

## **MORAVIANS: THE FIRST REFORMERS A SERMON ON COLOSSIANS 1:1-14**

**by Rev. Russell B. Smith**

Before there was a Presbyterian church. Before John Knox. Before John Calvin. Before the Reformation. Before Luther and his 95 Theses, there were the Moravians. While there were earlier individual reformers, like Wyclif in England and Jan Hus in Bohemia, the Moravians are the oldest existing reformation era church. And we look back to their most prominent years in the 17th and 18th centuries, we find that their faith story is still relevant for today.

You see, here in the early 21st century, the favorite buzzword is “extreme.” High intensity pastimes such as skydiving, bungee jumping, rock climbing, skateboarding, snowboarding, and wakeboarding are all commonplace sports activities. People walk around today with so many piercings they look like they fell into a toolbox. We guzzle gallons of caffeine, mixed with a little soda or coffee. We are a culture of high intensity.

The irony is that amidst this physical extremity, this generation values intellectual and spiritual blandness. Tolerance, moderation, and the so-called “middle way” in matters of the mind and spirit are what this generation calls for. Earlier this month, I heard theologian Leonard Sweet speak in Orlando, Florida. He told us that if you drive down the middle of the road you get hit by oncoming traffic both ways. I propose to you that in an age that values intense, extreme experiences, we need to exhibit an intense, extreme faith. And when we talk about intensity, when we talk about high-octane, high adrenaline, extreme faith, nobody did it better than the Moravians. As you look back over 500 years of Moravian history, you cannot help but say, “These people were completely sold out for Jesus Christ.”

The Moravians officially established their community in 1457, 60 years before Luther nailed his theses on the Wittenberg Door. They held most of the same beliefs that would later drive the Protestant Reformation: Justification by faith, worship in the local language, the necessity for a personal relationship with God. For 250 years, the Moravians suffered intense persecution for their beliefs until 1722 when Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a man of deep faith, invited them to refuge on his estate. The refugees picked up from Czechoslovakia and Bohemia and came to the refugee village called Herrnhut, meaning “the Lord’s Watch”. But other religious refugees came too — French Calvinists, Anabaptists from Germany. In time, the blending of nationalities and ideas brought about conflict. Zinzendorf, the de facto leader of this group, was disturbed by the

tension and had been praying with key community leaders about it. On August 13, 1727, those prayers were answered.

On that date, the whole community assembled for a communion service, and in that service, the entire body felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, leading them to beg forgiveness of one another and weep and seek reconciliation. This service was described as a second Pentecost. It was a rebirth, a renewal. Something happened to the Moravians during that service — they were transformed from being a disparate bunch of refugees into an excited band of disciples, ready for any task. After that date, the Moravians moved from Extreme Persecution to Extreme Faith.

First, they began with *Extreme Prayer*. “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you” (Col. 1:3). “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9).

Paul indicates his personal practice of continually remembering his friends in prayer. Imagine what it would look like if a whole community pledged to be quite literal about these verses. Shortly after that monumental communion service, the Moravians began the practice of hourly intercession. This was a prayer vigil that consisted of a rotating assignment of one man and one woman from the community praying every hour of the day. How long do you think they were able to keep up this continual rotation of prayer? A week? A month? How about over 100 years — Over 100 years of non-stop prayer. Not only is that extreme, but it shatters comprehension of what extreme means.

Even today there are groups of young Christians around the world, who are inspired by this astounding prayer vigil. They set up prayer rooms and covenant to go on prayer rotations. There is something extreme about rising at 2:30 in the morning every morning to be a part of a prayer rotation. But even so, they can't touch the 100-year record held by the Moravians in Herrnhut. Can you picture the unity that comes from such a practice? Can you imagine the personal growth those praying people experienced? Can you fathom the spiritual power that was unleashed by such non-stop intercession before God's throne?

What was unleashed was *Extreme Witness*. Verses 4-5 summarize the eternal hope we have through Jesus Christ — the compelling hope of everlasting life, not earned by our good works, but graciously given by a loving father. “Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints — the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel” (4-5). Then in verse 6, Paul tells us that this good news, this gospel, is bearing fruit all over the world. “...All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and

growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth" (6). Paul is being modest, for he is a primary catalyst for that fruit. He traveled all over the Mediterranean planting churches. He was extreme in his witness.

In the same way, the Moravians took their proclamation of the gospel around the world. Supported by the spiritual power of the hourly intercession, Moravian missionaries began to venture forth from Herrnhut. In 1732, they sent their first two missionaries to the West Indies, followed in 1734 by a band of 18, whose charge was to set up a colony on the island of St. Croix. Within a year, 10 of those missionaries died. Herrnhut sent 11 more volunteers, and 9 more died. From those difficult beginnings began a worldwide effort. In 1733, a group established a colony in Greenland; in 1737, the Moravians went to South Africa. Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, North Carolina, Georgia, Pennsylvania, London, East Africa, Alaska, Canada, Honduras, Nicaragua, California, Australia, Tibet, and Jerusalem. The tiny village of Herrnhut, powered by the constant intercession, exploded and sent missionaries around the world proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

Their *Extreme Prayer* powered their *Extreme Witness* that was validated by their *Extreme Lifestyle*. Take a look at verses 10-13 of our passage. Paul's prayer is that his readers would lead a lifestyle worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work. Paul's intent is that all of life is worship. We don't just play at some religious game here on Sundays. Rather, everything we do, whether at work or play, whether with family, friends or alone — everything we do we do for the greater glory of God. Paul lived that out in his life.

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves... (10-13)

The Moravians made this attitude a hallmark of their witness. Wherever they went, they established colonies. In these colonies, they lived together and shared resources. All the single men lived together and all the single women lived together. When they set up these colonies, they didn't just send preachers — they sent craftsmen. They sent people who were good at their trades so they could sustain the colony and bring glory to God through their excellence. Their belief was that the life of the community as a whole was an expression of praise and glory to God. Every moment, every breath was an opportunity to live for God. After the revolution was won, the Continental Congress sent a

proclamation throughout the colonies asking them to observe a day of prayer and thanksgiving. The Moravian community of Salem, North Carolina was one of the few communities that actually observed the day with worship. The whole community shut down, and they had a prayer and worship service. They continue to commemorate that service every 4th of July to this day.

So the Moravians were examples of Paul's attitude of extreme faith: *Extreme Prayer, Extreme Witness, and Extreme Lifestyle*. Their living example of faith in Jesus Christ had a broader impact than most people know. In the 18th century, a young Baptist Preacher in London read about the missionary feats of the Moravians and stormed into the Baptist convention saying, "Look at what these 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?" His name was William Carey, and he went on to become the first Baptist missionary. He opened the floodgates and soon all the major Protestant churches began sending missionaries around the globe. All because one man had been inspired by the Moravians.

On a perilous sea voyage from London to the British colony of Georgia, two young Anglican preachers found themselves trapped on a small ship in a big storm. They, along with the rest of the passengers and the crew, feared for their lives. There was only one exception to the panic on board — a band of Moravians who spent the entire storm singing hymns and praising God. These two Anglican preachers were so impressed by the faith of these Moravians that they sought them out and spent time with them. When the two returned to London, they began to worship with the Moravian community there. One night at a service on Aldersgate Street, one of those young men experienced what he called a "warming of the heart." His name was John Wesley, and he became one of the most effective evangelists of the 18th century. He founded the Methodist movement that has brought millions of people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. All because one man had been inspired by the Moravians.

People heard the stories of the Moravians, they encountered them, and they were inspired with passion and fire. We should be inspired, because they are a part of our family. In our confession reading we read about the Kirk, the communion of believers from the beginning to the end of time. In the kirkin of the tartans we heard about the Clan Diah, the brotherhood of all those who have sworn allegiance to the one true chieftain. That's why we can celebrate homecoming talking about Moravians from Czechoslovakia with music from Scotland here in the ethnic melting pot of America. Because we are one family, bound not by ethnicity, but by allegiance to the same Chieftain, Jesus Christ. That Chieftain had a bold calling for the Moravians, that Chieftain had a bold calling for William Carey and for Wesley, That chieftain had a bold calling for Calvin and Knox. And that Chieftain has a bold calling for us — for me and for you and you and you and each one of us here. Does the story of the Moravians

inspire you? What will you do with it? Live a little more boldly? Speak your faith a little more loudly? Will you consider Christ's claim on your life a little more seriously? Give of yourself in some new and unexpected way? Think about it.

Maybe there are some of you here today who have not yet sworn allegiance to that Chieftain, Jesus Christ. Maybe you want to join the family of Christ. If so, I want to talk with you, either after this service or sometime this week. All you have to say to me is "I need a Chieftain." and we'll take it from there.

In these days, are you called to an extreme faith? Are you called to be extreme in prayer, extreme in witness, and extreme in lifestyle? Our Chieftain had marching orders for the Moravians and he has marching orders for us — will you follow? You think about that. Amen.