

THE *UNITAS FRATRUM*: RELIGIOUS PIONEERS

by Russell Smith

Introduction

Largely forgotten by most of contemporary Christendom, the *Unitas Fratrum*, or the Moravians as they are popularly called, helped make possible the present day Christian landscape. Originally a group of disorganized followers of Jan Hus, the *Unitas Fratrum* became the most impressive missions movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. Their advances in the mission field helped pave the way for later missionaries, and they impacted such great figures as William Carey, George Whitefield, and the Wesley brothers.

We will view the *Unitas Fratrum* story in three main stages: the Precursors to the Reformation; Herrnhut and the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the Pioneers in Mission. After telling the stories of these three stages, we will briefly examine how their heritage is bequeathed to faithful Christians today.

Precursors to the Reformation¹

In the years following the execution of the early Czech reformer Jan Hus (1415), Hus' followers engaged in countless skirmishes with religious authorities. These followers fell mainly into two camps: the Utraquists, who opposed religious practices that directly violated Scripture, and the Taborites, who opposed religious practices that were not expressly authorized by Scripture. Although these groups were united by external oppression through the 1420's, the Roman Catholic Church finally struck a deal with the Utraquists, and in 1434 the Taborite forces were decimated by a united Catholic and Utraquist army at the battle of Lipan.

While this alliance between Utraquist and Catholic seemed to end the legacy of Jan Hus, seeds of reformation began to spring up in the Utraquist stronghold of Bohemia. Utraquist bishop John Rokycana began, like Hus, to preach against the excesses of the Catholic Church. His preaching pricked the consciences of his flock, including that of Rokycana's nephew Gregory. Gregory and a band of followers wanted desperately to act upon Rokycana's preaching, but didn't know how to go about it. So, Rokycana introduced them to the writings of Peter Chelchicky, a pacifist farmer who dreamed of a community of peace and love. Under the influence of Chelchicky's writings and Rokycana's preaching,

¹ It seems that very few historians have undertaken the task of recounting the early history of the *Unitas Fratrum*. For this part of the story, I rely heavily on Schattschnieder's work, lightly supplemented by Latourette (*A History of Christianity*, Peabody: Prince Press, 1975) and Schaff (*History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1907).

Gregory and his friends established a community near Lititz in 1457; they called this community the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Unity of Brethren. Thus, the official organization that would become the Moravian Church was born.²

From this point forward, the *Unitas Fratrum* endured continuous persecution up to and after the Reformation. Despite this persecution, they thrived. Schaff tells us that by 1500 there were 200,000 Brethren scattered throughout the region of modern day Slovakia and the Czech Republic.³ Hope also emerged in the form of Martin Luther, with whom the Brethren kept close ties. Schattschnieder tells us that the Brethren regularly sent encouragement to Luther, and that in 1538 Luther printed a confession of faith for the Brethren.⁴ Even though these glimmers of hope existed, severe persecutions of the Brethren took place all through the last half of the 16th century and into the 17th century. These persecutions culminated in the “Day of Blood,” when the Catholic Bohemian king executed twenty-seven noblemen who were either Brethren or sympathizers to their cause.

Herrnhut and the Coming of the Holy Spirit

It seemed as though the *Unitas Fratrum* would disappear from the annals of Christian history, but God’s providence deemed a different course. This course came through the intervention of Count Zinzendorf. Nicholas Louis von Zinzendorf, a Count of Saxony, was an unusual nobleman. At an early age Zinzendorf was introduced to the pietism of the Halle school. This pietism stamped on the young boy a passionate desire for a holy life. He even went so far as to gather his school friends into the “Order of the Mustard Seed.” Schattschneider describes their membership requirements: “Members of the group took a pledge of loyalty to Christ and promised to speak no slander, honor a promise made, live clean lives.”⁵ As a teenager, Zinzendorf was taking the grand European tour customary for young noblemen of his time. While in the art museum of Dusseldorf, he saw a painting of Christ crowned with thorns. The Latin inscription read, “I have done this for you; what have you done for me?” God did something inside Zinzendorf, for from that moment he decided to dedicate himself to Christian service in some way.

The opportunity to engage in service came three years later in 1722. Zinzendorf heard about the carpenter, Christian David, who was promoting the cause of the *Unitas Fratrum*. After speaking with Christian David, Zinzendorf

² Schattschneider, 20-21. Schaff does not share Schattschneider’s confidence in identifying the origins of the *Unitas Fratrum*: “The exact relation which this Hussite body bore to the Taborites and to the Austrian Waldenses is a matter which has called forth much learned discussion, and is still involved in uncertainty. But there seems to be no doubt that the Bohemian Brethren were moved by the spirit of Huss...” (Schaff, record 16,528 in the CD-ROM version).

³ Schaff, record 16,530 in the CD-ROM version.

⁴ Schattschneider, 26.

⁵ Schattschneider, 41.

invited the *Unitas Fratrum* to refuge on his estate at Berthelsdorf. By June of that year, a small band arrived to begin the Brethren settlement on his estate.

Word spread rapidly that Zinzendorf was harboring religious refugees on his estate, and the little community grew into a thriving village of various faiths. The *Unitas Fratrum* were designated from the rest by their country of origin, Moravia, so they came to be known as Moravians. The little community itself became known as Herrnhut, "The Lord's Watch."

But all was not well at Herrnhut. The various ethnic backgrounds and religious persuasions led to inevitable conflict, griping and dissension among its 300 inhabitants. By 1727, tensions had risen to a height. Greenfield describes the scenario: "Differences of opinion and heated controversy on doctrinal questions threatened to disrupt the congregation. The majority were members of the Ancient Moravian Church of the Brethren. But other believers had also been attracted to Herrnhut. Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, etc., had joined the community. Questions of predestination, holiness, the meaning and mode of baptism, etc., etc., seemed likely to divide the believers into a number of small and belligerent sects."⁶ Fortunately, in the midst of this tension, Zinzendorf and others were actively engaged in intercessory prayer for the community, and on August 13, 1727, those prayers were answered.

On that date, the community assembled for a communion service. In the service, the whole community felt the presence of the Holy Spirit. People wept and begged forgiveness of one another. They shared the cup and bread as one community united. Greenfield quotes Zinzendorf's later recollection of the day: "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 Savior."⁷ After the service, Zinzendorf asked for food to be sent to several of the community homes. The people joined in a simple meal of fellowship and friendship; this meal was the first Moravian Lovefeast.

Shortly after this meeting, the Moravians began the hourly intercession. This prayer vigil consisted of a rotating assignment of one man and one woman from the community praying every hour of the day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. This prayer vigil continued without interruption for over 100 years. From this near Pentecostal experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the intense devotion of the Hourly Intercession, the Moravian Church would launch a most extraordinary missionary movement.

⁶ Greenfield, 19.

⁷ Greenfield, 11.

Pioneers in Mission

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Herrnhut, it would take five years for the Moravians to send out their first missionary. In 1731, Zinzendorf went to the Coronation of the king of Denmark. There he met a Christian slave from the West Indies named Anthony. When Anthony told of his sorrow that there was no one to take the gospel to his family, Zinzendorf was so moved that he asked Anthony to come tell his story to the community at Herrnhut. Zinzendorf also met two Eskimos who told him about the Danish Missionary Hans Egede and his difficulties in teaching the gospel. By the time Zinzendorf returned to Herrnhut, he had the sparks of a vision for the Moravian Missionary movement.

Upon his return, Zinzendorf told Anthony's story. That night Leonard Dober, a potter, felt himself called by God to go to the West Indies as a missionary. Although Zinzendorf was supportive, many in the community questioned the venture. When Anthony arrived at Herrnhut, he warned the Moravians that any who would go as missionaries to the slaves might have to become slaves themselves. Finally, the issue was decided by lot, and Dober was given permission to go as a missionary to the West Indies. The community decided to send David Nitschmann, a carpenter, with Dober to help him get established. Nitschmann was to return to Herrnhut after four months to report on the progress of the mission. On August 18, 1732, Dober and Nitschmann were officially sent off by the Moravians to the West Indies.

Those first years of mission activities were hard on the Moravians. Dober endured hardship and the resentment of the wealthy landowners as he preached to the slaves. In 1734, a group of eighteen Moravians arrived in the West Indies, stopping at St. Thomas to tell Dober he had been elected an elder and had to return home. This group carried on Dober's work by setting up a colony on St. Croix. Within a year, ten of the group had died; Herrnhut sent eleven more volunteers, and nine more people died. In 1736, the survivors were recalled. Yet this did not end the Moravian mission work in the Indies, for in that same year, Frederick Martin arrived in St. Thomas to resume Dober's work. Martin, who had been imprisoned for his faith in Moravia, was the hardy stock needed for work in this hostile environment. Martin's strategy was to speak to slaves one on one, and it worked. Within a few months, he had won 200 converts and the enmity of the slaveholders. Martin was ultimately thrown in jail, and Herrnhut heard nothing for many months.

Despite these dire few years, hope was not lost. On January 29, 1739, there arrived in St. Thomas a ship bearing five Moravians: two married couples coming to serve as missionaries, and Count Zinzendorf himself, come to investigate the state of the mission. Bishop Baudert dramatizes the story as the ship anchored in the harbor:

“But with a sudden movement [Zinzendorf] turned to his companions and said: ‘What if they are dead and there is nobody

left?' ... 'Then we are here,' said Weber, who had been through the worst that could have to be faced.⁸ The Count's eyes sparkled, and it was as though a ray of sunshine passed over his face, which had been so full of anxious thought, and stretching out his hand to Weber he exclaimed '*Gens Aeterna* [a people that will not die], these men of Moravia!'"⁹

Zinzendorf used his prestige to have Martin released, after which Martin was able to minister for fourteen more years to great success. The Moravian Church spread all throughout the West Indies and remains a presence there today.

The Moravians didn't confine their work to the West Indies. In 1733, Christian David led a band of Moravians to Greenland in order to help out Danish missionary Hans Egede. In 1737, George Schmidt went to South Africa to evangelize the Hottentots.¹⁰ Other Moravian missions in the 18th century included Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, the Carolinas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and London. By the 19th century, the Moravians had expanded to East Africa, Alaska, Canada, Honduras, Nicaragua, California, Australia, Tibet (now moved to India), and Jerusalem. From the humble beginnings at Herrnhut, the Holy Spirit prompted the Moravian church to encircle the globe.

Moravian Contributions To Christendom

The primary contribution the Moravians made to Christendom was through their influence upon the great leaders of the faith. For example, the Wesley brothers were profoundly moved by their encounter with Moravians on a perilous sea voyage to Georgia. William Carey, after reading about Moravian missions, went to his Baptist brethren 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?"¹¹ Charles Spurgeon pointed his students to the Moravians as examples of ministerial progress.¹²

Moravian worship has also been a grand contribution to Christendom. The special service of the Lovefeast has been adopted by other denominations, particularly the Methodists. This Lovefeast service consists of a warm fellowship gathering accompanied by a simple meal, usually a spiced bun and coffee. In addition to this heartfelt gathering, the Moravian church overflowed in passionate music. Zinzendorf, Spangenberg, Cennick and others composed thousands of

⁸ Baudert tells us earlier in his work that Weber was one of the survivors of the doomed St. Croix mission.

⁹ Baudert, 21.

¹⁰ Tucker notes, to the shame of the Reformed tradition, that the Calvinistic Dutch Reformed minister in Cape Town "deplored the emotional and sentimental Pietism of the Moravians." (Tucker, 80). They actively opposed Schmidt's work.

¹¹ Greenfield, 15.

¹² Charles Spurgeon. *Lectures to My Students*. Zondervan. 1954. Pg 218.

unique Moravian hymns exalting the warmth of their faith and their passion for Christ.

It seems that the Moravian contribution to worship is best seen in Winifred Kirkland's book *The Easter People*, which recounts an Easter celebration in the Moravian community of Salem, North Carolina. The whole weekend includes Lovefeasts, decorating the simple graves in the cemetery, celebratory singing, and brass bands marching through the streets at dawn on Easter Sunday. Though the book is dated, I can testify that such celebrations continue in Salem even today. The Moravians continue to celebrate their faith with zest and ardor.

Personal Reflections and Appropriation

In surveying the history of the Moravians, we not only find compelling stories that excite the imagination, but we also find lessons that we can apply in our present situation. Central among these lessons is the power of prayer. As we mentioned before, in the early days of Herrnhut, Zinzendorf consistently prayed for unity among the divided religious refugees. God responded to Zinzendorf's persistent prayer in the coming of the Holy Spirit to Herrnhut on August 13, 1727. From that worship service, the hourly prayer practice began, and soon thereafter, the Moravians spread across the globe in missions work. This story illustrates the truth that when God prepares to do any significant work among His people, he prepares the field through the prayers of the people. Greenfield observes this truth when he states:

“Prayer always precedes Pentecost. The Book of Acts describes many outpourings of the Holy Spirit, but never apart from prayer. In our own day the great Welsh and Korean revivals were preceded by months, if not years, of importunate and united praying. Hence the supreme importance of the prayer meeting, for it is ‘the powerhouse of the church.’”¹³

We would do well in our era to pay attention to the communal aspect of this prayer. While we cannot neglect the power and importance of individual private prayer, the focus in the Moravian movement seems to be on community prayer. If we are to see revival happen in our own time, perhaps it will take the concerted effort of groups of people banding together to pray for it. Scripture does seem to support this communal aspect to prayer. We see a great concern for the assembled body of believers in the Psalter (Pss. 7:7; 22:22; 111:1). The prophet Joel, in issuing his call to repentance, calls for a fast and a solemn assembly that seems to include the whole body of Israel:

“Blow a trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the elders;

¹³ Greenfield, 19.

gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the and bride her chamber” (Joel 2:15-16).

The New Testament also gives us examples of corporate prayer (Acts 1:14, 12:5, James 5:14). The practice seems to have warrant in our Lord’s words to his disciples in Matthew 18:18-20:

“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it shall be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

With such ample Biblical and historical evidence, one wonders why we don’t see more communal prayer in our culture. Is it the rampant individualism? Has the consumer culture so infected our churches that we are no longer willing to commit to one another? Sadly, I think that this is partly the case among the mainline denominations and even among many of the evangelical ones. If we are to see revival happen among the mainline denominations, we might look to the Moravian example and bring believers together in regular prayer. Perhaps this could happen through a reinstatement of the old fashioned prayer meeting. Perhaps it might happen through the creation of contemporary praise and prayer services that focus on leading the people in corporate prayer. In any case, church leaders would do well to practice corporate prayer and to encourage church members to join them.

Over five hundred years later, the Moravian movement lives on. Here in the twilight of the twentieth century, we stand to learn much from these passionate and committed heroes of the past. Though I’ve focused on personal prayer as an application, we could also raise up the Moravian emphasis on tolerance for the “Non-essentials” as a needed virtue among evangelicals. We might look to the Moravian method of “tent-making” – each missionary was a tradesman who earned his keep. All told, we have much to learn from the Moravians. Lord willing, the stories of their faith will continue to resonate in the hearts of future Christians and inspire them to ever deeper devotion.

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