

The Big Chill

The Theological Disagreement which Separated John Wesley and Count Zinzendorf

by
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In the eighteenth century John Wesley and Nicholas Ludwig, Count of Zinzendorf and Pottendorf, each played key roles in movements which were significant sources of renewal in the Christian Church. Neither wished to separate from the established ecclesiastical bodies of the time. Both, for theological reasons, attempted to transcend traditional walls of separation within the Christian movement. Both prayed and worked passionately for the spiritual awakening of people within the established churches-people for whom Christianity had become, all too often in the eighteenth century, an empty social convention or a cold and barren acceptance of moral and religious propositions. Both were keenly interested in missions to people who were outside of the Christian faith, and both earnestly desired the established churches to return to the simplicity of the Christian life and teaching of the New Testament period.

But despite all this common ground Wesley and Zinzendorf found it necessary to part. As a result, the movements with which they were associated went their separate ways after a period of close affiliation. John Wesley's activity bore fruit primarily in the birth and growth of the Methodist Church and in numerous so-called holiness churches which point to him as having been important for the development of their teaching. Zinzendorf's work issued in the reconstituting of the Moravian Church and an explosion of missionary activity.

The decisive clash, the watershed event, after which the two movements separated with finality, took place in London on September 3, 1741. Differences had arisen more than a year earlier and the result had been a sharp division within the religious society that met at Fetter Lane in London. In an attempt to reconcile the two factions James Hutton, an English supporter of

Zinzendorf, arranged the 1741 meeting. The aim was for Wesley and Zinzendorf privately to work out the differences. But this conversation did not result in rapprochement. On the contrary, it clarified and hardened the line of separation between the two men.

In the generation which followed that of Wesley and Zinzendorf stories began to circulate among both Methodists and Moravians that purportedly set forth the reason for this separation. These anecdotes attribute the clash to personal factors. The stories spread widely and were generally regarded as good accounts of the causes of the break. As a result, these secondary tales have become the lens through which the controversy is interpreted. Whatever is thought to be the theological issue involved, it is invariably seen by nineteenth and twentieth century writers to be a reflection of a more fundamental personality clash. Thus, it is not surprising to find a competent scholar explaining the break with these words: "...the clash between their personalities was undoubtedly the chief factor behind their churches going along separate courses ... (one group) was not roomy enough for both a Wesley and a Zinzendorf."¹

I shall argue here that this is not the case. The fact that the incidents upon which the hypothesis of a personality clash are based have no grounds in the writings of either Wesley or Zinzendorf ought at least to make one suspicious, especially since neither man was prone to hide his true feelings and thoughts. With just this suspicion Nehemiah Curnock, editor of the standard edition of John Wesley's *Journal*, considers the anecdotes in question in an extended footnote and concludes that "it is unjust to both Wesley and Zinzendorf to attribute the quarrel ... to apocryphal stories of intolerance, discourtesy, and personal pique. The true causes were wholly different, and really much more serious."²

The aim of this paper is to show that the true causes were theological; that the two men disagreed with each other concerning a matter central to the way each understood Christianity. The result was that each regarded the views of the other as a grossly distorted version of the Christian gospel. Given this, the question of their personalities becomes superfluous in relation to the attempt to account for their parting of the ways. It was the case, to put it bluntly, that neither could accept in good conscience a position

¹ John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), pp. 216-217.

² John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. by Nehemiah Curnock, 9 vols., (London: the Epworth Press, 1938). 1:11-12.

which seemed to him to surrender the integrity and truth of the proclamation of Jesus Christ and to compromise the meaning of grace in the life of the believer. Any genuine reconciliation between Wesley and Zinzendorf would have required theological compromise of a sort that neither, for what should become obvious reasons, was willing to make.

In order to make this clear I shall undertake a critical interpretation of the substance of their 1741 conversation. Although the two differed theologically in more ways than the one which occupied them directly when they sat down to talk in London, their other differences did not drive them apart as did the matter they actually discussed. My interest here is in the theological views over which they broke with each other.

As surprising as it may seem, the two disputants absolutely agreed about what was said that September day in 1741. This is demonstrated by the fact that Wesley published "the most material part" of the conversation in his *Journal* in 1744³ and the Moravians published an identical account of the same one year later.⁴

My interpretation is not an attempt to make generalizations about either man or the controversy for the purpose of classification. This kind of generalizing and classifying produces tidy-looking arguments and conclusions, but it leaves outside of its purview too much that is important.⁵ Because such a method ignores what is unique and original for the sake of showing relationships between thinkers and ideas, and in order to establish and maintain clear and distinct categories, it is unhelpful as a way to understand and come to grips with any thinker as such and on his or her own terms.

Furthermore, my interpretation does not include a judgment concerning the truth, validity, or relative merit of the views in question. This is not to say that I have no such judgments, but rather that these have been, to the best of my ability, bracketed out of this study. I want to present, precisely and briefly, what each believed with regard to the substance of their 1741 interchange. The history of the discussion of the quarrel is already filled with polemics and a good deal of distortion has been the result.⁶ It takes a clear

3 Ibid., 2:488-490.

4 Nicholas Ludwig, Graf von Zinzendorf, *Ergänzungsbände zu den Hauptschriften*, ed. by Erich Beyreuther and Gerhard Meyer, 14 vols., (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 9:1026-1030.

5 e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. 2 vols., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 2:174-175.

6 e.g., the Rev. L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols., (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875). 1:341.

eye to see past this distortion to the actual convictions of Wesley and Zinzendorf, an eye unblinded by any concern to show one figure wrong or dangerous and the other right.

This investigation will proceed in three stages. First, I shall recount the well-known tale of John Wesley's early contacts with, and impressions of, the Moravians. Following this, it will be necessary to note the development of the conflict; the crystallization of the issues. And finally, with the clash thus placed in the context of the relationship between Wesley and the Moravians which preceded the difficulties, I shall consider the convictions of the two men. The substance of what they said in their 1741 interchange will be examined in the light of their own words spoken on other occasions close in time to the London meeting. This will make clear precisely what was at stake as far as each man was concerned, as well as what each meant by what he said in that pivotal conversation. This should also make clear whether there is good reason to think that at the root of this altercation was a fundamental disagreement about what constitutes the essence of Christianity, and not merely the refusal of two great men to work together because their personalities clashed.

I. First Contacts

John Wesley's early relationship with the Moravians was both positive and fruitful. In the fall of 1735 the young Anglican was on board a ship bound for Georgia. On the same ship were twenty-six Moravians. John's Journal entry for Friday, October 17, 1735 contains the first evidence of contact between them. In this passage Wesley describes the Moravians as "meek and lowly, dead to the world, full of faith and the Holy Ghost"⁷.

That journey to Georgia was a difficult one. The ship was buffeted by fierce storms. The violence of the weather and the sea drove John to face his own death as a real, indeed an imminent, possibility. But this threw him into inner turmoil, for he found himself unwilling to die.⁸ He felt deeply ashamed at this unwillingness,⁹ and on January 23 confronted himself with the question: "How is it that thou hast no faith?"¹⁰

⁷ Wesley, *Journal*, 1:110.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:122-123.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:140.

Two days later, on January 25, the weather turned particularly savage. The wind howled and roared. The ship trembled both from the force of the wind and from the battering of the sea. Wesley testifies that they were tossed about with such severity that it was impossible to remain standing without holding onto something, and that it was only with great difficulty that one could even keep such a hold.¹¹

That evening, as the storm continued unabated both on the sea and in Wesley's own heart, he joined the Moravians in their usual period of worship. Having seen their manner of life, which he considered to be a shining example of what the Christian life ought to be,¹² he burned to see their response to the threat of death.¹³ When he saw it his warm appreciation of the Moravians turned to respect and wonder. In his own words, this is what happened that night.

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, wherein we were mentioning the power of God, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans (Moravians) looked up, and without intermission calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."¹⁴

Those Moravians possessed precisely what John lacked but fervently desired. The last line of his *Journal* entry for that day reveals the force of the impression which the simple fearlessness of their faith in the Savior had made upon him: "This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen."¹⁵

After the ship's arrival in Georgia, Wesley remained in close contact with the Moravians there. He continued his efforts to learn German, begun aboard ship, so that he could communicate with them more easily. And when he felt the need of advice on spiritual or pastoral matters he did not hesitate to seek out A.G. Spangenberg, a Moravian leader, and wrote of him

¹¹ Ibid., 1:141.

¹² Ibid., 1:142.

¹³ Ibid., 1:142.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:142-143.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1:143.

during this period: »Mr. Spallenberg (sic) a wise man! Advised me as to myself! The cross once more.«¹⁶

Wesley was no less impressed by a Moravian conference he attended in February 1736, his first month in the colony. After prayer the assembly had elected and ordained a bishop. Wesley exulted:

The great simplicity, as well as solemnity, of the whole, almost made me forget the seventeen hundred years between, and imagine myself in one of those assemblies where form and state were not, but Paul the tent-maker or Peter the fisherman presided, yet with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.¹⁷

When he returned to England two years later John's relationship with the Moravians continued to be positive. He entered into an affectionate friendship with a Moravian preacher named Peter Böhler which proved to be of importance for Wesley personally and for Methodism historically. Together these two men formed the Fetter Lane Society in May of 1738.¹⁸ Böhler "advised" the society as to how it ought to be constituted.¹⁹ In accordance with his advice, it was a religious society within the Church of England; it was divided into bands, or small groups (as were the Moravians on the European continent and in America), and had lovefeasts (as did the Moravians); its members sang hymns, confessed their sins to each other, prayed for each other, and shared the true state of their hearts with one another.²⁰ From this society sprang both the later-organized Methodism of the so-called United Societies and the Moravian Church in England.²¹

In 1738, relations between John Wesley and the Moravians were so good, and the experience of Christianity Wesley had among the Moravians in England was so delightful to him, that in June he set out to visit Moravian communities and Count Zinzendorf in Germany. In July he wrote from Westphalia to his brother Charles. His letter is important for the attempt to understand the development of a problem in his relationship with the Moravians. It is short and to the point. Wesley wrote:

¹⁶ Ibid., 1:151.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1:170-171.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1:458-459.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 1:458-459.

²¹ Ibid., 1:458.

I am now with the Count ... The spirit of the Brethren is above our highest expectation. Young and old, they breathe nothing but faith and love ... I do not therefore concern myself with the smaller points that touch not the essence of Christianity, but endeavour (God being my helper) to grow up in these after the glorious example set before me.²²

Something appears to have troubled Wesley during this visit. But the practice of Christianity he saw ("they breathe nothing but faith and love") continued to impress him to such a degree that he considered the causes of his concern to be "smaller points that touch not the essence of Christianity". The manner in which the Moravians exercised faith and love even moved him to attempt to "grow up" in these smaller points so that he might imitate the Moravians more closely.

Still, he began a letter to the Moravians shortly after his return to England in September 1738. This letter, never finished and never sent, constitutes the earliest documentary evidence that something had begun to bother Wesley about the Moravians, and that this something might become a hindrance in his future relationship with them. At the same time, the letter was Wesley's first attempt to work out just what it was that bothered him. With this letter as a starting point, I turn now to a brief consideration of the crystallization of the disagreement.

II. The road to the 1741 meeting

This section will deal with the crystallization of the issues in Wesley's mind. This may appear one-sided, but it is necessary. First, this approach is necessary because Zinzendorf was not directly involved in the difficulties as they developed. We only hear his own voice when he declares John and Charles Wesley to be "false teachers and deceivers of souls in respect of the doctrine of Christian Perfection,"²³ and when he actually sits down to talk with Wesley. The second reason for an apparently one-sided approach to this section is that one finds no development in Zinzendorf concerning the issues in question after 1730-1731. When he referred to the Wesleys as false teachers because of their doctrine of Christian Perfection he was only applying to a specific situation what he had already articulated in principle. Moreover, he

²² Ibid., 2:12.

²³ Ibid., cf., footnote, 2:488.

remained steadfast in the views which led him to this judgment of John and Charles.

As was said above, Wesley's unfinished letter of 1738 was his first statement of the things which disturbed him about the Moravians. In the opening paragraph of this letter he expresses his continuing affection for the Moravians and the reasons for it. The rest of the document provides an insight into those points which, he had earlier written to Charles, "touch not the essence of Christianity". Wesley listed the following as the items that troubled him:

Do you (the Moravians) not wholly neglect fasting?

Is not the Count all in all?...

Is there not something of levity in your behaviour? Are you, in general, serious enough?

Are you zealous and watchful to redeem time?...

Do you not magnify your own Church too much? Do you believe any who are not of it to be in gospel liberty?

Are you not straitened in your love? Do you love your enemies and wicked men as yourselves?

Do you not mix human wisdom with divine; joining worldly prudence to heavenly?

Do you not use cunning, guile, or dissimulation in many cases?

Are you not of a close, dark, reserved temper and behaviour?

Is not the spirit of secrecy the spirit of your community?

Have you that childlike openness, frankness, and plainness of speech so manifest to all in the apostles and first Christians?²⁴

Behind nearly all of these questions lies a single theological matter. Furthermore, eighteenth century Moravians maintained a relatively consistent position regarding this matter. Their view was formed under the influence and guidance of Zinzendorf. But he had not imposed it upon them. Rather, they had come to agree with him on the proper understanding and importance of this theological theme.

What is indirectly in question here is the proper relationship between law (God's universal, absolute, righteous command) and gospel (God's free, unmerited and unmeritable offer of forgiveness of sins and personal fellowship in and through Jesus Christ). For Zinzendorf, and for Moravians in the eighteenth century, to misconstrue this relationship was to distort Christia-

²⁴ Ibid., 2:496-497.

nity, or even to change Christianity into a different religion. But this will become clear below. Suffice it to say at this point that the way the Moravians understood the law-gospel relationship determined their attitude toward fasting, levity, the use of time, their use of what Wesley interpreted as "cunning" and "guile", and the manner in which they "mixed", as Wesley put it, "human wisdom with divine".

At the time that he composed this letter Wesley did not seem to recognize any such theological issue behind the things which vexed him. His unfinished epistle suggests that he held the problem to be one of diligence in practice and not of theology. Although he considered the Moravian's practice of Christianity to be, in general, exemplary, he felt that greater earnestness was required on the points he listed. He apparently believed, in 1738, that if the Moravians would only apply themselves and exert more effort the causes of his concern would disappear.

But one year later the situation began to change rapidly. In October of 1739 Philip Henry Molther, lately tutor to the son of Count Zinzendorf, arrived in London. James Hutton was eager to bring the Fetter Lane Society as a whole under Moravian teaching concerning fellowship with the Savior. To further this end he brought Molther to the Society meetings.

Almost immediately people began to be confused and upset by Molther's teaching. He was telling them that there were no degrees of faith. According to him, one either has faith without any doubt or fear or one has no faith at all.²⁵ As a result, many in the Fetter Lane Society questioned whether they had ever had any faith at all.

Molther counseled people to "be still" and wait for the Savior to come to them and give them true faith. Stillness consisted of abstaining from outward works which John Wesley was accustomed to think of as means of grace (e.g., attending church in general and participating in the Lord's Supper in particular, reading the Scriptures, and praying).²⁶ Mr. Molther considered Jesus to be the only means of God's grace to human beings and the supplier as well as the object of faith. Not only did he hold that acts such as Bible reading and partaking of holy communion were not means of grace - he was convinced that they were dangerous for those who lacked true faith. It was his view that people without faith in the Savior would inevitably regard these activities as righteous works the performing of which would

²⁵ Ibid., 2:314,328-329.

²⁶ Ibid.

fulfill their duty to God.²⁷ Consequently, the people who do these things without faith are unaware that they need to be saved. They believe themselves to stand righteous before God quite apart from a Savior, since they think that they have done all that God requires of them. Their situation is worse than if they had never been inside a church or heard the Bible read. For Molther, they are the spiritual equivalent of a blindfolded man, unaware that he is blindfolded, walking happily towards the edge of a cliff which will be his certain destruction.

With the arrival of Molther, Wesley found himself in a quarrel which was distinctly theological. He later wrote that from November 1, 1739, he could see more and more things which he could "in nowise reconcile with the gospel of Christ".²⁸ Wesley disagreed completely with Molther's notions of stillness and true faith.²⁹ He met with Molther in December 1739, and again in April 1740, but hours of discussion brought them no closer.³⁰ Meanwhile, the Fetter Lane Society had become a divided company. Some members sided with Wesley and others with Molther, and suspicion replaced love as the spirit of the meetings. John described a meeting of the Society during this period like this:

In the evening our society met; but cold, weary, heartless, dead. I found nothing of brotherly love among them now; but a harsh, dry, heavy, stupid spirit. For two hours they looked at one another, when they looked up at all, as if one half of them was afraid of the other;...³¹

Martin Schmidt understands this situation not so much as a conflict simply between Wesley and Molther, but as a disagreement between Molther and Wesley's friend, the Moravian, Peter Böhler.³² Schmidt holds that Wesley and the Moravian leaders were still theologically united and that, for Wesley, "it was a matter of having to defend the classic Pauline-Lutheran ideas about justification, represented by Zinzendorf and Böhler against a Herrnhuter of the younger generation..."³³

²⁷ cf., *Ibid.*, 2:328-329.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:497.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:329-331.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:329-331, 344.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:343-344.

³² Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, trans. by Norman P. Goldhawk, 2 vols., (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), vol. 2, part 1, p. 42.

³³ *Ibid.*

Schmidt may be right about the controversy involving Molther. But it is difficult to judge, since Zinzendorf, who was not in England at the time, did not enter the discussion at all, and Böhler too was absent during the crucial moments of the disagreement. Curnock writes, "Had (Böhler) been in England in July 1740, the misunderstanding with the Moravians might have had a different result."³⁴

It remains to be seen whether the presence of either Böhler or Count Zinzendorf would have made a difference in the long run. In any case, after months of strife, discussion, and mutual distrust among the Society members John Wesley took decisive action on the evening of July 20, 1740. Following a lovefeast, he rose and read a paper summarizing the points upon which the two factions within the Society disagreed. The essential words were these:

... you (those who agree with Molther) asserted ... That there is no justifying faith where there is ever any doubt or fear ... That a man ought not to use those ordinances of God which our Church terms 'means of grace', before he has such faith as excludes all doubt and fear...

You have often affirmed that to search the Scriptures, to pray, or to communicate before we have this faith is to seek salvation by works; and that till these works are laid aside no man can receive faith.

I believe these assertions to be flatly contrary to the Word of God.³⁵

Wesley invited those who agreed to follow him and promptly left the Society.

Even if Martin Schmidt is correct about the character of this break in the Fetter Lane Society, and even if Curnock is accurate in his speculation that the presence of Böhler might have changed the outcome, it does not alter the fact that a fundamental theological disagreement was emerging between Wesley and Zinzendorf. While Zinzendorf remained silent in relation to the Wesley-Molther quarrel, he felt he could not remain silent about something else altogether. John had kept a rigorous schedule of preaching during the breakdown of the Fetter Lane Society, and Count Zinzendorf, ignoring the points at issue with Molther, responded to an element of Wesley's teaching that was central to Wesley's understanding of Christianity.

In the spring of 1741 Zinzendorf published a little pamphlet in England. In it he declared both John and Charles Wesley to be false teachers and de-

³⁴ Wesley. *Journal*, 2:441.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:370.

ceivers of souls because of their teaching concerning Christian perfection.³⁶ But he stated that if they would only "become humbled in the principal Point",³⁷ that is, cease teaching and preaching Christian perfection, all the rest of their conduct would not hinder him from "embracing them with candor and Love".³⁸

The appearance of Zinzendorf's pamphlet marks the beginning of a new quarrel. It is not a continuation of the Molther debate. Zinzendorf and Wesley did not part over points which initially split the Fetter Lane Society. It was Wesley's idea of "Scriptural holiness" that caused Zinzendorf to take action to preserve, in his words, "the little Flock of Sinners who love their Savior from being confounded with Pretenders to such Perfection of whom I cannot but be suspicious, that in the same time that they preach Perfection, they are willfull Servants of Sin..."³⁹

On the second day of May 1741 Wesley talked with Spangenberg and Böhler. Their discussion concerned the point which Zinzendorf had raised in his pamphlet. The two Moravians sided with the Count and affirmed Luther's paradox that the Christian is at the same time justified and a sinner; righteousness is imputed by God but original sin is not essentially removed until the Last Day. The Christian in the world is not righteous in fact, but in hope, wholly dependent in every moment on God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The key interchange in the conversation took place between John Wesley and Spangenberg.

I (Wesley) asked him: "Is there still an old man in you?" He (Spangenberg) said: "Yes; and will be as long as I live." I said: "Is there, then, corruption in your heart?" He replied: "In the heart of my old man there is; but not in the heart of my new man." I asked: "Does the experience of your brethren agree with yours?" He answered: "I know what I have now spoken is the experience of all the brethren and sisters throughout our church."⁴⁰

At that point several people who were with Wesley spoke of their experience of a progressive expunging of the sin that was in them. They believed themselves to be growing righteous, not merely passively by divine imputation,

³⁶ Zinzendorf, *Ergänzungsbände*, 9:852-853.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 2:853.

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Journal*, 2:451-452.

but actively by their own grasping and acting on God's grace. Spangenberg told them, with great emotion, that they were deceiving their own souls and were in a very dangerous error.⁴¹ "You fancy", he said, "your corruptions are taken away, whereas they are only covered. Inward corruption never can be taken away till our bodies are in the dust".⁴²

Following his record of this in the *Journal*, Wesley asks his readers: "Was there inward corruption in our Lord? Or, cannot the servant be as his Master?"⁴³

With Zinzendorf's pamphlet and this discussion the stage is set for the final meeting between Wesley and the Count. Months before, in August 1740, Wesley had written a long letter to the Moravians in Germany. He had elaborated essentially the same points contained in his unfinished letter of 1738, adding his concern that the Moravian's teaching on justification did not include "the cleansing our souls from all sin", and did not "imply liberty from sinful thoughts".⁴⁴ Further, he was disturbed that the Moravians seemed to undervalue good works, "never publicly insisting on the necessity of them, nor declaring their weight and excellency".⁴⁵ The nearest thing to a response to his letter was the pamphlet and this meeting with two of the Germans he had known since the earliest days of his acquaintance with the Brethren's church. He had a deep personal affection for both Spangenberg and Böhler. But this affection could not efface his concern for what he understood to be the essential content of Christianity.

III. The meeting

As is the case with every historical event, the break between John Wesley and Count Zinzendorf was the result of the convergence of numerous factors. Nonetheless, I shall attempt to show in this section that the particular historical event about which we are concerned had a theological disagreement as its root cause. In order to carry out the project it will be unnecessary to try to penetrate the deepest motivations of either of the men. It will become clear enough that each regarded the views of the other as a danger-

⁴¹ Ibid., 2:452.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:490-495.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:495.

ous misunderstanding of the essence of Christianity. Given the importance both attached to the truth of Christianity - each holding that apart from it human beings remain lost in darkness and sin, cut off from true life, separated from God in time and eternity - it is not difficult to understand the passion with which they responded to a perceived threat to that truth.

To posit a personality clash as the root cause of this breach in relations is to qualify this concern for the truth of the Christian message in such a way that one could, if the hypothesis were true, disregard the theological views in question. What would justify such disregard would be that their respective positions would cease to qualify as theology. They would be mere ideologies, set forth by the proponents to further personal ends, and therefore little worthy of serious attention as theology.

This position also leaves aside some important facts. The first of these is that Wesley and Zinzendorf barely knew each other.⁴⁶ This does not mean that they could not have had a personality clash. But if they had clashed in such a way, is it odd of me to expect some kind of personal remarks from each about the other, somewhere in their writings, which would reflect such a clash? Yet, such remarks do not appear. And in the conversation of 1741 the two men focused their attention on the substance of their disagreement, not on personal matters. The absence of any negative personal remarks and of discussion of the issues alone are important facts numbers two and three.

Martin Schmidt has written a very helpful account of what happened between Wesley and Zinzendorf in volume 2, part 1 of his theological biography of John Wesley.⁴⁷ I am in substantial agreement with his conclusions that in Wesley and Zinzendorf we see two fundamentally different ways of thinking about Christianity⁴⁸ and that at the root of their dispute were different understandings of how to read the Bible.⁴⁹ Professor Schmidt does not elaborate what the content of these two different approaches to the Bible might be. In a brief fashion, that elaboration will occupy us as we inquire into the meaning of their statements to each other in 1741. Let us turn now to this inquiry.

The two met for their conversation in the Gray's-Inn Walks on September 3, 1741. It was a Thursday.

⁴⁶ Schmidt, *Wesley*, vol. 2, part 1, p. 59.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-60.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Count Zinzendorf asked his younger contemporary: "Why have you changed your religion."⁵⁰ His question reveals the seriousness with which he regarded the matter they were about to discuss.

John Wesley protested that he did not know that he had changed his religion and wanted to know who had reported such a thing.⁵¹

Zinzendorf replied that he could see it in the letter Wesley had sent to the Moravians in Germany earlier.⁵² The Count was referring to the August, 1740 letter mentioned at the end of the preceding section of this paper.

One side of the theological dispute I intend to make clear appears in Zinzendorf's response to Wesley's query concerning how his epistle had shown him to have departed from his previous confession of faith. The count declared:

... you say there, that Christians are not miserable sinners: This is most false. The best of men are most miserable sinners, even unto death. If any speak otherwise, they are either manifest imposters, or diabolically seduced.⁵³

For talking about sin, or about the relationship between human beings and God, Zinzendorf's starting place is God's law. The law reveals what God righteously wills his creatures to do and to be. It commands and judges human beings. Because it is God's law, its commands and its judgments are absolute and universal. God reveals his commands, for Zinzendorf, in the Mosaic laws - this is the written law, and in Jesus' life and teaching - this is the law in person. And the latter, for Zinzendorf, is the clearer and more direct of the two, since it is a living law. As he put it in a 1747 sermon,

...the Savior says: I will that you be perfected, but I do not will that one should form, what is called among you an image of virtue, in conformity with people in the world, in conformity with a book in the world, in conformity with the Torah; I forbid you: you shall form yourselves

⁵⁰ For an English translation side by side with the original Latin text, cf., the Rev. Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 2 vols., (London: James Nichols, 1824), 1:481-488.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:481.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:482.

after me, as in conformity to the character and living law of the Father...⁵⁴

But precisely because it is God's will that human beings be perfected and actually be in conformity, perfectly, with the image of the Savior, the law condemns every person. The law assails people by vividly revealing the gulf that separates them from the perfection demanded by the law. And whether one is a Christian or not the judgment of the law is the same. Judged by its divine standard of absolute perfection, human beings are utter failures. As a result of this absolute and universal character of the law, which judges both act and motive, Zinzendorf asserted in 1738:

We cannot deny that we have sin in us, (I John 1:8), and that we carry it on us until we are in the grave. On account of this the body is dead for the sake of sin (Romans 8:10) and decomposition befalls it. In nature and in the mass of humanity the matter of the poison of sin is planted so firmly, that the healthiest thing would be for them to pass into the grave and to the state of worthlessness, and with that the Savior can make something better out of them.⁵⁵

Further, there can be no degrees of sin in this view. To fail to fulfill or carry out one small part of the law is to break it absolutely, and so rebel against God. One is either a sinner, or else one is perfect and righteous. Before God's law there is no ground in between. Thus, the Count continued in the same speech,

None is better on account of his little morsel of good, and none is more wicked on account of his many evils.⁵⁶

With the best works and actions we are sinners, as well as with the greatest sins.⁵⁷

All need grace, compassion, and a Savior's blood; nothing counts before God, neither our walking and running about, nor our repentance

⁵⁴ Nicholas Ludwig, Graf von Zinzendorf, *Hauptschriften*, ed. by Erich Beyreuther and Gerhard Meyer, 5 vols., "Gemeinreden I", (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962), 4:231.

All the translations of Zinzendorf's words are my own. I take full responsibility for them.

⁵⁵ Ibid., *Berlinische Reden*, 1:13-14.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1:21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1:22.

and self-reform, but rather his mercy, Christ's atonement, satisfaction and reconciling sacrifice on the cross.⁵⁸

In the law God commands human beings what to do and to be and human beings do not and are not in perfect obedience to him. Thus, with reference to the law, "the best of men are most miserable sinners".

As long as there remains a law that one should love God, as long as there remains one commandment; so long the human being remains an enemy of God ... The force of sin is the law, the person regards it continually as his Master, as his Orbilium, Tyrant, and Baal...⁵⁹

The office of the law, in Zinzendorf's understanding, is to drive people to despair of all works and to cause them to turn to Christ. The law of God makes people give up trying to please God and achieve the righteousness the law demands by their own doing and being and to cast themselves upon the grace of the Savior. In his "Pennsylvania Addresses", delivered in 1742, Zinzendorf made this point in the following way:

For all commandments and ceremonies were given for this purpose, that through them people be made lost, and that people should be brought into such a prison and dungeon that they all learned to wait for redemption, for the doors to open. That was the point and purpose of the many commandments in the Old Testament.⁶⁰

It is important to note that the Count articulated this position regarding the law and sin both before and after his dispute with Wesley. Moreover, he set it forth in the heart of Germany and on the edge of the wilderness in North America - two very different contexts and two different audiences. Whatever else one might say about Zinzendorf, one could not accuse him of inconsistency in his view of the law of God and the status of human beings in its light, or of equivocation in his use of the terms "law" and "sin".

When he told Wesley that any who teach that people can be something other than miserable sinners in this life "are either manifest imposters, or diabolically seduced", Zinzendorf was only speaking what he held to be the truth. To speak of a personal dislike for Wesley, or a personality clash of some kind between the two men, in order to account for the uncompromising character of his assertion is to obscure the real issue. Zinzendorf

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1:21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., *Einundzwanzig Discurse über die Augspurgische Konfession*, 6:184.

⁶⁰ Ibid., *Pennsylvanische Reden*, part 2, 2:215.

simply would not compromise in regard to the meaning of the human situation as he interpreted it by means of God's absolute, universal command. In his mind, such a move would have been a surrender of something essential to the Christian faith. This surrender would have entailed, for him, the distortion, the gross misinterpretation, of the gospel. He was completely unwilling to negotiate concerning a matter he held to be so critical to a proper understanding of Christianity.

After his assertion about the status of human beings before God's law, Zinzendorf brought up the one personal element of the conversation.⁶¹ He spoke of the contention between Wesley and the English Moravians. John quickly denied that it was a matter of personal enmity and added that the dispute was wholly doctrinal.⁶² It is both interesting and important that the Count took him at his word and asked him to elaborate.⁶³ Wesley replied:

- I feared lest they (the Moravians in England) should teach falsely: 1)
- Concerning the end of our faith in this life, to wit, Christian Perfection.
- 2) Concerning the means of grace, so termed by our church.⁶⁴

The remainder of the discussion revolved around the meaning of grace and holiness in the life of the Christian. Zinzendorf accepted John Wesley's stated reason for the trouble in the Fetter Lane Society. And accordingly, they dropped personal matters altogether and hammered at the doctrine which they approached so differently.

Having glimpsed Zinzendorf's understanding of God's law and its function, not to mention the situation of human beings before it, Zinzendorf's response to the term "Christian Perfection" becomes perfectly comprehensible. With the integrity of the gospel at stake, he thundered:

- I acknowledge no inherent perfection in this life. This is the error of errors. I pursue it through the world with fire and sword. I trample upon it: I devote it to utter destruction. Christ is our sole perfection. Whoever follows inherent perfection, denies Christ.⁶⁵

The Count had long held this view. And the violence with which he stated it to Wesley had nothing to do with his feelings about John. It had to do,

⁶¹ Moore, *Life of Wesley*, 1:482-483.

⁶² Ibid., 1:483.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1:484.

rather, with the danger Zinzendorf perceived in any misunderstanding of law and sin. If one were to think that one could become relatively good, or less a sinner, in God's sight by doing the works of the law; that is, if one were to suppose that one could become, on one's own initiative and strength, more or less righteous in relation to God by virtue of external acts in accordance with the law, Zinzendorf would give warning that such a notion is profoundly dangerous. In February 1738, long before Molther's arrival in England, Zinzendorf had explained his position in his Berlin speeches.

Many a one, who has had no opportunity and provocation to sin, and therefore cannot perceive whether his heart looks like this or like that, should he have time, opportunity, instruction, and capacity for it, he perhaps sins even more crudely than all others; because sins surely lie hidden one and all in his heart only more disguised, more concealed, more deceptive, and more dangerous.

Yes such people express great hostility toward the Savior, great unbelief, great fury over the decorum of grace.⁶⁶

The Count articulated much the same thing in a homily to a Moravian community in Germany just months prior to his September meeting with John Wesley. His three points in that homily concerned how it is that the gospel concerning Jesus Christ is 1) foolishness to some, 2) a scandal to others, and finally 3) the power of God to those who are being saved. About the second group Zinzendorf said:

To some the blood and cross of Jesus is a scandal. These are the people who want to be *religieuser*, more devout and pious, than is the usual practice in the world. And they are even greater enemies of the cross and death of Jesus than (those who view the gospel as foolishness) ... it cannot be given to these people to understand, that Christ had to become an offering for us, and that we are saved out of pure mercy and grace, consequently, that the holiest, most pious, most generous, the most blameless person is as widely separated from heaven, as the most infuriating evildoer.

This is a scandal for them. It causes in the depth of their being not scorn so much as it does resentment.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Zinzendorf, *Hauptschriften*, "Berlinische Reden", 1:20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, "Letzte sieben Reden vor seiner Reise nach Amerika", 2:92-93.

Clearly, Zinzendorf believed that John Wesley was one of these people. Despite the fact that Wesley preached that a person is saved only by the grace of God in Christ, the Count thought that John was endangering others by his call for growth in holiness toward Christian Perfection. To Zinzendorf this appeared as an attempt to place, not mere grace, but grace and growth in devotion, an increase in good works, and a decrease in outward sin at the very heart of Christianity. In other words, Zinzendorf saw Wesley's talk about holiness as a way of making the Christian message consist not of grace alone, but of grace and works.

Even when Wesley tried to explain that he believed it was precisely the Spirit of Christ that brought about perfection, Count Zinzendorf sharply rejected the idea.⁶⁸ Along with his rejection of any perfection understood as something that appears in the world through a person's activities and affections, Zinzendorf stated the second side of the theological dispute. According to him, the only thing to which the phrase "Christian Perfection" can properly refer is faith in the blood of Christ.⁶⁹ This is because, in his own words, "Christian Perfection is *imputed*, not inherent. We are perfect in Christ: in ourselves we are never perfect".⁷⁰

The person, who is a sinner separated absolutely from God from the perspective of the law, is declared righteous and perfect by God in and through Jesus Christ. But this imputed righteousness is alien and external to the self according to Zinzendorf. What is central is not what appears directly, or clearly and distinctly, in the present world, but what God declares concerning the sinner. At a 1746 synod of the Moravian Church, Zinzendorf asserted:

When the Savior created the world, he commanded: Let it be, and it was so. And when he reconciles the whole world in general, and each individual soul in particular, he also commands: Let it be, and thus is it clean.⁷¹

Zinzendorf takes the position that faith receives and accepts the gracious declaration of the Savior. Therefore, Christian perfection is faith, which rejoices in a righteousness not its own. Christian perfection is the perfect

⁶⁸ Moore, *Life of Wesley*, 1:484.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Zinzendorf, *Hauptschriften*, "Die an den Synodum der Brüder, in Zeist vom 11. Mai bis den 21. Junii 1746, gehaltene Reden", 3:11.

righteousness of Christ himself which is imputed to the believer through this faith.

The Christian, altogether pure by God's word, does not cease to stand under the law. Simultaneously the Christian is a sinner under the law of God and perfectly righteous by the gospel. This paradoxical expression of what it is to be a Christian - simul justus et peccator - is the direct consequence of a dialectical understanding of law and gospel.

Wesley's position on the matter is undialectical, and he does not see the Christian life as a grand paradox. While in the last portion of their discussion Zinzendorf presses his dialectical and paradoxical understanding, Wesley stands firmly with his undialectical and unparadoxical view. John stated the kernel of his undialectical concept of the law-gospel relationship very succinctly in his sermon "On Sin in Believers".

The sum of all is this: there are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul the 'flesh' and the 'spirit'. Hence although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet in a degree they are carnal.⁷²

It is this idea, grounded in a wholly undialectical way of thinking about law and gospel, which Zinzendorf fundamentally rejects. Rather than thinking of the Christian as standing under law and gospel wholly and simultaneously, Wesley envisions a continuum. At one end of the continuum is total wickedness and at the other is perfection. According to him, every person stands somewhere on this continuum between carnality and holiness - between wickedness and perfection. The law does not condemn absolutely, but tells us what we ought to do to please God and to move toward perfection. At the same time, the gospel saves, but does not make us perfect instantaneously. Perfection is a goal to work toward by the grace of Christ.

The Christian, in Wesley's view, is neither wholly sinner nor wholly perfect and holy. In Zinzendorf's view, the Christian is both simultaneously.

Thus, the explicit issue over which Wesley and Zinzendorf argued was the meaning of the new creature, or the Christian life in the world. But the issue which determined the position each took on that matter was the relationship between God's law and the gospel. Given the way each understood this relation, they were virtually bound to clash over their difference, since each also

⁷² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. in chief Frank Baker, 4 vols., "Sermons", (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:332.

took the interpretations of sin and holiness that their views of law and gospel logically entailed to be central to Christianity.

John Wesley's undialectical understanding of the relationship between law and gospel, and his consequent view that one could have faith and perfection (or sin) in degrees, could only look to Count Zinzendorf like an attempt to mitigate the absolute character of God's law, and to make salvation in some sense dependent upon the appearance of good works. Therefore, it could only look to him like a denial of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins by grace alone through faith alone. To Zinzendorf, Wesley's manner of talking about holiness had the disconcerting appearance of an attempt to elevate works of the law - mere civil righteousness - to saving status.

On the other hand, Zinzendorf's thoroughly dialectical understanding of the law-gospel relationship and his consequent paradoxical view of the Christian in the world could only look to Wesley like a denial of the doctrine of regeneration. And Zinzendorf's manner of speaking about the Christian as perfect in Christ could only sound like a dangerous denial that the outward life of the Christian changes, since Zinzendorf held that perfection is wholly imputed to the believer. Therefore, Wesley was bound to look upon the Count as an antinomian at the same time that Zinzendorf looked upon Wesley as a legalist.

Although the discussion continued, nothing new was added. The last portion consists of the two contrasting positions on the meaning of holiness, based on contrasting understandings of the relationship between law and gospel, standing at loggerheads. For example, the following is typical:

Z: [the Christian] is not more holy if he loves more, or less holy, if he loves less.

Z: Lead, if it should be changed into gold, is gold the first day, and the second day, and the third: ... but it is never more gold than in the first day.

W: But I thought that we should grow in grace!

Z: Certainly; but not in holiness...⁷³

While much more could be said concerning the nuances of the positions of these two Christians, it should be clear that no personality clash is necessary to account for their split. Neither could abide the distortion of something he considered essential to Christianity. For Wesley, this had to do with his long-held notion of holiness. For Zinzendorf, it had to do with the Christian as

⁷³ Moore, *Life of Wesley*, 1:485-487.

simul justus et peccator. However we set about appropriating the theological traditions in which we stand as Methodists and Moravians, let us at the outset be clear about the nature of the separation of our respective spiritual parents. And perhaps we ought to take seriously to heart their passionate concern for the integrity and truth of the gospel. For it was out of concern for that truth that they separated. As Count Zinzendorf once said:

One must only concern oneself rightly about Christ, but let all other things quickly go ... And Jesus must become our faith, love, hope, the only object and point of our life: all thoughts, speeches and desires must become fully his; thus they are right and have value in the presence of God on account of him. And so, with faith we must not tremble like the devils, but rather we can be sincere and confident, like children.⁷⁴

I close as Augustine concluded his monumental work *The City of God*, "I think I have now, by God's help, discharged my obligation ... Let those who think I have said too little, or those who think I have said too much, forgive me; and let those who think I have said just enough join me in giving thanks to God."⁷⁵

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im 18. Jahrhundert spielten John Wesley und Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf wichtige Rollen bei der Erneuerung der christlichen Kirche. Obwohl sie zunächst vieles gemeinsam hatten, trennten sich später die Wege der beiden Männer und ihrer Anhänger. Das entscheidende Ereignis, das jene Trennung zeitlich markiert, ist das Treffen zwischen Wesley und Zinzendorf am 3. September 1741 in London.

Die Zusammenkunft wurde von James Hutton arrangiert, einem englischen Anhänger Zinzendorfs. Ihr Ziel war die Verständigung über die in letzter Zeit entstandenen Konflikte innerhalb der >Fetter Lane Society<, doch traten tiefe Differenzen zwischen Wesley und Zinzendorf zutage. Die bisherige Forschung sah den Streit nicht zuletzt in persönlichen Konflikten

⁷⁴ Zinzendorf, *Hauptschriften*, "Berlinische Reden", 1:23.

⁷⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. by Marcus Dods, The Modern Library, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), p. 867.

begründet. Demgegenüber ist die Ursache aber stärker in den theologischen Differenzen zu sehen. Dies wird bei einer Rekonstruktion der Gespräche zwischen Zinzendorf und Wesley 1741 in London deutlich.

Die Untersuchung ist in drei Teile gegliedert:

Teil I schildert die Begegnung Wesleys mit den Herrnhutern auf der Überfahrt nach Amerika, seine Bekanntschaft mit Spangenberg und den Beginn der Freundschaft mit Peter Böhler, aus der die >Fetter Lane Society< entstand; und Wesleys Besuch bei Zinzendorf und den Herrnhutern in Deutschland, bei dem sich die ersten Anzeichen künftiger Unstimmigkeiten zeigten.

Der II. Teil der Darstellung zeichnet die Gedanken Wesleys und Zinzendorfs auf, die zu ihrer Londoner Begegnung führten. Die Darstellung konkreter Bedenken Wesleys gegen die Sitten der Herrnhuter leitet eine Diskussion über den entscheidenden theologischen Unterschied ein, der Wesley und Zinzendorf schließlich trennte. Der unmittelbare Anlaß zur Auflösung der >Fetter Lane Society< wird der Lehre des 1739 in London eingetroffenen Herrnhuters Philipp Heinrich Molther zugeschrieben, der kurz zuvor Lehrer von Zinzendorfs Sohn gewesen war. Wesley und seine Anhänger verließen die Sozietät, und die zunehmende Spannung drückte sich aus in einem Brief Wesleys an die Herrnhuter in Deutschland, in einer Veröffentlichung Zinzendorfs und auch im Gespräch zwischen Wesley und Spangenberg, über das in Wesleys *Journal* berichtet wird.

Der III. Teil der Untersuchung behandelt das Treffen von Wesley und Zinzendorf. In dem Gespräch vom 3. Dezember 1741, das rekonstruiert wird, treten die theologischen Meinungsverschiedenheiten klar hervor. Es wird deutlich, daß Wesleys Heiligkeitslehre und Zinzendorfs Rechtfertigungslehre nicht in Einklang gebracht werden konnten. Offensichtlich empfand Zinzendorf die Lehre Wesleys als eine Kompromittierung des reformatorischen *simul justus et peccator*, während Zinzendorfs Verwerfung von Wesleys "christlicher Vollkommenheit" Wesley als Verleugnung der Wiedergeburt erschien.