

AFTER THE FOUNDING FATHERS— Historical Case Studies: Zinzendorf & James Taylor

The departure of Bro. Witness Lee a decade ago on June 9, 1997 at the age of 91 marked the end of an era. Given Watchman Nee's passing 25 years earlier, it meant that the "founding fathers¹ of the Lord's present recovery" were both gone. Many Christian groups face a crucial transition when their¹ "founding father" passes away. The death of John Wesley (d. 1791) was a crucial juncture for Methodists. The decease of John Nelson Darby (d. 1882) was a turning point for the Plymouth Brethren. Similarly the departure of Bro. Witness Lee was a watershed event for the Lord's recovery. At such junctures crucial decisions are made which determine whether the Lord's move remains a vibrant force or is institutionalized.² Here we examine two case studies involving contrasting responses to the passing of the "founding fathers"—the Moravian Church's response to Zinzendorf's death and the Exclusive Brethren's reaction to the passing of James Taylor Sr.³ Both cases offer lessons for us today.

The Moravian Church after Zinzendorf's Departure

Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-60) has been identified as a crucial figure⁴ in the 18th century recovery of the church-life. Under Zinzendorf's leadership the Moravian Brethren established a vibrant church-life and a vision to bring Christ to all nations. W. Nee declares,⁵ *"They were the first group of brothers to go throughout the entire world to evangelize."* From small beginnings in Germany they pioneered the gospel's spread to slaves in the Caribbean, Inuit in Greenland and the First Nations of N. America. Their success in gaining "souls for the Lamb" from among "the heathen" was without parallel among Christians. In 1749 the Moravian Church was recognized as an "ancient Church" by the British government. This endorsement seemingly established their orthodoxy and allowed them to operate within the expanding British Empire. Yet shortly thereafter the Moravian Church faced a serious crisis.

Branded as an Extreme Sect, on the Brink of Financial Ruin

Count Zinzendorf was more of a visionary than a practical administrator. Under his leadership the Church's expansion was funded by personal loans. By the 1750's, expenditures were out of control and the Church was over-extended. This precipitated a spectacular crash in the Church's credit and reputation.⁶ Worse still, detractors pounced on this opportunity, issuing an orchestrated avalanche of books and pamphlets attacking Zinzendorf and the Moravian Church, further damaging their reputation. Key Evangelical figures like John Wesley and George Whitefield forsook them and joined in the attacks. The effect was nearly ruinous. Critics questioned Zinzendorf's orthodoxy, citing his radical emphasis on the Son among the Trinity and his depiction of the Holy Spirit as Mother.⁷ But it was his graphic "Blood and Wounds" theology which fuelled the most controversy.

Zinzendorf's Graphic 'Blood & Wounds' Theology

Christ's crucifixion wounds, especially His wounded side, were central to Zinzendorf's theology. *"The holy side of Jesus is a central point from which one can derive everything spiritual,"* Zinzendorf said.⁸ To him⁹ *"Swimming in the blood of Christ...[was] an expression of the soul's desire for eternal life in Christ."* The Moravians saw themselves as a community of believers living both literally and mystically within the side-wound of Christ. They were *"bees around the corpse of Christ"* and *"worms in the wounds of Jesus,"* worshipping the Savior's wounds *"so moist, so gory."* Few areas of their church-life were left untouched by their blood-and-wounds theology. They lived, worshipped, worked and loved within the wounds of Christ. ¹⁰*Children were raised singing praises to the side wound, and the dead were laid to rest in [Christ's] open side."* The graphic depictions and intense imagery of Moravian hymns were offensive to other believers¹¹ and embarrassing to themselves. They were portrayed as a weird Christian sect with heterodox beliefs. Under blistering attack from foes and former-friends,¹² in 1755 Zinzendorf retreated from England to his native Germany in disgrace. When he passed away five years later the Church had lost its credibility. Shunned by Christian leaders and engulfed in financial troubles it drew in upon itself. The future looked bleak. It was a crucial juncture.

New Leadership, Decisive Actions

The new leadership confronted a crisis calling for decisive action. The North American leader, Spangenberg¹³ (1704-92), was recalled to Europe where he rapidly emerged as the "first among equals" in the Moravian Church eldership. The Church assumed responsibility for the mountain of accumulated debt and introduced strict financial controls. It was a close call; several times the Church tottered on the brink of financial ruin. Yet they staved off bankruptcy and survived. More importantly, the elders introduced measures to clarify their stand, revive confidence in the Church and restore its good name. The Moravian leadership made statements

- Reaffirming their orthodoxy, they resolved to make the Heavenly Father a more central object of their teaching and worship.
- They apologized for extra-biblical teachings, admitting¹⁴ *"we have formerly expressed many private opinions and made such representations of the truth, both in our preaching and in our printed books, which have no foundation in holy Writ [Scripture] and have given offence."*
- Concerning Count Zinzendorf, they distinguished between his personal sentiments and the Church's stand. The leadership pointed out that ¹⁵ *"Moravians were not required to defend Zinzendorf's 'private opinions'."* Moreover, *"the Church wished to erase...the impression made by his sometimes unorthodox teaching."* They withdrew offensive published writings.
- They reaffirmed the primacy of the Bible. ¹⁶ *"The Holy Scriptures...shall remain the only standard and rule both of the doctrine and practice of the Moravian Church,"* they declared.
- They reiterated their mission goals—¹⁷ *"Our missions are the most important work of God, entrusted unto the [Moravian] Brethren by our Lord Himself."* Despite financial constraints, as the Lord led, overseas missions would not be reduced; they would be expanded.

From Radical Fringe to Mainstream Model

The reform measures worked. Shorn of its unorthodox trappings, the vital church-life and gospel endeavour initiated by Zinzendorf prospered. The Moravians published a History of Greenland, detailing their success among the Inuit. They launched a mission to the Inuit in Labrador, Canada. Mission outposts were also established in the American colonies, the Caribbean (St. Thomas, St. Croix, Antigua, Jamaica,) Surinam, Ghana, South Africa, Greenland, Algeria, Russia, Sri Lanka, Iran and Egypt. As Watchman Nee says,¹⁸ *"The Moravian Church became the strongest missionary body at that time. Their believers spread to every corner of the world."* Over the next 30 years (1760-92) the Moravian Church became the recognized authority in the field of foreign missions. When William Carey incited his complacent fellow-Baptists, the Moravians were his model. ¹⁹ *"See what these Moravians have done! Can't we Baptists at least attempt something in [faithfulness] to the same Lord?"* he challenged. As the 18th century closed, the Moravians had been successfully rehabilitated from the radical fringe to become the mainstream model of the missionary Church among evangelicals. The re-evaluation initiated by Spangenberg was instrumental in that restoration.

The Taylor Brethren—establishing the binding Authority of 'the Ministry'

The Exclusive Brethren's transition following the demise of James Taylor Sr. contrasts with that among the Moravians. The decease of James Taylor Sr. was a watershed event for the Brethren. For 50 years, Taylor's personal leadership had been universally recognized and accepted among them. In no other fundamental group was authority personally vested in a single leader to the degree it was in James Taylor. He was regarded as "God's elect vessel"—in today's term, the "Minister of the Age"—whose teaching carried apostolic authority. His ministry embodied God's up-to-date speaking. Taylor's death in 1953 created a vacuum with the potential of undermining the Exclusive Brethren's unity. To those concerned about the future²⁰ *"In his absence...the ongoing implementation and enforcement of his teaching appeared essential to the continuing cohesion of the group."* An unofficial group of prominent leaders arose to fill the leadership void. It served as²¹ *"an oligarchy working with a mutual aim of reinforcing the authority of previous ministry, particularly Taylor's."* Its actions were aimed at²² *"promoting the ongoing implementation of Taylor's ministry, alongside a move to establish beyond challenge its binding status."*

In contrast to the Moravians, there was no re-evaluation of Taylor's ministry among the Brethren after his passing; no reconsideration of his teachings in the light of Scripture. No distinction was made between Taylor's personal sentiments and the Church's stand. The leaders promoted the view that Taylor's ministry was to be embraced in its entirety. Doubtful doctrines, like the notion that the Holy Spirit should be an object of worship,²³ became dogma rather than being discarded. One leader warned those who were wavering, ²⁴*"If you are going to remain happily in fellowship with the Brethren...you must accept all Mr. Taylor's ministry."* The subsequent elevation of Taylor's ministry spawned the view that his²⁵ *"ministry...was on a par with Scripture. Indeed...its authority went beyond that of the Bible."* In effect, Taylor's ministry became a "third testament," among these Exclusive Brethren. The few "dissenters" who dared question the supreme authority ascribed to "the up-to-date ministry" were silenced or excommunicated. Nevertheless the unofficial self-appointed oligarchy lacked the muscle and cohesion necessary to maintain the uniformity which had characterized the Brethren under a single leader. Within a decade of Taylor's decease, his son, James Taylor Jr. emerged to claim his father's leadership mantle and enforce legalistic compliance to 'the ministry.' A new era of despotic control had begun. Today, 50 years after James Taylor's passing, this branch of Brethren is widely regarded as an exclusive Christian sect. It remains isolated, in-bred and irrelevant on the radical fringe of Christianity.

Conclusion—time for a re-evaluation?

The passing of the "founding fathers" offers a unique opportunity for Christian groups to re-evaluate their teachings and practices as they enter a new era. In the New Testament and Christian history each of the Lord's servants had their shortages and made mistakes. Peter denied Christ and returned to his former occupation (John 21). Even after Pentecost, on occasion he compromised with Judaism (Gal. 2). The Apostle Paul performed a Nazarite vow (Acts 21:18-26). Subsequent servants of the Lord, though mightily used of God, are not immune from error.²⁶ One historical pattern of transition is the Taylor Brethren where Taylor's ministry in its entirety became the authoritative standard to which compliance was demanded. Another, more promising example, is the Moravian Church where Zinzendorf's legacy was re-evaluated after his passing. That re-examination and re-statement of the Church's position saved the Moravians from being condemned to obscurity as a radical fringe cult. It rehabilitated them to be the mainstream model for evangelicals, especially in terms of mission. The impact of that "re-positioning" persists until today.²⁷

A decade has elapsed since Bro. Witness Lee completed his course on June 9, 1997. Perhaps it's time the Lord's recovery commenced a similar re-examination. Watchman Nee warned against perpetuating a work when God takes away His workers, violating the important Scriptural principle that²⁸ *"David 'served his own generation and slept' (Acts 13:36). He could not serve two."* In his final public ministry, Bro. Witness Lee said (concerning receiving believers)²⁹ *"We all made mistakes in this matter in the past, I myself included; I confess that, I had, for this matter and before the Lord, a very painful repentance. I am really sorry."* To some observers this parting word strongly suggests that the Lord's recovery should not simply continue with "business as usual" after W. Lee's passing. Rather it implies some re-consideration and modification is needed in the teachings and practices affecting our relationships with believers "outside the recovery." Other benevolent commentators suggest a more wide-ranging re-examination is necessary if the Lord's recovery is to avoid the stigma of being labelled a "Christian cult."³⁰ A recently published "Open Letter" by over sixty Evangelical Christian Scholars and Leaders also calls for such a re-evaluation.³¹

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APPENDIX: THE HOLY SPIRIT AS AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP [See the end of this document]

NOTES:

1. Although not a biblical term we use the expression "founding father." The "Phoenix Accord" (Feb. 2003) signed by certain leading co-workers-brothers from both the Great Lakes area and S. California contains a statement which refers to "spiritual fathers." It says, "We acknowledge Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as our spiritual fathers in the Lord whose ministries constitute the basis for the teaching and leading in the recovery today."
2. Watchman Nee warned against institutionalization, saying, "Once there was the blessing of the Lord, men organized something to contain the blessing. ...**When the grace of God comes, men immediately set up an organization to keep it. The organization remains, but the content is lost.** However, the cup cannot be broken; there are always those who are zealous to maintain the cup continuously. **Here is a matter of principle: The students of Wesley could never be equal to Wesley, nor could the students of Calvin match Calvin.** The schools of the prophets seldom produced prophets—all the great prophets were chosen by God from the wilderness. The Spirit of God descends upon whomsoever He will. He is the Head of the church, not we. **Men always think the living water is valuable and must be kept by organization, but it gradually declines through the generations until it completely dries up.**" (Watchman Nee, *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, Vol. 47, p. 57, emphasis added)
3. The transition of the Exclusive (Taylor) Brethren following the death of James Taylor Sr. may be particularly relevant to the present situation in the Lord's recovery because the similarities are striking. (1) Both Taylor and Watchman Nee were highly appreciative of John Nelson Darby's writings. Many of the teachings in the recovery can be traced back to the early Brethren, especially Darby. (2) The paths of W. Nee and James Taylor crossed in the 1930's. In 1932-35 the Taylor Brethren felt that "they received en masse a considerable number of Christians in mainland China, [i.e the local churches] who met in ninety Brethren-style meetings under the leadership of Watchman Nee. The links were short-lived..." [Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, (Paternoster, 2005) p. 40] The fact that (according to their realization) Taylor's group received the 90 local churches into their fellowship suggests they saw much in common between the two movements. (3) Some teachings recently emphasized in the Lord's recovery (e.g. the unique 'Minister of the Age,' the emphasis on God's 'up-to-date speaking through the ministry') were already taught among the Taylor Brethren during that earlier era (1930-50).
4. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-60) has been designated as "Minister of the Age" in the 18th century. See for example Ed Marks, *The Ministry*, vol.7, No. 6, (Aug. 2003) p. 13.
5. W. Nee writes: "By 1732 the earliest missionary body in the world was conceived, the so-called Moravian Brethren. ...They were the first group of brothers to go throughout the entire world to evangelize. Eighty five out of one hundred among them eventually became foreign missionariesThe Moravian Church became the strongest missionary body at that time. Their believers spread to every corner of the world." Watchman Nee, "What Are We?" *Collected Works*, vol. 11, p. 847
6. In an era where insolvent debtors were sent to "debtors' prison" it was a serious matter to default on a loan, especially for a Christian entity.
7. This has been referred to as the "feminization of the trinity" by the Moravians seen in their description of the Holy Spirit as Mother. [See Aaron Fogleman's article in the *William & Mary Quarterly*, 2003, pp. 295-332.]
8. "By Thine Agony and Bloody Sweat" A review of the book, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* by Craig Atwood.
9. Craig Atwood, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* pp. 100-1
10. "By Thine Agony and Bloody Sweat" A review of the book, *Community of the Cross*
11. John Wesley "called attention to [the Moravians] recent extravagant emphasis upon Christ's side wound, and urged all who had been fooled into joining the Brethren to desert them." [John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf*, p. 213]
12. Chief among "former friends" and supporters were John Wesley (see previous note) and George Whitefield. George Whitefield's 1753 public *Expostulatory Letter* to Z. ...was long-lasting in its prejudicial effect." (J. C. S. Mason, "*The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800*", p. 10)
13. August G. Spangenberg had overseen the Church's N. American operations.
14. J. C. S. Mason, "*The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England, 1760-1800*", p. 12
15. J. C. S. Mason, "*The Moravian Church*..." p. 12
16. J. C. S. Mason, "*The Moravian Church*..." p. 12 Spangenberg reassured readers "The Brethren's congregations do not take the writings of the Count or any man as their standard of doctrine; the Bible alone is their standard of truth."
17. J. C. S. Mason, "*The Moravian Church*..." p. 16

18. Watchman Nee, *Collected Works*, vol. 11, p. 847
19. A. J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer*, p. 194
20. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, (Paternoster, 2005) p. 123
21. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, p. 122
22. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, p. 121
23. Initially in 1942 and subsequently in 1947-8 Taylor began to teach that the Holy Spirit should be worshipped, just as the Son and Father were worshipped in the Lord's table meeting. [Earlier Brethren rejected this view because no explicit New Testament basis could be found for worshipping the Spirit.] In 1950 a new edition of the group's "Little Flock" hymnal was commissioned. A new version was rapidly produced, containing no less than 45 hymns solely addressed to the Holy Spirit. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, p. 120 [This topic is addressed in more detail in **the Appendix** below]
24. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, p. 123
25. Roger Shuff, *Searching For The True Church*, p. 123 The quote in context reads: "*This absolutist view of ministry...the proposition that such contemporary ministry, implicitly synonymous with the current voice of the Spirit, was on a par with Scripture. Indeed, by inference, its authority went beyond that of the Bible since the Scriptures contained only the written words of Christ, while current teaching in the power of the Spirit represented Christ's direct and personal words to the contemporary Church.*"
26. In Witness Lee's final public conference in March 1997 he said, "*Concerning the matter of receiving people according to God,...we co-workers in every place all need to learn, the responsible ones in every place all need to learn, the brothers and sisters in every place all need to learn.... too many things cause us to learn. **We all made mistakes in this matter in the past, I myself included**; I confess that, I had, for this matter and before the Lord, a very painful repentance.*" [translation from the Chinese transcript] Elsewhere W. Lee wrote: "*Although I have always intended to do the right thing, I have nevertheless made many mistakes, even some big mistakes. I certainly hate these mistakes, but I can testify that they have afforded God the opportunity to show forth His wisdom. Therefore, I can thank the Lord for all my mistakes.*" [W. Lee, *Life-study of Ephesians*, p. 273] Furthermore he said, "*My point is this—do not think that any leader could not make a mistake. Only the Lord Jesus, the unique Leader, never made any mistake. It is absolutely impossible for Him to be mistaken. However, all of us, including Peter, have made many mistakes.*" [W. Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move, Elders' Training, Book 7*, p. 113]
27. The Moravian Church exists until today. Recent figures indicate a total world-wide membership (in 1995) of 765,000. The largest concentrations are in Tanzania, S. Africa, Nicaragua, W. Indies—areas which were the subject of Moravian missions.
28. Watchman Nee, *Collected Works*, vol. 40, pp. 84-5. Bro. Nee says, "*David 'served his own generation,' and slept (Acts 13:36). He could not serve two! Where **today we seek to perpetuate our work** by setting up an organization or society or system, **the Old Testament saints served their own day and passed on. This is an important principle of life.** Wheat is sown, grows, ears, is reaped, and then the whole plant, even the root is pulled out....God's work is spiritual to the point of having no earthly roots...Men pass on, but the Lord remains. ...**God Himself takes away His workers, but He gives others. Our work suffers. But His never does. Nothing touches Him. He is still God.**" (emphasis added)*
29. See Note 26 above. This quote in context reads: "*Concerning the matter of receiving people according to God,...we co-workers in every place all need to learn, the responsible ones in every place all need to learn, the brothers and sisters in every place all need to learn.... too many things cause us to learn. **We all made mistakes in this matter in the past, I myself included**; I confess that, I had, for this matter and before the Lord, a very painful repentance. I am really sorry. I am really sorry toward the Body of Christ, also really sorry, not only toward the brothers and sisters among us, but even to those in the denominations, also really sorry toward them...*" We note that Brother Lee include himself in this apology, saying "**We all made mistakes...in the past, I myself included.**" Contrary to the claims of LSM's "blended brothers," W. Lee was **NOT** merely apologizing for the mistakes of the local churches. The LSM-DCP brothers state: "*What Brother Lee said in the Chinese-speaking conference was his observation and realization before the Lord **that the churches receiving his ministry had at times failed** in the past to live up to that standard: Brother Lee "shared with the saints his grieving **that the churches under his ministry had caused offence** through coming short in our practice of these truths." **"Repenting for Offending the Body of Christ—What Did Witness Lee Really Say?"** (article on AFaithfulWord.org)*
30. We understand that in this context the term "Christian cult" is being employed in a theological sense and **not** in a secular or sociological sense.
31. **60 Evangelical Christian Scholars' Open Letter (January 9, 2007) www.open-letter.org**

APPENDIX: THE HOLY SPIRIT AS AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP

I have been asked to elaborate on some statements concerning the Holy Spirit as an object of Worship in the article above. The specific statements which provoked discussion relate to the actions of the leadership of the Taylor Exclusive brethren after the passing of James Taylor Sr. in 1953:

Quote from the text above: "The leaders promoted the view that Taylor's ministry was to be embraced in its entirety. Doubtful doctrines, like the notion that the Holy Spirit should be an object of worship,²³ became dogma rather than being discarded."

The footnote cited in the text above, #23 explains: "Initially in 1942 and subsequently in 1947-8 Taylor began to teach that the Holy Spirit should be worshipped, just as the Son and Father were worshipped in the Lord's table meeting. [Earlier Brethren rejected this view because no explicit New Testament basis could be found for worshipping the Spirit.] In 1950 a new edition of the group's "Little Flock" hymnal was commissioned. A new version was rapidly produced, containing no less than 45 hymns solely addressed to the Holy Spirit. Roger Shuff, Searching For The True Church, p. 120"

FURTHER CLARIFICATION:

James Taylor Sr. proposed that the Holy Spirit should be worshipped, just as the Son and Father in the Lord's table meeting. That is, he taught that there should be a specific section in the communion service allocated to the worship of the Holy Spirit as such i.e. the Holy Spirit as a distinct "Person" of the Trinity. Based upon James Taylor's teaching the Taylor Exclusives' Lord's table meeting has "three sections"—(1) Worship & remembrance of the Lord (the Son); (2) worship of the Holy Spirit and (3) Worship of God the Father. This contrasts with the practice of the "Open Brethren" and our own practice.

At the typical Lord's table meeting (or "Lord's Supper") in the local churches we remember the Lord and display His death in the breaking of bread and drinking the cup. During this portion we remember the Lord and offer praise and thanks to Him. After this we usually have a section to worship the Father (including the praise of the Trinity.) The typical Lord's Table meeting in the local churches has these "two sections." **There is NO additional specific section in the typical Lord's table meeting for the worship of the Holy Spirit (as a distinct "3rd Person" of the Triune God.)** The only worship offered to the Holy Spirit is as One "Person" among the Three "Persons" of the Triune God (e.g. Hymn #6 *Glory, glory to the Father/ Glory, glory to the Son/ Glory, glory to the Spirit.*)

The LSM Hymnal, Hymns Reflects this Understanding

The Hymnal prepared by Brothers Witness Lee & John Ingalls & published by LSM entitled, Hymns reflects this teaching & understanding. I refer the interested reader to the "Table of Contents." There is a large section of Hymns devoted to "PRAISE OF THE LORD" (Hymns #56-241). There's also a substantial section devoted to "WORSHIP OF THE FATHER" (Hymns #10-55). There are a number of Hymns under "BLESSING OF THE TRINITY" (Hymns #1-9) including "His Worship" (Hymn #6) and "His Praise (Hymns #7-9). It is significant that THERE IS NO SECTION entitled "Worship (or Praise) of the Holy Spirit." Rather there is a section entitled "FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT." [Contrast the LSM Hymnal, Hymns with the Taylor "Little Flock" which contains no less than 45 hymns solely addressed to the Holy Spirit.] Why doesn't the LSM Hymns have this category? **Because we do NOT take the "Person" of the Holy Spirit as a distinct object of our worship.** [Contrast this with the teaching of some Pentecostal teachers, like Benny Hinn, who say the Holy Spirit has been "neglected" as an object of worship.]

To say that (according to the New Testament) the Holy Spirit should not be a distinct object of our worship at the Lord's table meeting **does NOT deny that the Holy Spirit is God. It does NOT deny that the Holy Spirit is one of the three "Persons" of the Triune God.** We are simply saying the New

Testament teaches us to worship God (e.g. Matt. 4:10; Rev. 14:7; 22:9), worship the Father (e.g. John 20:17, 19-23; Heb. 2:12) and to worship the Son (e.g. Matt. 8:2; Heb. 1:6). **It does NOT tell us to worship the Holy Spirit as a distinct "Person" of the Trinity.** According to the New Testament, the Spirit does not glorify Himself, rather "He will glorify Me (Christ, the Son)" (John 16:14). **The teaching of W. Nee & W. Lee, the LSM hymnal, *Hymns* and the practice of the local churches reflect this understanding.** They DO NOT match the teaching of the Taylor Exclusive Brethren.

Nigel Tomes, June, 2007