

# This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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## Schleiermacher - Moravian of a Higher Order

*175 years ago the famous German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, died in Berlin on February 12, 1834. Schleiermacher, who is sometimes called "the Father of Modern Protestant Theology," once characterized himself as a "Moravian of a Higher Order." This month we will look at Schleiermacher's connections with the Moravian Church.*

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the importance of Schleiermacher's Moravian background for his theology and ideas. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher was born on November 21, 1768, in Breslau, Germany, as the son of a Reformed army chaplain. When Schleiermacher was almost ten years old, his father was introduced to the Moravians while visiting the Moravian community of Gnadendorf. The Schleiermachers got very interested in Moravian piety and decided to send their children to Moravian schools.

Friedrich Schleiermacher went to the Moravian school ("Paedagogium") in Niesky in June of 1783, where he was educated until he graduated in September of 1787. At that time the Theological Seminary of the Moravian Church was located in Barby, where future ministers of the church were trained. After graduation Schleiermacher joined other Niesky graduates to begin his theological studies in Barby. Schleiermacher would say later that he "spent almost three of the best years of his youth" in Barby.

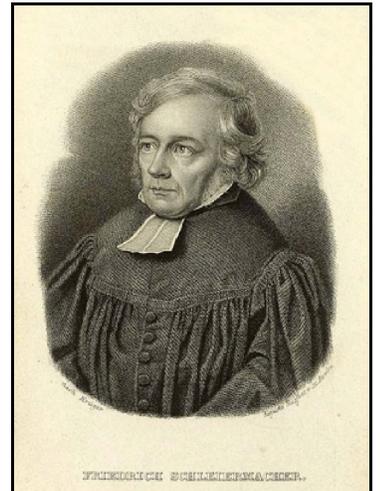
Schleiermacher enjoyed the strong sense of community at the Seminary. Together with a group of other students, he read the works of the philosophers of their day. They had to secretly acquire these books, because Seminary leaders did not want them to become "infested" with modern ideas. It soon became clear to Schleiermacher that the theological training he received in Barby did not answer all his theological questions: Why would God, who obviously created humankind as imperfect beings, want to punish humankind for not being perfect? Why was it necessary for Jesus to die in order to reconcile God with humankind, especially since Jesus never said his death was to be understood as such? The Moravian teachers in Barby were unable to answer these questions and considered Schleiermacher's doubts as "disbelief." On April 14, 1787, Schleiermacher left the Moravian

Seminary in Barby; however, he remained in contact with his fellow students and with his sister, Charlotte, who lived in the sisters' house in Gnadendorf and later in Berlin.

Schleiermacher later became an important theologian and philosopher; for many years he was a professor of theology at the University of Berlin. Although he had soon realized the shortcomings of Moravian piety, he also recognized how the Moravians had influenced him. Modern scholarship sees

the roots of some aspects of his work in his Moravian upbringing, especially his thinking about such ideas as experience and community. Schleiermacher himself remained aware of his Moravian background. In 1802 he wrote to his publisher: "Here [with the Moravians] my awareness of our relation to a higher world began... Here first developed that basic mystical tendency that is so essential to me and saved and supported me during all the storms of scepticism. Then it germinated, now it is fully grown and I have become a Moravian again, only of a higher order." Schleiermacher died in Berlin on February 12, 1834.

Sources: Dorette Seibert, *Glaube, Erfahrung und Gemeinschaft: der junge Schleiermacher und Herrnhut* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).



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