

THE BEGINNINGS OF EVANGELICAL MISSIONS

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ABSTRACT:

ONE OF THE BASIC TEACHINGS OF EVANGELICAL MOVEMENTS WAS THE DOCTRINE ON MISSION WORK. BY MISSION WORK WE UNDERSTAND THE SPREADING OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING TO PAGAN PEOPLES.

OUT OF ALL THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENTS, THE PURITAN, PIETIST AND MORAVIAN COMMUNITIES, WHICH WERE BORN IN ENGLAND AND BOHEMIA, WERE THE FIRST TO HAVE THE COURAGE TO PUT INTO PRACTICE THE TEACHING ON MISSIONS.

THE PRESENT WORK AIMS TO PRESENT CHRONOLOGICALLY THE EARLIEST HISTORICAL DATA PRESERVED TO THIS DAY, WHICH TELL US ABOUT THE FIRST EVANGELICAL MISSIONARIES, ABOUT THE FIRST AREAS THEY HEADED TOWARDS AND THEIR PIONEERING WORK THERE.

KEY WORDS: MISSION, EVANGELICAL, PURITANS, PIETISTS, MORAVIANS,

INTRODUCTION

The evangelical movement was a breath a fresh air for the Christian churches. It brought with it a number of changes both in theory and in practise. Church morality had become outdated and so had evangelism and mission work.

Until the 17th century, the Catholic Church had had the largest mission ministry in the world. However, given its extremely strict requirements, such as the rule of celibacy, and the use of Latin, this religion was difficult to practise in pagan areas, and the work proved largely ineffective². By the 18th century, Catholic missions had already begun to

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² According to Jonathan Hill, *Ghid al istoriei creștinismului*, (Oradea: Casa Cărții, 2008), 376

shrink while protestant ones (and mostly evangelical) were taking their place³.

This work will focus on the events of these two centuries and we will look at the main evangelical movements that started doing mission work, at the main areas chosen for missions and the reason why they were chosen, as well as at some prominent figures who organized and even braved the mission field.

THE PURITAN, PIETIST AND MORAVIAN MOVEMENTS - THE BASIS OF EVANGELICAL MISSIONS

The *Puritan* movement was first chronologically, both considering when the movement began and when the actual mission work started. The *Pietist* movement came along just a few decades later, followed almost immediately by the Moravian movement.

Although Moravians came last, their zeal and involvement in mission work has been unparalleled through out all of Christian history.

All through this paper we will often refer to Pietists and Moravians as one movement, because mission work for both movements originated in Halle.

PURITANS

Puritan ideas originate in the 14th century when John Wycliffe (1328 ? - 1384) wanted to revitalize the spiritual life of the church. Thus, he stood up against its abuses, and through intense work and much courage he offered the English people a translation of the New Testament in their own language⁴. From that point on, the English population began to get a hold of the truth which made it impossible for the manipulations of the church to still have the same effect, but more importantly, the people started to become aware of the truth. Following these changes in the church life, the doctrines acquired new meaning in the minds and hearts of people. At the same time, the doctrine of missions received fresh understanding and was much more widely practised.

Gisbert Voetius (1588 - 1676) was the first Protestant to develop a theology of missions. His ideas spread rapidly thanks to their incomparable essence, and the Puritans were the first to adopt, develop and apply them in various parts of the world.

Voetius's theology about missions had three objectives: the first was the *conversion*

³ Jonathan Hill, *Ghid al istoriei creștinismului*, 374

⁴ According to Earle E. Cairns, *Creștinismul de-a lungul secolelor*, (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 2007), 245-7.

of the Gentiles, the second, subordinated to the first was called *planting the church*, and the third, subordinated to the first two, was the *glory and manifestation of divine grace*⁵.

According to Voetius, missionary work is a primary theological truth which “comes from the heart of God”. His ideas are relevant even today. He says that mission work and persecution are factors which help the church grow and stay united. However, through prolonged “theologisation”, the church dries up and division among churches appears as a result of theological disagreements. The priest, pastor, religious order, and even the congregation are secondary authorities in mission work. Only the church is competent to plant another church.

When a church is planted, the old church must remain in close contact to the new one. However, adds Voetius, that does not imply that the old church will be the authority over the new church, which would be the case within the Catholic Church⁶.

All these ideas were later taken over and put into practice by the Puritans. One of their desires was for the church to grow and expand as much as possible. Although they did desire a quantitative growth, their major interest was in quality.

Motivated by this desire, in 1634 John Eliot decided to begin his mission work among pagans. In 1631, at 37 years of age, Eliot left England to settle in Boston to become the pastor of a local church. During his pastoral work, he felt God called him to go and preach the Gospel to the indigenous tribes. Subsequently, at 40, he started learning the Algonquian language and began his work among Algonquians. In his lifetime, he managed to translate the entire Bible which led to the conversion of many pagans who went on to start churches, and some of them even became pastors. At the end of his life of 87 years, Eliot left behind a solid work, and many churches that would continue his ministry⁷.

History tells us that John Eliot was the first Puritan to begin mission work. His example was followed by many other Puritans that history briefly mentions. His mission work began to grow extensively almost a century later, when the descendants of the Puritans, whom we encounter under a different name, developed the spirit of mission work through the revivals that they were directly involved in.

Thanks to the Great Revivals of the 18th century, which had at their core powerful speakers such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, John and Charles Wesley, and

⁵ According to David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, (New York:ORBIS, 1991), 256-7

⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 257.

⁷ According to Erroll Hulse, *Cine sunt Puritani?... și care e doctrina lor*, (Oradea: Făclia, 2002), 62.

William Wilberforce, the interest in mission work also grew⁸. Among these, the Methodists played a key role in missions⁹. Sometime later, towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, many missionary societies were founded - starting with William Carey's in England, but others also, in continental Europe – and these made the transition to modern mission work¹⁰.

PIETISTS AND MORAVIANS

Pietists

After Luther and Calvin, the Protestant church went through a time of decline; the Pietist movement came in response to the degraded state of the church. The Pietist movement had forerunners such as Arndt (1555 - 1621), Arminius (1560 - 1629), and Tellinck (1579 - 1629), who fought to repair the situation within the church, but their work was rendered more difficult by the Thirty Years' War (1618 - 1648). Once the war came to an end, the movement regained its course, which eventually led to the separation of church and state¹¹.

After the war, Philipp Jakob Spener (1635 - 1705), August Hermann Franke (1663 - 1727) and Nikolaus Ludwing von Zinzendorf (1700 - 1760) took over their forerunners' ideas and consolidated the Pietist movement. The Pietists greatly emphasized the spiritual life of the congregation, had a well-developed practical theology which asked for more social involvement. They were also sceptical toward theological scholasticism, in spite of having very well prepared people¹².

In what concerns mission work, Franke played the most important role. Privileged by his status as a professor at Halle University, Franke laid down the bases for the Halle Foundations where one could receive formal training for Christian mission work¹³.

Thanks to the Pietist spirit, strongly oriented toward practical work, and to the contribution of Spener and Franke to Christian missions, the Pietist ministry is to this day recognised as one of the pillars of modern mission work.

John Albery said that the first protestant mission abroad was offered by the Danish

⁸ According to Jonathan Hill, *Ghid al istoriei creștinismului*, (Oradea: Casa Cărții, 2008), 329-339

⁹ Hill, *Ghid al istoriei creștinismului*, 344.

¹⁰ Hill, *Ghid al istoriei creștinismului*, 374.

¹¹ According to Eduard Recordon și Philippe Tapernoux, *Biserica sau Adunarea, Vol.III. – Timpurile Moderne*, Dillenburg, GBV., 1993, pp. 57-60

¹² <http://www.etown.edu/YoungCenter.aspx?topic=About+Anabaptists+and+Pietists>

¹³ Ernest H. Wendland, *Pietis's World Mission Enterprise*

mission, later known as the Danish-Halle Mission. As we know, Halle is in Germany but given the massive support for missions that came from Halle and the large number of missionaries trained at Halle University, the mission received the name of the Danish-Halle Mission¹⁴.

The first Pietist missionary to have a major ministry in the pagan world was Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg. Due to the fact that he was one of the missionaries that marked the history of Pietist mission work, it is worth taking a moment to make a brief biography of his work.

Ziegenbalg was born on June 14, 1683 in Pulsnitz, Germany. He came from a poor family and his parents died when he was but a teenager, so that he was raised by his older sister, Anna. He was shy by nature, and the vanity of the world was not a goal for him. He spent most of his time studying, so much so that he developed a stomach illness because of his excessive focus on books. While searching for the answers to his questions he started corresponding with Spener and Franke. Their Pietist language made such an impression on him that in May 1703, Ziegenbalg enrolled at the Halle University where he found the answers to his many questions.

During his years at Halle, he organized different evangelism campaigns in Halle, as well as in other towns. His zealous ways and his evangelical spirit were proof of an authentic Pietist-Christian. During the church service in Berlin, he received the calling to enter the mission field abroad. Two years later, in 1705, on November 29, Ziegenbalg and his friend Pleutschau, 7 years his senior, were embarked on a ship to Tranquebar, India, although initially there was talk of the West Indies.

Tranquebar was a village on the Indian South-Eastern coast. It was chosen because although the rest of the territory was under Portuguese rule, 80 years before, the Danish had managed to obtain 15 square miles of territory around Tranquebar which now needed to be administered. That was why a fortress was built there by the name of Dansbourg. Among other constructions, a Lutheran church was also built and it was in good relations with the Halle school.

Seeing the need for evangelism among the foreigners, Luetkens requested help with his work, and so, in 1703, Ziegenbalg and Pleutschau were invited to go spread the Gospel to the pagan peoples. They accepted the invitation and in 1705, as mentioned before, they

¹⁴ Wendland, *Pietis's World Mission Enterprise*

embarked for India.

After many and long adventures, they made it to their destination and their work could now begin. However, the lack of language knowledge posed a problem. Thus, Ziegenbalg started studying Tamili, and Pleutschau Portuguese, the two main languages used in the area. Learning Tamili was not easy, but after a while, Ziegenbalg had read all the available books in Tamili and managed to compile a dictionary of 20.000 words. After approximately three years he was fluent in Tamili and together with his colleague, had already translated Luther's Catechism in both languages. His goal was to be able to translate the New Testament, but another issue that came up was printing, which was not available in all of India, which is why he postponed the printing of his translation until his first visit back to Europe. Until then they were forced to use only manuscripts¹⁵.

Their efforts were repaid. After the Gospel started being preached to the slaves, their congregation grew to 35 members in just a few years. Tranquebar had already become a known place for mission work and in 1709 a ship brought three more missionaries to help with evangelism¹⁶.

In 1714, having returned to Europe, Ziegenbalg printed everything he had translated, among which a book of Tamili grammar. Beside solving certain mission related issues, before returning to Tranquebar he marries one of Spener's relatives.

In that same period of time the Anglican Educational Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge incurred the expenses of sending a printing press to Ziegenbalg in Tranquebar, and with its help he was able to print and publish the Bible in Tamili¹⁷.

Five years later, because of his stomach illness, at just 36, Ziegenbalg dies leaving behind a beaten path for those wishing to serve God in a similar way¹⁸.

Moravians

The Moravian movement originates in Jon Hus's work, in Bohemia. Following the separation from the church in Rome, in Bohemia and Moravia began the persecution of those who had abandoned the Catholic faith. The Lutheran and Reformed churches, but mostly the assemblies of the brothers, bore the brunt of this. Moreover, they were forced to keep taking part in the Catholic rites which they considered as superstitious.

¹⁵ Ernest H. Wendland, *Pietis's World Mission Enterprise*.

¹⁶ Wendland, *Pietis's World Mission Enterprise*

¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Istoria creștinismului – Primii 3000 de ani*, (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 675.

¹⁸ Ernest . Wendland, *Pietis's World Mission Enterprise*.

Because of these persecutions, many brothers had to take refuge in different areas. Things continued this way for the Moravians for almost 100 years. In 1722, a young Saxon count, the count of Zinzendorf, found out about their suffering and decided to put one of his estates to God's service by offering it to the brothers as a place of refuge¹⁹.

Thus, on Zinzendorf's estate a very strong Christian community was formed, and it was based on prayer and singing. They prayed up to seven times a day, and even more on Sundays. The songs were another important element of their worship. Each day the community spent about one hour singing, and sometimes even their sermons were sung²⁰.

The context in which the Moravians lived, the fact that they had to abandon their fortunes, neighbours, relatives, only helped prepare them more for the mission work to which God was calling them and which entailed complete detachment from everything they owned.

Zinzendorf came from a rich German family and was born in Dresden on May 26, 1700²¹. His grandmother was responsible for a large part of his education and she was a godly Pietist. He went on to study at Halle where Spener was his teacher. In the previous subchapter we discussed that Halle was a mission-oriented school and that Franke had started here a foundation for the development of education and Christian mission. In addition to this, Zinzendorf's background had already started a fire in his heart for those who hadn't heard the Gospel yet.

During one of his trips to Copenhagen, in 1731, Zinzendorf met Anthony Ulrich, a black man from St. Thomas Island in the Antilles, who had converted to Christianity. Ulrich spoke to the Count about his people and of the need for missionaries to proclaim Christ to them.

Back in Herrnuht, Zinzendorf told the Moravians of his meeting in Copenhagen and of his desire to do something for the people of that race. History tells us that the Moravians were so moved by this, that on that very night two of them, Leonard Dober and Tobias Leupold, decided to go to the Antilles as soon as possible. And so it was that on August 25, 1732 the Moravian mission began, when the two brothers, Dober and Leupold, embarked

¹⁹ According to Adrien Ladrière, *Biserica sau adunarea Vol.II - Biserica în Evul Mediu*, (Dillenburg: GBV.,1993), 391 - 401

²⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Istoria creștinismului – Primii 3000 de ani*, (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 673.

²¹ *Christian History : Zinzendorf and the Moravians*. electronic ed. Carol Stream IL : Christianity Today, 1982; (Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996).

on their mission to the island of St. Thomas²². The beginning of the Moravian mission was spectacular, and it continued at the same rate for a long time. Very often, other small groups of missionaries went in different directions to spread the message of Christ to the ends of the Earth.

When Zinzendorf found out about ignorance of the Greenland Eskimos, he asked the Moravian brothers to put themselves in God's service and go and serve in that area. Their response was quick and in 1733 three brothers were already heading to Greenland. A year later, in 1734, the Moravians were headed to Lapland and Georgia; in 1735 to Suriname; in 1736 to the African Eastern coast (Guinea); in 1737 to South Africa; in 1738 toward the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam; in 1739 to Algeria; in 1740 they went to the North American Indians, Ceylon, Romania and Constantinople. In the book *Christian History: Zinzendorf and the Moravians*, the author tells us that the time from 1732 - 1742 was considered the golden age of Moravian mission and is unparalleled in the history of world Christian missions²³.

History tells us that in 1760, the year of Zinzendorf's death, 226 missionaries had already gone to 28 places, so they were sending out about 8 missionaries a year²⁴.

What made the Moravians, and their mission spirit, different from other evangelical movements, was their complete surrender to God's service and their complete detachment from all things material and even from their relatives. To them, serving God meant more than anything else.

The zeal for missions that often animated them made them not always take the necessary precautions, which lead to a number of issues such as the impossibility to adapt to the environmental conditions. That cost the lives of many missionaries shortly after reaching the mission field, all for the sake of Christ and Christ alone.

²² *Christian History : Zinzendorf and the Moravians*. electronic ed. Carol Stream IL : Christianity Today, 1982; (Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996).

²³ *Christian History : Zinzendorf and the Moravians*. electronic ed. Carol Stream IL : Christianity Today, 1982; (Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996).

²⁴ Edouard Recordon and Philippe Tapernoux, *Biserica sau Adunarea, vol. III. – Timpurile Moderne*, (Dillenburg: GBV., 1993), 67-71.

CONCLUSION

From this paper we see that the evangelical movement was based on other smaller movements, and that the most significant ones were the Puritan, Pietist and Moravian movements. These started independently from one another, toward the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century, but in just a century and a half they became known as one movement.

It is very important to note that each small movement, from its beginnings, strongly emphasized mission work, which helps us conclude that the evangelical movement is also a missionary movement. This is one of the reasons why the number of Evangelicals has grown so rapidly and on several continents.

One last note-worthy element is that the beginnings of evangelical mission work, through the work of the Moravians, reached even in those times levels that have become and remained peaks in the entire history of evangelical and Christian mission work.

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