

## Intro:

Last Sunday we presented a brief biographical sketch of the leader of the Moravians in the 1700s, Count Zinzendorf.

We mentioned the beginning of the Moravian missionary effort briefly last week, today I'd like to give you a more detailed description.

We will also be showing a dramatized documentary on New Years Eve. Some aspects of the film are a bit amateurish, but I want to show it to you for the content, not for the 'movie quality'.

Today I'll give you a bit of a survey of the first Moravian mission.

## I. The first missionary call

- A. Zinzendorf and David Nitschman met converted former West Indies slave, Anthony Ulrich, at coronation of Christian VI in Copenhagen (1731)
  1. Urged Zinzendorf to send missionaries to slaves (churches in West Indies preached only to slave owners)
  2. At Herrnhut, the single Moravian men had been studying such subjects as medicine, geography, and theology in preparation for possible foreign service
  3. Zinzendorf hurried back to Herrnhut to report Anthony Ulrich's message
- B. Initial response
  1. Leonard Dober, a young potter, couldn't sleep that night, impressed with the desire to go to the mission field
  2. Found a passage the next morning that said: "For it *is* not a vain thing for you; because it *is* your life: and through this thing ye shall prolong *your* days in the land" (Dt 32.47)
  3. Met with his friend, Tobias Leupold, in their regularly scheduled time for prayer – discovered that Leupold also felt called to St Thomas
  4. Wrote a letter to Zinzendorf, volunteering for the task
- C. Time of trial
  1. Zinzendorf and rest of community made the young men wait a full year before making a decision
  2. Some were negative (reason not given)

3. Decided the issue by drawing lots (paper with scripture phrases on them)
  - a. For Dober, the lot said, “let the lad go”
  - b. For Leupold, the lot said he must wait
4. David Nitschman agreed to go along for a time and help Dober get established, but would then return to Herrnhut

## II. Opposition in Copenhagen

- A. The two men were sent out from Herrnhut to sail from Copenhagen
  1. Moravian community gave a ‘farewell prayer meeting’ August 25, 1732
  2. Zinzendorf laid hands on them and dedicated them to the service of Christ
- B. Discouragement and opposition – and a little encouragement
  1. On the way to Copenhagen, God-fearing friends tried to discouragement – they thought it meant certain death
  2. Met the same opposition in Copenhagen
    - a. No ship would take them, it was said
    - b. If they did get there, they could not survive
    - c. They wouldn’t be allowed to contact the slaves
      - 1) Dober asserted he was willing to be a slave if need be
      - 2) This was considered laughable – it wouldn’t be allowed
  3. West Indies Company, the colonizing company in charge of St Thomas opposed them (even though the men in charge were friends of Zinzendorf)
  4. Some suggested they join the army to support themselves
    - a. This was refused
    - b. Intended to support themselves by their own trades
  5. Even Anthony Ulrich, the former slave who first encouraged the mission, now spoke against it
    - a. Intimidated by the community, he denied he ever called for a mission [remember, this is a very class based community, and he is not part of the upper class]

- b. Before the missionaries left, he did give them a letter for his brother and sister

### C. Persistence

1. The missionaries were faithful and persistent in seeking a way to St Thomas
2. Finally, some began to support them
  - a. Two court chaplains
  - b. Gained attention of Danish queen, who also contributed towards their expenses
3. Gained a birth as ‘working passengers’ on a Dutch ship
  - a. West Indies Company ships would not permit them
  - b. Dutch ship’s captain supplied them with needed tools
  - c. Sailed for West Indies Oct 8, 1732

## III. St Thomas

### A. Arrived Dec 13 in the harbor of St Thomas (a Sunday)

1. The men were given lodging unexpectedly by a planter who had a mutual friend in Copenhagen
2. On the first day, they also went out searching for Anthony Ulrich’s family
  - a. Found Anna and Abraham, slaves on one of the company plantations
  - b. Read Anthony’s letter to them
    - 1) Anthony gave his testimony of salvation
    - 2) Pleaded for his brother and sister to do likewise
    - 3) Quoted Jn 17.3: And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.
  - c. Missionaries urged other listening slaves to respond to the gospel as well

### B. David Nitschman stayed with Dober for some time, but then had to return to Germany as agreed

C. Leonard Dober laboured on alone for a year and a half

1. Had to support himself with odd jobs, no good pottery clay on island
2. Response of the slaves was slow, though Anthony's family seemed open
3. Dober experienced many trials, including a serious bout with a fever
4. Finally he managed to gather together a total of 4 converts, including Anthony's family
5. After a year and a half, reinforcements arrived, including his prayer partner, Tobias Leupold, who had been told to wait
6. The reinforcements arrived with instructions for Dober to return to serve in Germany as an elder of the church
7. Six years later, Zinzendorf himself arrived in St Thomas (with more missionaries) and found 800 converts in the slave church
8. Today there is an elementary school in St Thomas named "Leonard Dober Elementary"

## Conclusion:

When Asked His Reasons for Going to St. Thomas, Leonard Dober Composed a Letter Describing His Motivation

*Since it is desired of me to make known my reason, I can say that my disposition was never to travel during this time [that period in his life], but only to ground myself more steadfastly in my Savior; that when the gracious count came back from his trip to Denmark and told me about the slaves, it gripped me so that I could not get free of it. I vowed to myself that if one other brother would go with me, I would become a slave, and would tell him so, and [also] what I had experienced from our Savior: that the word of the cross in its lowliness shows a special strength to souls. As for me, I thought: even if helpful to no one in it [my commitment] I could still give witness through it of obedience to our Savior! I leave it to the good judgment of the congregation and have no other ground than this I thought: that on the island there still are souls who cannot believe because they have not heard.<sup>1</sup>*

How old was Leonard Dober when he went to the mission field? 18.

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<sup>1</sup> From "You Are My Witnesses" by James Weingarh, Christian History Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 17.