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John Wesley and the Moravians, Pt. 1: Seven Minute Seminary
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DISPUTING HOLINESS: WESLEY'S DEBATE WITH THE MORAVIANS

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Wesley never lost his affection for the Moravians, but some areas of theological divergence prevented him entering any formal connection with them. Nonetheless, both their times of connection and the disagreements between Wesley and the Moravians helped shaped JW's theology.

As JW & Moravians traveled and worshiped together, JW discovered they shared his interest in using the primitive church as the model for their faith and life.[1] JW's time in Savannah deepened Wesley's appreciation for their communal discipline and spirituality.

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, [a German Pietist nobleman, played a pivotal role in the renewal of the Moravian Church in the 18th century, offering refuge to persecuted Moravian Brethren and establishing the community of Herrnhut, which became a center for missionary activity and prayer] embraced the 'Philadelphian ideal' held by many pietists of 'brotherly love', which focused on the religion of the heart of true believers rather than on institutional churches.[4]

The Anglican religious societies were influenced by the collegia pietatis of continental pietism, so there was a historical link to some of the ideas and practices of the Moravians who had been shaped by pietism through Zinzendorf. Over time these Anglican religious societies had lost some of the energy and effectiveness that they once had, and by the 1730s there was need for renewal. A number of societies existed in London, and some members had read accounts of the Moravians written by English missionaries to Georgia. The stage was set for an interaction that would have far-reaching influence.

The Fetter Lane society was not formally a Moravian society, but it was not a typical Anglican religious society either. The membership came from the Church of England, but the rules were established under the guidance of Peter Böhler. Many marks of Anglican society were absent, such as the requirements for members to be Anglican, for leadership to be clergy, and for regular attendance at worship. Meanwhile, practices of the group like mutual confession showed Moravian influence.

The Moravian understanding of salvation both prepared John Wesley for his Aldersgate experience and ultimately became a key point of division between Wesley and the Moravians. The trust in and assurance of Christ's love that John experienced at Aldersgate demonstrated an utter reliance on Christ for salvation, as taught by the Moravians. But Wesley proved unable to abandon completely the importance of pursuing holiness.

The Count stressed instead the simple acknowledgment of sinfulness and sincere reliance on the blood of Christ.[13] Faith is God's gift, not our work. This theological understanding meant that rather than organizing around rules for pursuing holiness, the Fetter Lane society focused on the sinner sincerely seeking faith.

The implications of abandoning the pursuit of holiness became clear as the Anglican members of Fetter Lane were influenced by Moravian emphasis on 'stillness' in receiving salvation. Zinzendorf insisted that the only 'duty' Christians had was to believe Christ's word. If they truly believed, Zinzendorf was convinced that their nature would evidence holiness. But if they sought holiness itself as a 'duty', they would be defeated.[14] Likewise they had no duty, for instance, to receive Lord's Supper—and should in fact 'be still', waiting for God to act to bring them to faith. While this stance was known from early in the life of the Fetter Lane society, it became a fracture point in 1739.

As some Fetter Lane members abandoned practices such as communion, reading of Scripture, and even prayer, out of fear that by participating in these activities they were seeking salvation by works rather than faith, John Wesley became extremely troubled. JW believed these practices were means of grace, ordained by God for our use.[15] Even those of weak faith (still having fear and doubt) should participate in them, so God could use the means to address their need. Conflict over this matter grew within the Fetter Lane society over several months, culminating in Wesley's departure from the society in July 1740. Several members left with him, forming a new society that met in the Foundery, which Wesley had recently purchased as a center for Methodist work in London.[16] This departure strengthened the Moravian identity of the society that continued at Fetter Lane. Committed local leaders gave guidance, like James Hutton, who was a bookseller and issued some of Zinzendorf's writings in English. In 1742 the remaining members of Fetter Lane were established as a Moravian congregation.[17]

Antinomianism and Stillness

To appreciate why stillness could have been the breaking point in the Fetter Lane society… one must remember that England had a prior history with antinomianism. After England became Protestant, English Christians debated among themselves about the proper way to think about God's free grace and human responsibility. With ideas veering in different directions, often in reaction to each other, strong voices emerged stressing the duty of godliness and other voices insisting instead on passive reception of Christ's 'alien' righteousness. The latter voices were judged by the first group to be championing antinomianism. A wave of such 'antinomian' teaching hit England in the 1640s, in the lead up to the English Civil War. Although free grace was clearly an important teaching of the Reformation, a theology that undermined law and duty proved unwelcome during the disorder of civil war.[33]

Utter reliance on Christ was the aim of Zinzendorf's theology and spirituality. Because salvation is God's gift and not a human achievement (even of human participation in a process), the believer needed to receive passively what God offered. Meditating on the wounds of Christ (especially the wound made in his side during the crucifixion, called the 'side hole'[37]) allowed believers to be filled with Christ. Emptying oneself to be filled with Christ was a kind of mortification of the flesh, a dying in Christ.[38] Oneness with Christ was sought especially during Holy Communion, a practice that may account for some of the differences between the Moravians and Wesley regarding participation in Holy Communion.

While Wesley was helped by the Moravians to recover the priority of God's gracious work in salvation, he increasingly worried about antinomian overtones in their teaching. Since he recognized that the English persons who had adopted Moravian views sometimes took them to extreme,[39] he took up this question with Zinzendorf directly in an extended conversation (in Latin, since neither was fully comfortable in the other's native tongue) that Wesley published near the end of the fourth extract of his Journal.[40] The point at issue was whether Christians have any inherent perfection or holiness in themselves. The Count contended that God gave believers justification and sanctification at the same time, so in an instant we receive not only forgiveness but also holiness (understood entirely as God's gift, not our personal growth). Moreover both forgiveness and holiness were imputed, so there is no holiness inherent in the believer but only through Christ. Our only duty is faith, and faith makes us wholly holy. For Wesley this narrow understanding of duty implied antinomianism, for it made the law void both in what it commands and what it prohibits.[41]

The Church of England had worked to find a way between the extreme views of English Christian thought, and Wesley had been convinced of the rightness of this approach. The Church had a high view of sacraments, and through its religious societies encouraged people to pursue the discipline of holy lives. Holiness had also been a key element of Wesley's mother's teaching during his childhood.[42]

JW understood the importance of our participation in the path that God has given Christians to walk, and he was convinced that disregarding the means that God has provided for moving along this way would keep us from becoming more like Christ.

Although the appreciation for the priority of faith that he received from the Moravians was important for Wesley's saving experience of God and for his theology, total passivity did not fit his idea of Christian life. He could not see how reliance on Christ ruled out participation in the very things God had given us as means to grow in Christ.

While Zinzendorf had been educated and ordained as Lutheran, devotion to Christ, not formal theology, was always paramount.[50] He stressed reliance on the blood of Christ, which led to great attention on the wounds of Jesus. He also embraced celebration of the gifts of God in the world, so he did not draw a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. The hymns he (often wrote and) encouraged his people to sing regularly focused attention on Christ's wounds, and envisioned the Moravian faithful as birds or bees circling and resting in the wounds.

The utter reliance on Christ that Zinzendorf endorsed led him to a very complicated view of sin. The Count affirmed the Lutheran maxim 'simul justus et peccator', insisting believers do not leave behind their 'sinner-form' even as they are made completely holy in Christ.[57] They have an imputed holiness, while they are really sinners.[58] And yet, the point of emptying oneself and being filled with Christ was to become like Jesus.[59] Zinzendorf conveyed this aspect of his theology by saying those born of God 'cannot sin'.[60] This complicated view of sin and holiness was difficult to understand, not only for Wesley, but also for some Moravian members who took 'cannot sin' as meaning they were sinless.[61]

The combination of marital theology, the encouragement of playfulness, and the idea of sinlessness that accompanied being filled with Christ led some [Moravians](especially but not exclusively in Herrnhaag) to extend the idea of sex as a sacrament of mystical union with Christ beyond marriage to extramarital sexual relations.[64]

Wesley's engagement with the Moravians convinced him that exclusive focus on imputed righteousness tended to eliminate concern for one's own righteousness, and could therefore work against interest in obeying God's commands, even those commands to show compassion to others.

The minutes of his annual Conferences with his preachers held in 1753 and 1759 record that one topic of concern was whether preachers were giving adequate attention to 'practical religion'—that is, 'duties, using the means of grace, private prayer, self-denial, fasting, seriousness'.[83]

Similarly, the minutes of Conference in 1758 included discussion about a proper understanding of 'perfection'.[84] In particular, the conference addressed a question about 'mistakes' and concluded that they are transgressions of God's perfect law and still need atonement through Christ. Because the possibility of mistake is not eliminated in Christian perfection, even perfect love of God does not leave us 'sinless'.

Wesley's third caution was to beware of antinomianism. In other words, in claiming perfection, do not think you are above the law or can live apart from it. In this caution, Wesley referred to the Moravians and their 'refined antinomianism'.[86] Wesley allowed that many of the Moravians he had known had felt the living power of God in their lives, but added that in feeling this power they sometimes lost sight of the ways Satan was still trying to work on them. He cautioned those Methodists professing renewal in love not to make the same mistake. They should not become 'still' in the sense of ceasing the works that keep them close to God. Proper stillness would instead involve ceasing to talk about their perfection and not doing things that would lead them to lose it.

When Wesley sought to counter the potential antinomianism of Moravian emphasis on faith as the sole Christian duty, he made the goal of personal holiness the center of Christian life. What he discovered through the controversies that arose in the 1760s was that claims to present attainment of personal holiness can also be vulnerable to antinomianism. Not only was authentic Christian holiness not 'sinless', but the 'perfect' remain vulnerable to temptation; so holiness is 'always capable of being lost if it is not nurtured'.[87] Methodists should never grow lax in using the means that God has given us to nurture holiness. This is perhaps the abiding lesson that Wesley learned through his engagement with the Moravians.