

# This Month in Moravian History

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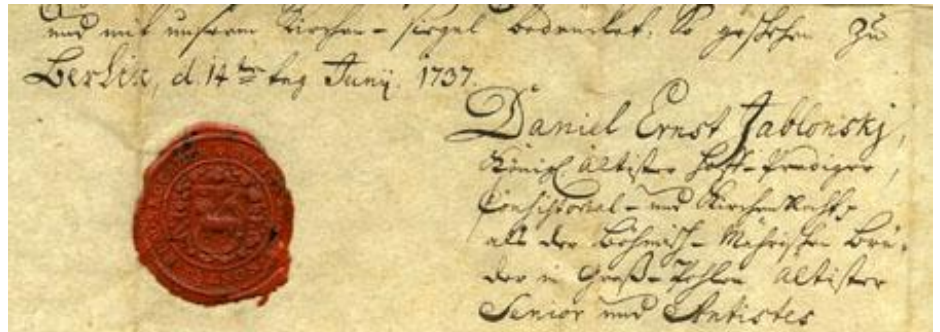
## David Nitschmann's Bishop's Ordination, 1735

On March 13, 1735, David Nitschmann was ordained as the first bishop of the renewed Moravian Church. Though not much publicity was given to it at the time, this ordination had major consequences for the later development of the Moravian Church.

During the 1730s the Moravian movement spread beyond the original community of Herrnhut. With Moravians working as missionaries on various Caribbean islands, in Greenland and in Lapland, it became necessary to ordain missionaries as ministers so they could baptize and administer Holy Communion. Herrnhut was officially part of the Lutheran parish of Berthelsdorf during these years, so the Berthelsdorf minister was responsible for administering the sacraments. Beyond Herrnhut this was different. What were the missionaries to do when they needed to baptize someone? Moravian missionaries were mostly craftsmen and not ordained theologians. In order to be able to ordain missionaries, a bishop was needed.

One possibility could have been to ask bishops from other denominations to ordain Moravian missionaries. However, Zinzendorf chose a different solution. He knew that Daniel Ernst Jablonski, Reformed minister in Berlin and grandson of Johann Amos Comenius, had a positive opinion of the Herrnhut community. Jablonski was also a bishop of the Polish branch of the Unity and Zinzendorf wanted Jablonski to transfer the apostolic succession to the renewed Moravian Church.

It is not completely clear why Zinzendorf selected David Nitschmann to be ordained a bishop. Nitschmann, who was 38 years old at the time of his ordination, must have proven his usefulness on many occasions.



Copy of the ordination certificate, David Nitschmann Papers, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem.

He was born in Zauchtenthal (Suchdol) in Moravia in 1696. After he joined the community of Herrnhut in 1724 he undertook several trips to Moravia to visit with other Protestants. Zinzendorf sent him on missions to England (1728) and Livonia (1729), and he accompanied Zinzendorf to the coronation of the King of Denmark in 1731. Together with Leonhard Dober, Nitschmann went to the Caribbean island of St. Thomas in 1732 and he investigated possibilities to settle Moravians in northern Germany in 1734. Furthermore, Nitschmann, who was a carpenter and not an academically trained theologian, met the apostolic ideal of the craftsman preacher and missionary, who had no education but an awakened heart.

In March of 1735 Zinzendorf requested Jablonski to ordain David Nitschmann as "Senior and Overseer" and to avoid any publicity. So when Jablonski performed the ordination on March 13th it was conducted not in a church but in Jablonski's office. The only witnesses present were two members of the Bohemian congregation in Berlin.

With Nitschmann's ordination, the episcopate of the Unitas Fratrum was transferred to the renewed Moravian Church of

Herrnhut. Unlike the bishops of the Unitas Fratrum, however, Moravian bishops did not have any administrative authority. According to his ordination certificate David Nitschmann's main responsibility was to visit and to ordain "Pastors and Servants of the Church." Until this day, Moravian bishops are primarily responsible for ordinations and for the pastoral care of the ministers.

Nitschmann left for Georgia in August of that year. After his return to Europe he assisted Jablonski at the ordination of Zinzendorf as second bishop of the renewed Moravian Church in 1737. The decision to have Moravian bishops was significant for the further development of the church; it meant that the community of Herrnhut considered itself to be a distinct denomination. The transferral of the episcopate from the Polish branch of the Unity also enforced the idea that the church in Herrnhut was the continuation of the old Unitas Fratrum.

### Sources

Büdingische Sammlung (1742); E. Beyreuther, *Zinzendorf und die Christenheit* (1961), 91-93.