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978-1-108-07106-2 - The History of Greenland: Including an Account of the Mission Carried on by the United Brethren in that Country: Volume 2

David Crantz

Excerpt

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THE
HISTORY
OF
GREENLAND.

CHAPTER I.

From 1733 to 1740. — Brief historical Sketch of the Church of the Brethren. — Circumstances which led to Missionary Undertakings. — Departure of the three first Missionaries to Greenland. — Their Reception at Copenhagen. — Voyage and Arrival in Greenland. Their Reflections on their Prospects there. — Primary Difficulties. — Attack of the Small-Pox. — 1734. — Wretched Condition of the Savages. — Arrival of two new Missionaries. — 1735. — Continued Labours of the Missionaries. — Visits made to them by the Heathens. — Solemn Engagement of the Brethren. — Their want of the Necessaries of Life. — Their Sentiments under Poverty, Contempt, external Weakness, and internal Pressures. — 1736. — Providential Supplies. — Increase of their Family. — Mr. Egede returns to Europe with Christian Stach. — Instance of a Heathen desirous to be converted. — 1737. — Return of Christian Stach with a new Assistant. — Failure of Supplies from Holland. — Accidents at Sea. — Discouraging want of Success. — Residence of four Weeks amongst the Savages. — 1738. — A Greenlander consents to stay with the Missionaries. — Kajarnak is awakened, and believes the Gospel. — Results of his Conversion. — 1739. — A severe Famine drives the Natives to the Brethren. — They become more desirous of Instruction. — Baptism of the first four Greenlanders. — Flight of Kajarnak.

THE present church of the United Brethren traces its origin to the ancient Bohemian church, known under the same appellation, which was founded in the middle of the fifteenth century by those persecuted Bohemians

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and Waldenses who were determined to resist the temporal encroachments and spiritual errors of the Papal See. Watered by the blood of its martyrs, John Huss and Jerome of Prague, and deriving its episcopal ordination from the Waldensian bishops, it long maintained the Christian faith in purity, and spread itself in numerous flourishing branches through Poland and Moravia. But the unremitting violence of its adversaries, and the opposition of the secular power, at length reduced it to a languishing condition; and after having been once snatched from the brink of ruin by the timely assistance of the Church of England *, it ap-

* For a detailed account of the oppressions exercised against the ancient Bohemian and Moravian church, see *Crantz's History of the Brethren*, and *Risler's Select Narratives*. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the deplorable condition of the Protestant episcopal church in Poland was well known in England, and an order of the privy-council was issued, March 10th, 1715, "for their relief, and for preserving the remainder of the said episcopal churches in Great Poland and Polish Prussia." Among the multitude of nobles and clergy driven from their native country in the reign of Ferdinand II., was *John Amos Comenius (Komensky)* who was minister of the Brethren at Fulneck in Moravia, from 1618 to 1627. In his exile, he wrote a compendious history of the Bohemian Brethren, to which he prefixed an *Address to the Church of England*, dedicating this book as his last will and testament to that church, to use it according to their own pleasure, and preserve it as a deposit for the posterity of the Brethren: "should God produce, (as he writes in the *Dedicatory Address*,) even out of these concussions, that which is better than we all can think: to wit, as he hath promised, that the gospel may at last pass away from sharply chastised Christendom to the other nations of the world; that so as it was long ago, our stumbling may be the enriching of the world, and our diminishing the riches of the Gentiles. *Rom. xi. 12.*

"The consideration of this so-much-to-be-admired eternal providence, doth greatly allay the grief which I have taken by reason of the ruin of the church of my native country; of the government of which, so long as she kept her station, the laws are here described, and set forth in view. Even myself, alas! being the very last superintendent of all, (senior bishop or president of the synod,) am fain before your eyes, O churches! to shut the door after me.

"But yet I would not have these things to be so taken, as if, in my solitude, and by my departure hence, I feared or foretold the final end of the church in my country. I know that the church, being founded upon the rock of eternity, cannot fail, viz. the Catholic. And yet examples testify, that particular churches are sometimes overthrown

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CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN.

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peared to be totally extinct in the beginning of the eighteenth century. At that critical period, however, it pleased God suddenly to revivify the dying flame. A number of Moravian emigrants formed a new settlement at Herrnhut in Upper Lusatia in 1722, where they revived the ecclesiastical institutions and discipline of their ancestors, and united in a solemn covenant to follow Christ as their Head and Master, even under contempt, persecutions, and death.

This renovated church began at an early period to turn its attention to the deplorable state of the Heathen world, deeply sensibly of the duty under which it lay,

by the hand of an angry God ; that according to his good pleasure, others may be planted, or else the same elsewhere.

“ This I, with full trust, expecting from the everlasting goodness, (if notwithstanding, God should call me to depart out of this life without present comfort,) will say with the last of these seven Maccabean Brethren martyrs, *Let the anger of the Omnipotent, which is come upon our generation for our sins, rest upon me, (or cease in me,) and my brethren.* 2 Mac. vii. 38.

“ But to you, Friends, after the example of our eternal Master, we commend our well-beloved Mother, the Church. Take you now the care hereof in our rooms, whatever it shall please God to do unto her, whether to restore her amongst us, or, when she is deceased at home, to raise her to life elsewhere. You have just cause indeed to love her, even when dead, who whilst yet living, went before you in good examples of faith and patience, even now unto the third generation.

“ God himself, when he took away and laid waste his people’s land, city, and temple, because of their unthankfulness for his blessings, would still have the basis of the altar to be left in its place, upon which after ages, when they should be returned to themselves and to God, might build again. If then, by the grace of God, there hath been found in us, as wise men and godly have sometimes thought, any thing true, any thing honourable, any thing just, any thing pure, any thing to be loved, and of good report, and, if any virtue and any praise, care must be taken that it die not with us when we die ; and, at least, that the very foundation be not buried in the rubbish of present ruins, so that the generation to come should not be able to tell where to find them. And indeed, this care is taken, and provision is made on this behalf, by this our trust confided to your hands.”

An English translation of this book was published in 1661, and the original Latin was reprinted in London in 1710.

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CAUSE OF MISSIONARY UNDERTAKINGS.

to carry forth the light of the gospel, and, in reliance on the Divine Providence, endeavour to dispel some portion of that gross darkness which covered the nations. After maturely considering this important object, it sent out its missionaries in simplicity and lowliness, poorly supplied, indeed, with externals, but armed with a lively zeal, and an intense strength of faith. The seed which they were favoured to sow, grew mightily by the blessing of God, and prospered, till after the silent but most persevering labours of many years, its produce filled the wilderness with its fragrance, and gladdened the desert places of the earth with its beauty. There could not well be imagined an apter emblem of the Brethren's missions, than the grain of mustard seed, which "grew and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in its branches." From very small beginnings, an assembly of about six hundred poor exiles, did this great work commence in hope, and the several flourishing settlements in various parts of the globe now testify, that the strength of the Lord has accompanied the weak endeavours of his servants, that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, and that the feeblest instruments are sometimes made use of to perform the most signal exploits in extending the kingdom of the Cross.

Nicholas Lewis, Count Zinzendorf, a German nobleman, equally distinguished by original genius, learning, and piety, was the first promoter of missionary undertakings among the Brethren. An earnest desire to be instrumental in spreading the Word of Life among foreign nations, had taken possession of his mind during the course of his university studies, but was not called into exercise till the year 1731, when he attended at the coronation of Christian VI., at Copenhagen. In that city he met with two Greenlanders who had been baptized by the venerable Mr. Egede, and learned with pain that the mission to Greenland was to be relinquished. His domestics also conversed with a baptized negro from St. Thomas, who earnestly entreated

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DEPARTURE OF FIRST MISSIONARIES.

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that Christian missionaries might be sent to his enslaved countrymen. He appeared peculiarly interested in the fate of his sister, whom he had left behind in that island, and who, as he said, frequently besought the great God to send some one who might show her the way to Him. The Count afforded him an opportunity of stating his case in a public meeting of the Brethren at Herrnhut, where his representations and entreaties proved so effectual, that two of those present, Leonard Dober and one of his confidential friends, offered to go St. Thomas, though under the persuasion that they would be obliged to sell themselves for slaves in order to gain access to the negroes. They set sail August 21st, 1732, ten years after the building of Herrnhut, when the congregation consisted of no more than six hundred poor exiles, including women and children.

At the same time the plan of a mission to Greenland was also agitated. As that country was under the Danish government, which was very friendly to the Brethren, it appeared to them the more eligible for the establishment of a mission; and the forlorn state of the poor natives, who had already received Christian instruction from Mr. Egede, loudly called upon their compassion. Matthew Stach and Frederic Boehnisch, two young men, being at work together in preparing a piece of ground for a burial-place at Herrnhut, in the course of conversation, found that they had both, unknown to each other, formed the desire of going as missionaries to Greenland. They therefore proposed themselves for this service; but the delay of a year intervening, before their offer was accepted, and Boehnisch having, meanwhile, undertaken a considerable journey, Christian Stach consented to accompany his cousin. These two missionaries, along with Christian David, the principal agent in the Moravian emigration, who intended to return to Europe after the settlement of a mission, set out from Herrnhut, Jan. 19th, 1733, attended with numberless good wishes from their Brethren.

The congregation which was as yet totally inexperienced in missionary affairs, could give them no in-

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RECEPTION AT COPENHAGEN.

structions. They were but the second company who had to make the untried experiment, whether the heathen would receive the message of peace from their Creator and Redeemer, and were therefore left to act in every circumstance as the Lord and his Spirit should lead them. It was only suggested that they should cherish an affectionate brotherly love; that they should respect the venerable Christian David, as a father, and profit by his advice; and that they should offer themselves as assistants to that long-tried Apostle of the Greenlanders, Mr. Egede, but if he did not want their help, they should by no means interfere in his labours.

With scarcely any provision for their journey beyond the most necessary articles of clothing, our missionaries travelled by way of Hamburgh, to the Danish capital. Here they met with a kind reception from Professor Ewald, member of the College of Missions, and M. Reuss, his Majesty's chaplain, and from several other friends to whom they had been recommended. Their intention of going to Greenland could not, however, but be regarded as a visionary scheme, particularly while the fate of the Danish mission at *Godhaab* was yet in suspense. But they took little notice of these gloomy forebodings, and cast their confidence on Him, who, as they believed, had called them to the work, and would support them in the prosecution of it. They learned shortly after that his Majesty had granted leave for one vessel more to sail to *Godhaab*, and that M. Pless, the first lord of the bed-chamber, had engaged a merchant of the name of Severen, to send a trader to *Disco Bay*, on trial. Though the latter would be ready to sail almost immediately, they preferred, after deliberate consideration, to wait for the King's ship, and made their application to this effect to the chamberlain.

Their first audience with this minister was not a little discouraging. Indeed it might well seem strange to him, that young laymen who possessed no advantages of study or experience, should hope to succeed, where the indefatigable exertions of the learned and pious

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Egede had accomplished so little. But being convinced by a closer acquaintance of the solidity of their faith, and the rectitude of their intentions, he became their firm friend, willingly presented their memorial to the King, and exerted all his influence in their behalf. He is said on this occasion, to have made use of the following argument ; that God has in all ages employed the meanest and apparently the most despicable instruments for accomplishing the grand designs of his kingdom, in order to lead men to ascribe the honour to him alone, and rely not on their own power or penetration, but on his hand of blessing. His Majesty, moved by the representations of his minister, was pleased to accept their overtures, and wrote with his own hand a recommendatory letter to Mr. Egede.

The chamberlain also introduced them to several persons distinguished by rank and piety, who liberally contributed towards the expense of their voyage and intended settlement. Being asked one day by his Excellency, how they proposed to maintain themselves in Greenland, they answered that they depended on the labour of their own hands, and God's blessing, and that not to be burdensome to any one, they would build themselves a house and cultivate the ground. It being objected that they would find no wood to build with, as the country presented little but a face of barren rock : "Then," replied they, "we will dig into the earth and lodge there." "No," said the chamberlain, "to that necessity you shall not be reduced ; you shall take timber with you for building a house : accept of these 50 dollars for that purpose." With this and other donations they purchased poles, planks, and laths ; instruments for agriculture, masonry, and carpenter's work ; several sorts of seeds and roots ; implements of fishing and hunting ; household furniture, books, paper, and provisions.

Thus equipped they took an affecting leave of the court where they had been so hospitably entertained, and embarked on the 10th of April, on board the King's ship, *Caritas*, captain Hildebrand. The con-

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8 VOYAGE AND ARRIVAL IN GREENLAND.

gregation at *Herrnhut* had already adopted the custom, of annually compiling a collection of Scripture texts for every day in the year, each illustrated or applied by a short verse from some hymn. This text was called the *Daily Word*; it supplied a profitable subject for private meditation, and a theme for the public discourses. It has been frequently observed that the text appointed for a day distinguished by some remarkable event, has had a striking coincidence with that event. Thus the Daily Word on that 10th of April, when our Brethren set sail upon a mission which so often appeared to baffle all hope, was, (Heb. xi. 1.) *Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

*“ We view Him whom no eye can see
With Faith’s keen vision steadfastly.”*

In this confidence they set sail, nor did they suffer themselves to be confounded by any of the unspeakable difficulties of the following years, till they and we at last beheld the completion of what they hoped for in faith.

They sailed by Shetland, April 22d, passing there out of the North into the West Sea, or Long Reach, and after an expeditious and agreeable voyage, entered Davis’s Strait, in the beginning of May. Here they encountered a field of floating ice, while enveloped in a thick fog, but the next day a terrible storm arose, which dispersed the ice, and freed them at the same time from their fears. On the 13th, they came in sight of the coast of Greenland, when a violent tempest of four days’ continuance, preceded by a total eclipse of the sun, drove them back more than 60 leagues. May 20th they cast anchor in *Baal’s River*, after a voyage of six weeks, and joyfully welcomed the snowy cliffs and savage inhabitants of a country, which had so long been the chief object of their wishes. The Word of the Day was: *“ The peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”* By this they were frequently encouraged to a

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REFLECTIONS ON THEIR PROSPECTS. 9

peaceful and believing perseverance during the first ensuing years, amidst all the oppositions they met with, and the slender prospect of the conversion of the Heathen. The sight of the first Greenlanders, though they could not speak a word to them, was accompanied with sensations of lively pleasure: their pitiable condition pierced them to the heart, and they prayed the Lord, the Light to enlighten the Gentiles, that he would grant them grace, wisdom, and power, to bring some of them at least out of darkness into his marvellous light,

Immediately on their landing they repaired to Mr. Egede, and delivered the letters of recommendation, which they had, received from several members of the College of Missions. He gave them a cordial reception, congratulated them on their undertaking, and promised them his assistance in learning the language. They next fixed upon a spot for building on, the nearest habitable part of the coast, to which they afterwards gave the name of *New Herrnhut**, and having consecrated it with prayer, began to run up a Greenland hut of stones and sods, in which they might find shelter, until they had erected a wooden house. They bought an old boat of the captain, in which they intended to procure themselves food by fishing. It was an early season, and the snow disappeared a month sooner than usual; yet the cold was so severe, that the turf often froze in their hands. On the 6th of June, they had so far finished their hut, that they could enter it, pulling down the tent of boards, in which they had hitherto lodged. Directly after the ship had sailed, June 15th, they laid the foundation of their proper dwelling-house, and advanced so far in five weeks, that one room was habitable. They likewise began to build a house for such Greenlanders as might resort to them for instruction, but it was long before there was any use for this.

The honest warmth and confidence of the missionaries in this period of their labours, appear from the

* *Herrnhut* signifies *The Lord's Watch*.

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10 REFLECTIONS ON THEIR PROSPECTS.

following letter of Matthew Stach, to his friends in Europe: — “I address you, my Brethren, from a country where the name of Jesus is not yet known, and where the Sun of Righteousness has not yet arisen. You live in the bright noon-day; the sun is risen upon you. Has he now warmed your hearts? Or are some of you still frozen? The light shines round all of you; but for him who has not yet arisen to walk in the light, it were better to have lived in Greenland, and never heard of Jesus. For to know what is good, and not to act accordingly, is a reproach to the truth. The heart of Jesus burns with love for the salvation of men; and will he suffer a soul that pants after him, to seek for four, or five, or six years without attaining? I cannot believe it, for I have experienced the contrary. When I sought him with all my powers, and all my powers were exhausted, my eyes still swam with tears, and my heart palpitated with desire. And when even the fountains of my eyes were dried up, and my heart had no more strength to beat, the friend of sinners came and healed my wounded conscience. This is not a mere imagination, but a divine power which occupies and fills the heart.

“But you who have known the Saviour and been washed in his blood, may you be established in grace! And as you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, go on in the strength of that meat, and conquer in the name of the Lord. My heart is listed with yours under the banner of the cross. To Christ will I live, to him will I die; for nought but my Saviour who rescued me from death can give me pleasure. Now, my Brethren, grow and flourish in the blessed flock of God, which he has planted as a sign among the nations in these last days. The salvation is great, and the harvest will be glorious, when we have sown much seed and watered it with many tears. Let us animate each other to follow the bleeding lamb without the camp. Rejoice not that you have trampled the old serpent under your feet, but rejoice that you are hid in the clefts of everlasting love. Let your loins be always