

LECTURES

For Moravian Theological College, Mbeya, Tanzania

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These lectures were presented on various subjects at the Moravian Theological College at the time of my visit, June to August 1995. In December of 1994 I received the kind invitation to lecture and to assist with the development of the projected B.D. program, an honor to which I was happy to respond. I arrived on June 17 and delivered these lectures to the students on June 19-26. I dedicate them to the Moravian Theological College in Mbeya, its students, its staff, and its future -- to the honor and glory of God.

ZINZENDORF'S THEOLOGY I — Evangelism

Theology and Identity of the Moravian Church

Although it has often been said that the Moravian Church does not have a theology or is not theologically inclined, it is my feeling that it has a very definite theology. In its long history it has variously had its own position and developed its own creeds, and at other times it has utilized the theological expressions of the other Christian traditions. In 18th Century Germany the Renewed Moravian Church was quite Lutheran, at least in Europe, affirming the special role of the Augsburg Confession.

The unique Moravian contribution to theology is not a theological system, but *its approach to theology*. This is well expressed in the statement on theology in 1979 by the Joint Theological Commission of the Northern and Southern Provinces, U.S.A.:

"Theological reflection in the Moravian tradition is not to be understood as an attempt to arrive at final answers but is a way of thinking about God and His relationship to us so that He can, through His Spirit, draw us to Himself, and to His Son, and we can know Him as the Source of our living. Such reflection should lead to sharing of ideas and experiences, articulation of our faith, new levels of trust toward each other as persons through whom God partially discloses Himself in various ways, stimulation of the Christian life and our attentive waiting upon God for His clarification of our understanding."

One may say that the theological views which are particular to the Moravian Church were formed by an awareness that Christianity at its heart was relational, not conceptual; that the fostering of Christian life was central (for without life concepts have no value); and that conceptual, liturgical and institutional expressions were shaped by the historical contexts in which they came into being. The understanding of the Ancient Moravian Church (from the end of the 15th to the 17th century) was particularly formed by its dividing all theological and church matters into: essentials (what is necessary for salvation), ministerials (whatever serves the essentials: church, sacraments, Scripture) and incidentals (the ways you did things). In the Zinzendorffian period we have the emphasis on Basic Truths or Fundamentals (similar to the "essentials" of the Ancient Church), and Heart Religion which affirmed that the primary way to know God is with the heart, not the head. This is a very explicit theology, though it is not a "systematic" theology. Zinzendorf, for example, did not write a systematic theology because he theologically believed

that it was not possible -- one cannot know and express God that way. Any attempt to systematize understanding of God will always have gaps because of human limitations. One needs to accept that the only Christian system is Christ, the historical expression of the *Person* of God. Zinzendorf's belief that Heart Religion ¹ was the basis of all Christian religion, allowed him to recognize the oneness of Christians though there were many differing creedal expressions of Christianity, conditioned by their cultures. Thus Moravians of the Renewed Church in different countries adhered to different creedal formulations, yet all belonged to the same Moravian Church. One still finds a list of acceptable and important creeds in the *Ground of the Unity*, the Moravian creedal expression which took shape in the Unity Synod of 1957.

Zinzendorf's Understanding of Evangelism

Zinzendorf's dates are easy to remember. He was born in 1700 and died in 1760. He was a German nobleman, a Lutheran clergyman, and a Moravian Bishop. He was not only the "father" of the 18th century Moravian Church, but a prolific writer and significant theologian. Karl Barth said he was "a church father who is important and fruitful for the whole church."² We do not have time to go into the details of his life. In our first of our two sessions together I want to deal with his understanding of evangelism, and then in the second deal with his understanding of the Bible, an issue which is coming before Unity Synod this August in Dar es Salaam.

He had a well-thought out approach to mission and evangelism, in harmony with his understanding of Christianity. It is an approach that I wish the Moravian Church would consider today. It expressed itself in various ways in various contexts: foreign missions, strategies for Europe and Britain (settlement congregations and the Diaspora societies), and a particular strategy for the American context (expressed in his desire to create an indigenous and non-denominational church in Pennsylvania, the "Congregation of God in the Spirit", which would include all German speaking Christians).

In the interests of time I will describe his understanding of evangelism only briefly:

1. *There is a spiritual dimension to life which many are conscious of even if they are not aware of the real nature of God and Christ.* It is the responsibility of the church's mission to function like Peter to Cornelius, to help persons interpret and identify the God whom they experience. The Catechism for the Heathen ³ is a striking example of this in which Zinzendorf constructed a catechism around the experience of all peoples of a Creator whom he identified as Christ. One should start the evangelization of persons with listening to their spiritual experience. To do so did not diminish the centrality of Christ, for

¹. Zinzendorf defined "Heart" as the inner person which had five senses as did the outer person. The "Heart", especially when it has been brought to life by the Holy Spirit, can perceive the Saviour *objectively* and *directly*. In modern terms we might speak of this as "intuition" or "extra sensory perception". Zinzendorf's approach is very similar to Teresa of Avila's "intellectual vision". One knows one has seen and experienced, but this is not dependent on images or emotions. The best evidence for the Heart relationship with the Saviour is changed life. There are several biblical examples of "Heart Religion" which Zinzendorf liked to cite. One was that of John and Jesus mother gathered at the cross. Another was the objective perception of Jesus by John the Baptist while he was still in his mother's womb (Luke 1). See *Einige seit 1751 von dem Ordinario Fratrum zu London gehaltene Predigten in Dreyen Haupt-Abtheilungen edirter*, Erster Band, London and Barby: 1756, Abth. II, (1/17/53), pp. 153-156.

². "Protokoll des Gespraches zwischen Prof. Dr. K. Barth und Vertretern der Brudergemeinde", *Civitas Präsens*, No. 13, May 1961, p. 3. Barth says he moved closer to Zinzendorf in his later years.

³. This is a catechism developed for use in mission focusing solely on Christ. It identifies a people's experience of a Creator as an experience of Christ. Thus the missionary is helping them to understand the One they already have experienced. It develops Christian life in responsibility to Christ. The Trinity is only mentioned in connection with baptism. When the question is asked "Who are all these?" (Father, Son and Holy Spirit: in whose name baptism takes place), the reply is that Jesus will teach you about this.

he saw the universal experience of God as really an experience of Christ who is Creator of the world and "experiential Father" of all humanity.

2. *Congregations, expressions of the Christian faith and life, need to be planted so that there is a reality, a presence, to which to point when the Gospel is spoken of.* This does not mean, however, that the growth of congregations in membership is of primary concern, but rather the work of the Creator/Saviour with the individual. (See item 4.)

3. *The Gospel is to be preached in general so that others may hear the Good News -- so that the Christian words are public.*

4. However, it is another matter when working with individuals. *One is not to proceed with the conversion of individuals nor to rush them in their process with God unless one first discerns what God is doing in that individual's life.* The process is God's, not ours, and we can only be supportive and interpretive of it. We should not have the "itch of making many converts". The Saviour is Creator of all souls and has his plans for each. If God's work with a person is not finished in this life, he will finish it in the next. ⁴

5. *What persons are called to is primarily relationship with God/Christ (Heart Religion) and the new life which flows out of that relationship.* All that is needed for the person to be equipped for starting the Christian life is for the Saviour to appear before the Heart and the Heart to "see" him and respond. "Seeing" does not mean seeing an image, hearing words, or feeling emotions. It means an objective seeing, more like intuition, which may only be understood afterwards in its life-changing effects. Nothing can take the place of the hear relationship with the Saviour and when one has the Saviour, one has everything. This is the simplicity of which Spangenberg wrote in his hymn "When simplicity we cherish, then the soul is full of light."

6. *The relational nature of Christianity means that it is available to all: infants, retarded, senile.* It is not dependent on our comprehension, though comprehension is a responsibility of those who can. In his *Socrates Zinzendorf* comments:

2) Religion must be something which is obtained without any concepts, through mere experience; otherwise no one deaf, or still less someone born blind, or even less an insane person, or a child, could have the religion which is necessary for salvation.

4) The conceptual meanings vary with age, education and other conditions. The experienced meanings are not so much subject to these variations; they remain firmly established in the face of time and circumstances.⁵

7. *The cross, exemplifying Jesus' sufferings and humanity, must be kept central (in contrast to a "theology of glory").*⁶

⁴. See particularly Discourse XIII of *Twenty-One Discourses on the Augsburg Confession* and Lecture V of *Nine Public Lectures*.

⁵. *Der teutsche Sokrates*, "Gedancken vor gelehrte und doch gutwillige Schüler der Wahrheit", Samuel B. Walter, 1732, pp. 35f.

⁶. In fact, the ascended Christ took his humanity and wounds with him to heaven, not leaving them behind, always remaining the crucified one (so says the Gospel of John, his favorite). Thus the cross as a symbol expresses the way the Saviour relates with us (gently, not using force); the Saviour's full embrace of human life, even sexuality; the concreteness of human salvation; and the way the church too must live. It is also the "cross-form" in which the Saviour appears to the Heart.

8. *Experimentation is important.* This is the way that one tests truth and discerns what Christ wants us to do.⁷ One cannot find out what is possible unless one experiments.

⁷ . The Moravian Church of the 18th century launched into a series of experiments notable not only for their variety but for their consideration of contextual issues. Settlement congregations were founded. Diaspora work was begun to revitalize the state churches. A Pilgrim Congregation traveled with Zinzendorf. Provision was made for various interest and age groupings through the choir system. Foreign missions were launched with at least the declared intent of developing indigenous forms of Christianity. An ecumenical experiment was tried in the American context where there was no state church: the Congregation of God in the Spirit.