

Moravians Approach the Indians: Theories and Realities

by
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On June 19, 1772, the Reverend David McClure, a recent graduate of Yale College and would-be missionary to the Indians, set out on a 4,268 mile round trip from New Hampshire to the Indian towns of eastern Ohio. As historian James Axtell notes, he "wore out three horses, and converted no one."⁽¹⁾ The reasons for his dismal performance are another story, but it is interesting for us to note that he and his party did visit a Moravian Delaware Indian town. As he noted in his diary, the Moravians had

the best mode of christianizing the Indians ... they go among them without noise or parade ... & by their friendly behaviour conciliate their good will. They join them in the chase, & freely distribute to the helpless & gradually instill into the minds of individuals, the principles of religion. They then invite those who are disposed to harken to them, to retire to some convenient place, at a distance from the wild Indians, & assist them to build a village, & teach them to plant & sow, & so carry on some course manufactures. <In a later conversation with a resident Moravian missionary, he was told that they tried,> to carry the knowledge of Jesus Christ among pagans, & not to build on other's foundations, or enter on other men's labors.⁽²⁾

The theoretical framework for this kind of Moravian mission activity in the eighteenth century was constructed by the two outstanding leaders of the movement, Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf and Bishop Augustus Gottlieb Spangenberg.

As a German nobleman, Zinzendorf's academic training was in law but his first love was theology. As a leader in the Protestant reform movement of Pietism, his emphasis was on the joyful experience of the living Christ in one's life. Creeds and institutions were secondary. The Count was a classic charismatic leader and as such he inspired immense love and loyalty among those he attracted. He also stirred up much controversy and criticism among his contemporaries. Many historians have tried to capture the personality of the man in

a few words. One of the more colorful attempts was by Paul Wallace who wrote in his biography of the Count's Pennsylvania Indian guide Conrad Weiser, "Zinzendorf was a kind of Christian mastodon, trampling ruthlessly over all obstacles that stood between him and the Lamb of God. He had enormous energy, grandiose conceptions, a flaming poetical vision. He was always planning things on a tremendous scale, and his mind leaped ahead defying time and space, geography and ethnology, in the imagined accomplishment of his designs."⁽³⁾

Spangenberg, although equally committed to the Moravian cause, was by temperament and training quite different. A university trained Lutheran theologian and professor, he joined the Moravians in 1733 and remained with them until his death in 1792. Though only four years younger than the Count, he outlived him by thirty-two years. Although Zinzendorf visited with both native Americans and colonists during his visit to America, it was Spangenberg who was really responsible for leading Moravian work in the eastern colonies. The Bishop also carried out the task of publicist for the Moravians through his many books: a biography of Zinzendorf, instruction manuals for missionaries, a systematic theology, and other publications. The functional relationship between the two men is summarized by Ernest Stoeffler in his important study of the German pietist movement. Spangenberg, he claims,

emerged as the most incisive apologist of the Moravian understanding of Christianity. In the process of defending it, however, he toned down, or even eliminated what he regarded to be the Count's more startling theological aberrations and anti-nomian sentimentalities ... Spangenberg succeeded in bringing the Zinzendorffian movement back under the roof of an essentially pietistic understanding of the Lutheran confessions.⁽⁴⁾

This direction of Spangenberg's work will become more apparent as we consider first the theory of mission work developed by the two men and then consider some of the realities within which Moravians had to work - particularly among native Americans in the eastern colonies.

Both leaders agreed, initially, that a call to missionary activity was inherent in the Christian faith. For Moravians, "the glad celebration of the love of God and his gift of redemption in Christ called for the simple preaching everywhere of this story of salvation."⁽⁵⁾ Any generation of Christians was but participating in God's ongoing plan for the salvation of humanity. Christ's activity might be recorded in the Bible, but it is not captive there. He continues to meet persons where they are, at all times. So, Zinzendorf declared, "preach the gospel to all creatures, all nations ... no nation excepted, no people has preference here, no place in which they were born, not their language nor sex."⁽⁶⁾

Based on his understanding of such New Testament passages as the story of the encounter between Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1-14) and Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39), Zinzendorf developed a rather unique understanding of how conversion happens. The only real missionary is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is constantly operating in the world and is never captive of the Christians or the institutional church. The Spirit stirs within people what we would call religious questions. The people wrestle with them and may even suddenly find peace and joy and answers to their questions though they do not know why they feel that way. At the same time the Spirit is stirring up the Christian missionaries and sending them out everywhere. The crucial juncture is when the seekers and the missionaries meet and the missionaries speak of Jesus as the one who has brought peace and joy. If the seekers accept what the missionary says about Jesus, baptism follows. The whole process is under the direction of God through the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit finds those people whom Christ selects for membership in his community, and these people respond to the preaching of the missionary. This community is never restricted to institutional Christianity exclusively since such responsive souls are always found everywhere in the world. This process operates the same way in a German parish church or in a native American village in Pennsylvania. "It is never the responsibility of the preacher", wrote Zinzendorf, "that one is awakened, but rather the Holy Spirit acted at least a minute, an instant, before a word touched me, before words fall into my heart, before a sentence, a paragraph, a conclusion, a proposition becomes my text, my principle, upon which I can rely ... to one this happens distinctly, to another indistinctly."⁽⁷⁾ Finally, the people who do respond were described by Zinzendorf, using biblical language, as being "the first fruits" of "a holy beginning."⁽⁸⁾ Actually, the Count initially felt that only a small number of people in each missionary situation would respond in this way. He began to question that assumption during his own lifetime as the Moravian mission work in the West Indies grew to involve large numbers of people.

Shortly after Zinzendorf's death, Spangenberg was involved in leading the movement formally to abandon this restrictive understanding. Spangenberg also had trouble with the Count's idea of the Holy Spirit operating totally independent of human cooperation. He would eventually argue that the seekers can never truly know peace and joy until they have a chance to respond to the verbal proclamation of the missionary.

Both men could agree wholeheartedly, however, about what it was that the missionary was to say at that crucial juncture when meeting the seeker. In simple terms, the only thing different or new about Christianity was Jesus, and how he shows God's love for hu-

manity. Talk about Jesus and that will naturally lead to a discussion of all the other topics of Christian theology. A relationship with the Savior was considered more important than conceptual knowledge of theology. As Spangenberg phrased it, "the blood and death of Jesus must remain our diamond in the golden ring of the gospel."⁽⁹⁾ Zinzendorf was, as usual, a bit more verbose in his comment on this point.

I can never wonder enough at the blindness and ignorance of those people who are supposed to handle the divine word and convert men ... who think that if they have them memorize the catechism or get a book of sermons into their heads, or at the most, present all sorts of well-reasoned demonstrations concerning the divine being and attributes, thus funneling the truths and knowledge into their head that this is the sovereign means to their conversion.⁽¹⁰⁾

The report of a conversation, first recorded by Spangenberg⁽¹¹⁾, illustrates how this insight was supposed to work out in practice. A member of the Christian Mahican congregation at Shekomenko, in the Berkshire region on the New York and Connecticut border, was present at a conference in Bethlehem and told how he first became interested in the Moravians. He had heard various preachers before the Moravians arrived. One came and started out to prove that there was a God. The Indians said, "well, and dost thou think that we are ignorant of that? Now go again whence thou camest." A second arrived and told his hearers they should not steal, drink, or lie. To him they said, "Fool that thou art; does thou think we do not know that? Go and learn it thyself, and teach the people thou belongest to not to do those things. For who are the greater drunkards, or thieves, or liars, than thine own people?" Finally the Moravian Christian Henry Rauch came, went into his hut, sat down and began to speak.

The contents of his discourse to me were nearly these: I come to thee in the name of the Lord of heaven and earth. He acquaints thee, that he would gladly save thee, and rescue thee from the miserable state in which thou liest. To this end he became a man, hath given his life for mankind, and shed his blood for them, etc. Upon this, he lay down on a board in my hut, and fell asleep, being fatigued with his journey.

This action caused his host to reflect on the situation. What kind of a man is this who makes his speech and then goes to sleep? As he continued, "I might kill him immediately, and throw him out into the forest; - who would care for it? But he is unconcerned." The missionary's words and his action had made an impression. Indeed, the storyteller continued, "I dreamed of the blood which Christ shed for us." He eventually expressed faith in the God Rauch spoke about and at the conference, he concluded his testimony by saying, "I tell you,

therefore, brethren, preach to the heathen, Christ, and his blood, and his death, if ye would wish to produce a blessing among them." This story appears in several of the early histories of Moravian missions where it is offered as illustrative of the preaching emphasis of the era.

Commitment to this approach is also implied in the remarks attributed to a group of Moravians in Bethlehem when news reached them in 1748 of the death of the Rev. David Brainerd, a Presbyterian missionary in areas to the east of this town. "Mr. Brainerd's decease and his honest labours amongst the Indians were spoken of. It is to be feared that the Indians he has laboured amongst, being now fallen into the hands of Presbyterians, will be filled with head knowledge, and therefore the distress call of these poor souls we have particularly on our hearts."⁽¹²⁾

Based on their understanding of the nature of the missionary enterprise and the content of the missionary message, the eighteenth-century Moravians drew certain consequences about how missionaries were to live in cultures different from their own. In this area, Zinzendorf tended to be the generalist while others, including Spangenberg, had to work out the specifics in local situations. While there are many nuances to this subject, it may be appropriate here to concentrate on a maxim of Zinzendorf recorded in a set of instructions for missionaries in 1736: "Do not measure souls according to the Herrnhut yardstick."⁽¹³⁾ In the early eighteenth century the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut, Germany was the headquarters of the Moravians. The Count was suggesting that one not impose European cultural patterns everywhere, especially when working outside of that geographical context. Yet, as a later Moravian historian would comment in a review of Moravian activity among native Americans, "missionary activity can no more be divorced from its cultural consequences than can a man dissociate himself from his shadow when he walks in the sunlight."⁽¹⁴⁾ Zinzendorf himself had trouble keeping the Herrnhut yardstick out of sight; Spangenberg hardly tried.

Consider this extended narrative, taken from the Count's description of a journey from Bethlehem to Shamokin in September, 1742.

Hitherto I have felt no freedom to operate directly upon the Iroquois in their seats, as I have been unable to discern any promising indications or signs of grace among them, excepting in the case of a few individuals. Their intercourse with the French and English has not been for good. In addition to the vices of civilized life they have thus acquired, I find they have adopted erroneous views of religion. ... They are apt to infer from my speech, and from my connection with these two nations, that I am one of the same sort of people, - which I am not. The Dutch in Japan are afraid, and I among the Indians am ashamed, to pass for a European Christian.

He then goes on to recount his first conversation with Iroquois leaders and his presentation of his "different method" and begged them to have patience with me, in case I failed at once to preach long sermons. I remarked furthermore that I was especially and intimately acquainted with the Great Spirit, and asked them finally to permit me and the Brethren simply to sojourn in their towns, as friends, and without suspicion, until such time as we should have mutually learned each other's peculiarities.(15)

Zinzendorf was at least suggesting the possibility of a mutually beneficial cultural interchange between the Iroquois and the Moravians as each group came to learn "each other's peculiarities".

Spangenberg was less optimistic about the possibility of such a relationship. He could, for example, argue that the one thing which united all the non-Christian people, among whom the Moravians worked as missionaries, was their moral corruption. So, Indians were very hospitable towards strangers not out of love but out of fear that an offended stranger would seek revenge at a later date.(16) Indian attire, to him, reflected perverse human pride. Of course, Indians could counter the effects of snake bite; but these cures were frequently administered under the guise of magic. Therefore, Spangenberg believed, Christians would soon leave the old healers and come to the missionary to use his medicine even for physical cures.(17)

Although they possessed a theoretical framework which might have allowed a genuine interchange of cultural understanding and values between themselves and the Indians, the realities here soon forced the Moravians into another course of action. The Moravians arrived in this area in the early 1740's after an unsuccessful attempt to establish themselves in Georgia. They were relative latecomers to the colonial scene. Although one of their professed purposes in coming was to missionize the native Americans, the first reality they confronted was that most of the Indians with whom they worked already had had contact with other settlers. Many of the quotations already read also allude to this from both Indian and Moravian viewpoints. From the Moravian viewpoint, they often regarded such contacts with disfavor, since other settlers frequently presented poor examples of how Christians ought to behave.

The Moravians dealt with this reality through their attempt to gather the Christian Indians in isolated autonomous villages under church control. The features of these towns are well known: log houses, a school, a church, a missionary's house, craft buildings and so on, all laid out in neat rows so pleasing to the Germanic eye. Lists of rules governing community life were drawn up. Missionaries learned native American languages and spoke, taught and wrote in

them. Schools were begun, crafts using European tools developed and the entire liturgical life of the church was introduced.(18)

Yet even these well-defined villages could not protect their inhabitants - Indians and missionaries - from the second major reality of the time: war. Events connected with the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812, all conspired to wreak havoc among various Moravian settlements and martyrs for their faith, both Indian and missionary. A crucial element of that faith which called for so great a commitment was a belief in pacifism. From the Moravian point of view, pacifism was never a formal condition for church membership; yet it was a view shared by many within the denomination in that era.

Theological reasons aside, the Moravians also tended to favor the British cause until the Revolution was well under way. The British government had been good to them in its colonial relations. The issues which stirred up the colonies often seemed to be squabbles between groups of foreigners. Thus, most Moravians did not identify even the Revolutionary War as "their" fight though many of their patriot neighbors often tended to equate their silence with support for the crown.

From the native American point of view, commitment to pacifism was a part of the religious message preached by the Moravians. Those who accepted that message frequently held to it with great tenacity, despite the hardships it brought. Acceptance of the message did allow an escape from the seemingly incessant warfare and harassment which plagued Eastern Indians in this area. But it also did force converts to it, to leave their traditional tribal structure and frequently placed them under pressure in the colonial powers' manipulative search for native American military allies.

In retrospect, we can agree that what was occurring during these times between American Indians and Moravians was a meeting of two cultures both of which were in transition. The culture of the various groups who together comprised the Eastern Woodland Indians was under severe stress. The threat of entanglement in military alliances framed in Europe, and the never ending pressure from land-hungry settlers in the colonies, had severely circumscribed the Indians' ability to observe the traditions of their culture. Even such details of life as their traditional views about housing, clothing and food were subjected to new pressures and interpretations. By 1755 when Christian Indians were showing up in white settlements in this area as refugees from destroyed mission villages, a dress and behavior code had to be developed to identify the Christians. "They are always clothed. They are never painted, and wear no feathers, but hats on caps. They let their hair grow naturally. They carry their guns on their shoulders, with the shaft upwards." When meeting a settler, "they will call to him, salute him, and coming near, will

carry their guns either reversed or on the shoulder."(19) The Eastern Woodland Indians were becoming strangers in their own land.

The culture of the Moravians was also under severe stress. They were German immigrants really just embarking on their journey toward acculturation in the midst of English, Scotch-Irish, other German groups, and the Indians, and were in a political arena transforming itself from colony to independent nation. The Moravians were confronted with all these diversities more or less simultaneously. Qualitatively, their desire to establish isolated villages of Christian Indians was no different from their Moravian desire to establish closed communities, like Bethlehem, for themselves. Moravians, in short, still felt as strangers in their new land.

But both cultures continued to change and adapt. Native American culture, for many years to come, experienced great pressure to accommodate to white culture. Yet elements of that culture would retain their vitality and appear with new vigor in the mid-twentieth century. As the Moravians moved along the road towards increased acculturation to the religious and social standards of their neighbors, their commitment to pacifism faded. By the end of the eighteenth century, this was apparent; also, that the German language would gradually be dropped in favor of English. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Moravians had emerged as an American Protestant denomination.

Perhaps one can even assert that, at the time of the eighteenth century meeting, the cultures of both groups had really been more alike than different.

Endnotes

- 1) James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 263.
- 2) *Diary of David McClure, Doctor of Divinity, 1748-1820*, ed. Franklin B. Dexter (New York, 1899) as quoted by Axtell, *ibid.*, p. 265.
- 3) Paul A.W. Wallace, *Conrad Weiser, Friend of Colonist and Mohawk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945), p. 136.
- 4) F. Ernest Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) p. 165.
- 5) R. Pierce Beaver, "American Missionary Motivation Before the Revolution", *Church History*, XXXI, No. 2 (June, 1962), 225.
- 6) E. Beyreuther and G. Meyer, eds. *Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf Hauptschriften*, vol. 3: *Zeister Reden - Vom Grund-Plane Unserer Heiden-Missionen* (Foundation of Our Mission to the

- Heathenl (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1963), p. 190.
- 7) N.L. Count von Zinzendorf, *Nine Public Lectures on Important Subjects in Religion, Preached in Fetter Lane Chapel in London in the Year 1746*, trans. and ed. George W. Forell (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1973), p. 29
 - 8) S. Baudert, "Zinzendorf's Thought on Missions Related to His View of the World", *International Review of Missions*, 21, No. 83 (July, 1932), 399.
 - 9) A.G. Spangenberg, *Von der Arbeit der Evangelischen Brüder unter den Heiden* (Barby: Christian Friedrich Saur, 1782). Published in English translation as *An Account of the Manner in which the Protestant Church of the Unitas Fratrum or United Brethren, Preach the Gospel, and Carry on their Missions among the Heathen*. Translator not known. (London: Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel, 1788). The quotation is from the *Account*, p. 69.
 - 10) Zinzendorf, *Nine Public Lectures*, p. 35.
 - 11) Spangenberg, *Account*, pp. 62-63.
 - 12) Minutes of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for June 4, 1748 as quoted by Arthur J. Brown, *One Hundred Years, A History of the Foreign Missionary Work of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. ...*, 2d ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1936), p. 165.
 - 13) E. Beyreuther and G. Meyer, eds. *Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf: Ergänzungsbände zu den Hauptschriften*, vol. 8: *Büdingische Sammlung. Band 2 - Eine Heyden-Boten Instruction nach Orient* <Instructions for Missionaries to the East> (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965), p. 634.
 - 14) Kenneth G. Hamilton, "Cultural Contributions of Moravian Missions among the Indians", *Pennsylvania History*, XVIII, No. 1 (January, 1951), 3.
 - 15) "Zinzendorf's Narrative of a Journey from Bethlehem to Shamokin, in September of 1742", as found in William C. Reichel, *Memorials of the Moravian Church*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), pp. 64-65.
 - 16) Spangenberg, *Account*, p. 47.
 - 17) *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 - 18) See Hamilton, *op. cit.*
 - 19) "Extracts from the Diary of Nazareth Relating to the Indian Converts from Wechquetank, 1763" as quoted by Eugene Leibert, "Wechquetank", *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society*, vol. VII (Nazareth, PA: The Moravian Historical Society, 1906), pp. 71-72.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Herrnhuter Weg der Indianermission: Theorie und Wirklichkeit

Die theologischen Grundsätze der Herrnhuter Mission im 18. Jahrhundert sind von Zinzendorf und Spangenberg entwickelt worden. Diese beiden herausragenden Gestalten der Brüdergemeine waren hinsichtlich Ausbildung und Temperament ganz verschieden. Spangenberg, der Zinzendorf um 32 Jahre überlebte, wurde zum Apologeten des Grafen und der Brüdergemeine. Diese Tendenz tritt offen zutage, wenn man sowohl die Missionstheorie betrachtet, die von den beiden entwickelt wurde, als auch die realen Bedingungen, mit denen die Herrnhuter bei den einheimischen Amerikanern in den östlichen Kolonien arbeiten mußten.

Zinzendorf und Spangenberg stimmten darin überein, daß der Auftrag zur Mission im christlichen Glaube selbst begründet ist. Gestützt auf die Auslegung von neutestamentlichen Stellen wie Apg 8, 26-39 und 10,1-14 entfaltete Zinzendorf seine Auffassung, daß der Heilige Geist jede Phase der Missionsarbeit lenke. Spangenberg betonte später stärker die Rolle der mündlichen Verkündigung des Missionars.

Das Herzstück der christlichen Botschaft ist nach der Auffassung beider die in Christus offenbarte Liebe Gottes zu der Menschheit. Dies ist es, was die Leute hören müssen, und daher soll der Missionar mit der Christus-Botschaft den Anfang machen. Das Zeugnis eines christlichen Mohikaners von Shekomeko über das Auftreten des Missionars Christian Heinrich Rauch veranschaulicht die Wirksamkeit dieser Missionsmethode.

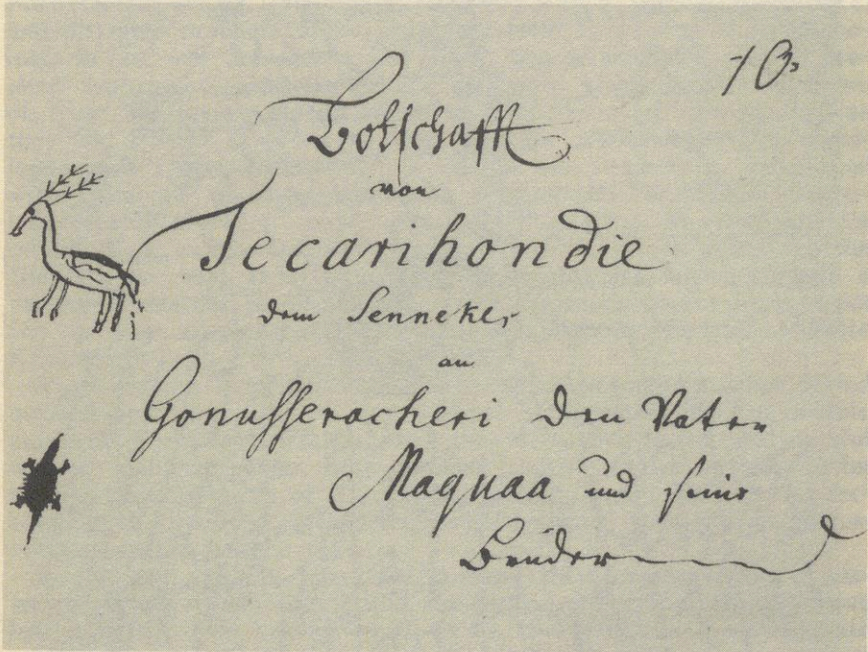
Zinzendorf und Spangenberg zogen aus ihrem theoretischen Ansatz gewisse Schlußfolgerungen für das Verhalten der Missionare, die in fremder kultureller Umgebung leben. Zinzendorf fiel es trotz seines 1736 formulierten Grundsatzes: "Messet nicht die Seelen mit der Herrnhuter Elle", schwer, die einheimische amerikanische Kultur nicht nach europäischen Maßstäben zu beurteilen. Spangenberg gab sich kaum Mühe, solche Urteile zu vermeiden.

Die Herrnhuter verfügten über eine Missionstheorie, die ihnen einen echten Austausch von kulturellem Verstehen und kultureller Werte zwischen sich und den Indianern ermöglicht hätte; doch die Realitäten zwangen sie bald, andere Wege einzuschlagen.

Um die bekehrten Indianer vor dem schädlichen Kontakt mit anders gesinnten Siedlern zu bewahren, sammelte man sie in geschlossenen autonomen Siedlungen nach dem Herrnhuter Gemeinmodell und unter gemeindliche Kontrolle. Aber auch diese Maßnahme ließ Missionare und Missionierte nicht von einer zweiten Realität dieser Zeit verschont bleiben: dem Krieg. Die pazifistische Einstellung vieler

Missionare und Indianer komplizierte die Beziehungen zwischen den Herrnhutern, den Indianern und der englischen Kolonialmacht noch zusätzlich.

In der Wechselbeziehung zwischen den Herrnhutern und den einheimischen Amerikanern sehen wir die Begegnung zweier Kulturen, die sich beide aufgrund vielfältiger Spannungen in einem Übergangsstadium befanden. Die östlichen Waldland-Indianer wurden Fremde im eigenen Land und die Herrnhuter waren noch Fremde im neuen Land.



p. 47/48: Message of Tecarihondie (Indian name for Zinzendorf's son-in-law, John Wattewille) to Genusseracheri (Indian name of David Zeisberger), with an Indian Fathom of Wampum. John Wattewille was on a tour of inspection to the North American Moravians in 1748/49.

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