblical Review, New York, wrote: No matter whether one is sympathetic toward the idea of revivals or not, if he wants to study the question thoroughly, he cannot afford to overlook the history and teachings of the Moravians. Theirs has been from the beginning a great Revival Church, and its service to the general cause of Christianity, and to foreign missions in particular, is deserving of wide recognition. The story of their spiritual development and its influence is one of the most inspiring in the annals of Christianity.

Their first great experience which gave the Moravians such spiritual power was a personal experience of salvation. The second great experience which gave them such spiritual power and leadership was the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Dr. J. Kenneth Pfohl, a Moravian pastor, wrote in The Moravian in 1927:The great Moravian Pentecost was not a shower of blessing out of a cloudless sky. It did come suddenly, as suddenly as the blessing of its great predecessor in Jerusalem, when the Christian Church was born. Yet, for long there had been signs of abundance of rain, though many recognized them not. In short the blessing of the 13th of August, 1727, was diligently and earnestly prepared for. We know of no annals of Church history which evidence greater desire for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and more patient and persistent effort in that direction than those of our own Church between the years 1725 and 1727.

Two distinct lines of preparation and spiritual effort for the blessing are evident. One was prayer; the other was individual work with individuals. We are told that 'men and women met for prayer and praise at one another's homes and the Church of Berthelsdorf was crowded out.' Then the Spirit came in great power. Then the entire company experienced the blessing at one and the same time. In

another article in The Moravian, Dr E. S. Hagen declared: The great revival in 1727 in Herrnhut was the normal and logical result of prayer and the preaching of the Word of the Cross. 'Christ and Him Crucified' was our brethren's confession of faith, and 'the inward witness of remission of sins through faith in His blood' their blessed and quickening experience.

Lecky in his History of Morals says of John Wesley's conversion, May 24, 1738, in the prayer meeting of Moravian Brethren in Aldersgate Street: 'What happened in that little room was of more importance to England than all the victories of Pitt by land or sea.' ...A renewal of our days as of old involves a return to fervent prayer and to the earnest and effectual preaching of the remission of sins through the vicarious sacrifice and the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Revival time is coming. We cherish a high expectancy of it. Sooner than we dream of, to God's people, who give themselves to earnest, persevering prayer, and the Scriptural testimony concerning the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the windows of Heaven will be opened (1927:9091).

The day of revivals is not past. The Holy Spirit still waits to fill believers with power from on high

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