

PROLOGUE: THE HOLE

At the south end of Main Street in the historic district of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, sits the single brothers' house. This large stone building was completed in 1748 as the residence for the single men of the Moravian community. When I first saw the building while visiting Bethlehem with my parents in the 1980s, a large, gaping hole was prominently visible in the center of the north façade, above the two entrance doors. It marked the location of a stone with an inscription that adorned the brothers' house when it was first built. The original inscription read, "Vater und Mutter und lieber Mann, habt Ehr vom Jünglings Plan" (Father and Mother and dear husband, be honored by the young men's plan). On the south side of the brothers' house a sun dial was placed with the text "Gloria Pleurae" (glory be to the side wound).¹

Both texts summarize the theology of the Moravians at the time of construction of the brothers' house: the Trinity was described as the Holy Family, with God the Father, the Holy Ghost as the Mother, and Christ as the husband. Christ's side wound, the last wound Christ suffered on the cross when the Roman soldier pierced his side to see if he had already died (John 19:34), was the focus of Moravian devotion at the time.

Soon, however, Moravians became embarrassed by the text. A Swedish visitor in 1754 noted how Thomas Benzien, one of the Bethlehem pastors, evaded questions about the text of the inscription.²

Pastor Unander came forward with the serious question, "What is the meaning of the inscription which is read over the door of the unmarried Brethren's house, '*Vater und Mutter und lieber Mann*,' etc.?"

"Ah," answered Mr. Benzien, "that is something that he devised who built the house. I, for my part, have never approved of it."

I fell into the conversation, and said, "Be assured, gentlemen, that although the words are altogether mystical, yet we well understand their meaning."

"I doubt not, gentlemen," he answered, "that you do indeed understand it, and that you are not ignorant of the Brethren's arrangements in other places."

"But," said Pastor Unander, "would it not be better if those words did not stand there?"

"Yes," said he; "so I also think that it would be better. Yet no one can doubt that the man who first put that up had a good meaning with it."

It was undoubtedly Mr. Benzien's idea that that should be kept among the secrets of the Brethren, and not stand before the eyes of every one, whereby their Society might be misjudged. For that he is one of their chief men, who approves of all their inventions, cannot be doubted.³

Did Brother Benzien's uneasiness relate to the fact that the Holy Spirit was called Mother or was it the fact that Christ was referred to as the husband of the single men? In any case, at some point during the eighteenth century the stone was removed so that no one would be offended by the text, leaving a gaping hole in the façade. In later years the brothers' house was stuccoed over, and the hole disappeared from sight.

When the brothers' house was restored to its original appearance in the 1960s and the stucco was removed, the empty hole reappeared. For many years the hole remained prominently visible, reminding passersby of the way Moravians treated the history of the late 1740s.

When I moved to Bethlehem in early 2004, I noticed to my surprise that the hole had been filled with a replica of the original stone, bearing the same inscription that once caused such great embarrassment to the Moravians. Today the inscription is incapable of causing much discomfort: the number of people in Bethlehem who can read German is limited nowadays, and who would really understand the meaning of such a cryptic text?

The tablet, however, is representative of how Moravians have dealt with their history and theology of the late 1740s. After first giving it one of the most prominent locations in the community, Moravian leaders chipped the stone away and discarded it, leaving an empty hole of taboo and ignorance. The stone was later replaced, at a time when few people could grasp its meaning except for those interested in unraveling one of the enigmas of Moravian history.

It is the piety of the late 1740s and the subsequent embarrassment about this piety that form the subject of this book.