

Nikolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf (May 26, 1700 - May 9, 1760).

In this rapidly changing technological age, it seems that the past offers no guidance for the future. Why bother then reading an article devoted to the tricentennial anniversary of the birth of a German count? Because Zinzendorf, a friend of kings, archbishops, North American Indians and British merchants, wielded tremendous influence on all who knew him. When the 18th century churches of the Reformation were stifled by dead orthodoxy, Zinzendorf and his movement responded to the Great Commission with great enthusiasm and gave their all to reach the lost for Christ.

Count von Zinzendorf was brought up by a godly grandmother and aunt, who were Pietists, and showed remarkable spiritual depth almost from infancy. He was a brilliant student. When he was 14 years old, he gave public speeches in Latin, Greek, French, and German. One year later he recited a poem of 300 stanzas; a poem he had written himself. He was first educated in the famous Francke School in Halle, Germany. Already then his heart went out to missions. With some 16-year old friends he founded a mission society, which they called "The Mustard Seed," which later developed into the mighty mission movement. He studied law at the University of Wittenberg, where he attempted to reconcile Lutheran orthodoxy and pietism. He was noted for his devout spiritual character. When he was 19 years old, he traveled to Holland to complete his studies. On the way he visited a museum in Dusseldorf, where he saw a painting which deeply moved him. He saw Christ crowned with thorns with the caption, "This I did for you. What do you do for Me?" He knelt in prayer. "Lord Jesus, I want to do everything for You," he said. His chosen life-motto was, "I have one passion; it is He, and He alone."

Zinzendorf's theology was simple. His distinctive emphasis was on "heart religion." It was enough to know Christ as sacrificed. His view of the church was akin to the Anabaptist position. The church was a fellowship bound together by a common salvation, obedience, and joy in the Lord. He stressed the brotherhood of believers, Christian living on a voluntary basis, and had an ecumenical outlook, which transcended the boundaries of countries and churches. The hymns he wrote focused on Jesus. They testified to childlike simplicity, a warm devotion to the "Lamb of God," and a joyful confidence in His suffering.

Zinzendorf had a major impact in England. Through his contact with the Wesleys, Zinzendorf put a new warmth into English hymn singing. Some of his German hymns have entered into the English Hymnody through versions of Wesley and others: notably "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness"; "Jesus, still lead on"; and "Christ will gather in His own."

But Zinzendorf did more than speak and compose hymns. He turned his faith into deeds.

A turning point in his life came in 1722 when he invited a group of Bohemian Brethren (Unitas Fratrum), persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church, to settle on his estate in Saxony. He organized them into a community called Herrnhutt (The Lord's Watch). In 1727 Zinzendorf left government service and became a lay preacher and evangelist, as well as the spiritual leader, of the Herrnhutt colony, and in 1737 was ordained Bishop of the Moravian Church. In 1731 he was called upon to represent the Saxon court at the coronation in Copenhagen of Christian VI of Denmark. While he was there, he met two

Christian Eskimos, and learned with deep regret of their decision to give up the mission work in Greenland. His attendants also met an African who told them of the cruel lot of the slaves in the Danish West Indian colonies. He told these stories to the Moravian brotherhood upon his return home. It was promptly decided to take up mission work.

In 1732 two men were sent out to St. Thomas in the West Indies. Gradually reinforcements came. Others of the Danish islands were entered, and new mission stations were opened. In 1733 Moravian missionaries arrived in Greenland. In 1735 a band of Moravian missionaries went to the Dutch possessions on the northern coast of South America. In 1752 Moravians went to Labrador. Hence, within a short time span the renowned foreign missionary work of the Moravians rapidly extended to Central and South America, Labrador, the Indians of the U.S. and Alaska, South Africa, India and even to remote Tibet. Mission work among the Jews was also taken up. The Moravian missionary work was done by men with little formal education, no theological training, no language preparation, or learning about the culture of the people among whom they had to settle. What counted was unswerving love for the Saviour and a willingness to sacrifice for Him. The first two missionaries to Greenland were grave diggers. But the Moravian church furnished the unique spectacle of having three times as many members in their foreign missions as in their home churches. They lived their motto "Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow Him." Their missionary zeal can be traced in large measure to their leader Zinzendorf, who consecrated every talent, faculty, he possessed to His Saviour.

Zinzendorf covered enormous distances for the sake of the Gospel, sometimes 7500 kilometers in one year, partly by foot. He traveled to St. Thomas where he liberated missionaries jailed for their faith. In 1741 he went to North America with his 16 year old daughter and a few other followers. He hoped that America would be the place where he could proclaim the Gospel without interference from the various established churches, which had troubled him in Europe. He also brought the Gospel to the Indians, slept in their tents, ate their food, and smoked the peace pipe with them. . God used Zinzendorf and the "Hernhutters" to awaken the church to their missionary calling. While Europe was spiritually asleep, they began to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Moved by compassion for the lost, they went at great personal sacrifice to the poorest of the poor with the message of salvation. They suffered disease, hunger, danger, and even death for the sake of their Master. Their passion and example for missions still put us to shame.

On this tricentennial celebration of Zinzendorf's birth we pay a well deserved tribute to this great missionary leader; however, we must point out that his theology was a Christology, a neglect of the Father and His work in creation and nature. His mission purpose was mainly limited to the salvation of individual souls. He did not pay sufficient attention to the planting of churches. He concentrated more on inner personal faith experience than on the Church to stand straight and tall to the honour of God in the public square and to claim every sphere of public life for Christ the King. Although we may find his theology deficient, Zinzendorf was greatly used by God to advance His Kingdom. Twenty-first century Christians can learn a great deal from his exemplary life and mission zeal.

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