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A New Departure into Life: The History of Pietism

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I have been asked to say something about the history of Pietism. But what exactly is a Pietist? In Germany, liberal-minded Christians sometimes use the expression as a derogatory term for believers who are more conservative. Pietists are then narrow-minded people who impose certain views on others and appeal to the Bible in doing so. On the other hand, conservative Christians sometimes use the term in a positive way to describe themselves. They want to express that they believe in the gospel, lead a Christian life, and profess the message of the Bible. This makes it clear that we are not talking about a long-gone phenomenon when we talk about Pietism. In Germany, there are still groups that feel committed to this branch of Christianity.¹ In 1974, for example, the “Freie Theologische Akademie” (Free Theological Academy, today: “Hochschule” or University) was founded at the Bergstraße Bible School,² which does not belong to any particular church or denomination. It is committed to a new spiritual awakening in Germany and has been guided by the reform ideas of Pietism since its inception.³

This already reveals something very essential about Pietism. “Pietism” is not a term for a specific denomination or confession.⁴ Rather, it is a reform movement that was by no means uniform in Germany but encompassed different groups and spread to many countries. Through this movement, God has given new spiritual awakenings and done much good. Therefore, I would like to strive for a balanced presentation and try to highlight some of the good things that we owe to Pietism to this day. However, we must not overlook the weaknesses that rightly prompted professing Lutherans to voice some criticism. When I attempt to present both sides, I do not do so in a self-righteous, arrogant spirit. Rather, such an analysis should be guided by a sincere effort to learn from both positive developments and mistakes made so that we may be encouraged and strengthened in our Christian life today. To this end, I would like to highlight four aspects that can help us to get to know the Pietist reform movement a little better: it is 1) a renewal movement, 2) a Bible movement, 3) an ecumenical movement, and 4) a missionary movement.

¹ In Württemberg, for example, there are the “Altpietisten” (Old Pietists), who have been calling themselves “Evangelischer Gemeinschaftsverband” (Protestant Community Association) since 2009.

² At that time, the Bergstraße Bible School was in Seeheim-Jugenheim in the southern Hessian district of Darmstadt-Dieburg. Today, the training center is called “Bible Study College” and has been based in Ostfildern since 2009.

³ When I studied there, Spener's *Pia Desideria* was already discussed in the introductory course to theological studies (i.e., in the first semester).

⁴ An exception is Württemberg, where the entire regional church was swept up in Pietism and a special branch of “ecclesiastical Pietism” was formed. See Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte*, 10th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949), § 106 n-o.

A Spiritual Renewal Movement

The beginnings of Pietism date back to the 17th century. For many countries, this was a terrible and very difficult time. Between 1610 and 1650, almost all of Europe was embroiled in wars. Battles were fought for supremacy in Europe and in the global economy. Austria and Spain were ruled by the Habsburgs, who were supported by the Pope. They were at war with the mostly Protestant kings and princes of northwestern Europe. The Peace of Westphalia ended the war in 1648 and brought recognition to several churches and denominations.⁵ But the war had severely damaged Germany and the Lutheran Church, as it further increased the intellectual and spiritual exhaustion that had already begun before the war.⁶ People suffered from the consequences of the war. And it is obvious how much it wears people down when there are constant disputes about questions of faith during wartime—even if it is highly questionable whether these wars were fought primarily over questions of faith rather than for other reasons. In any case, it is not too surprising that the philosophy of Rationalism emerged during this period, which initially cast doubt on everything and only wanted to accept what could stand up to human reason.⁷

But then something happened that can be observed time and again throughout the long history of Christianity. When unbelief gains the upper hand and the final demise of Christianity seems imminent, God intervenes and, in his mercy, grants a new spiritual beginning. Pietism had its origins in Holland. Gisbert Voetius (1588–1676), a professor of theology in Utrecht, gathered students into so-called “conventicles” to cultivate a deeper personal piety. Through one of his students, Theodor Undereyck (1635–1693),⁸ these ideas found their way to Germany, where they shaped Reformed Pietism.⁹ The most important representative of this movement was Gerhard Tersteegen (1697–1769). He was a weaver by profession, but Tersteegen was also active as a writer and lay preacher. His preaching sparked a spiritual awakening. Tersteegen also wrote many chorales that are still sung today.¹⁰ For example, he wrote the lyrics to the well-known Christmas hymn “Jauchzet, ihr Himmel” (“Rejoice, O Heavens”), the second verse of which reads: “Jauchzet, ihr Himmel, frohlocket ihr Enden der Erden! Gott und der Sünder, die sollen zu Freunden nun werden. Friede und Freud wird uns verkündigt heut; freuet euch, Hirten und Herden!” (“Rejoice, O heavens, rejoice, O ends of the earth! God and sinners shall now become friends. Peace and joy are proclaimed to us today; rejoice, shepherds and flocks!”)

However, the actual founding father of Pietism is the Lutheran Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705), who worked in Frankfurt am Main. At the request of a Frankfurt publisher, he

⁵ James A. De Jong, “Weltweite Ausbreitung,” in *Handbuch: Die Geschichte des Christentums* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1979), 460.

⁶ J. P. Köhler, *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1917), 493.

⁷ Colin Brown, “Vernunft und Unvernunft,” in *Handbuch: Die Geschichte des Christentums*, 479ff.

⁸ Theodor Undereyck was the son of a merchant from Duisburg. He studied in Utrecht under Gisbert Voetius from 1654 to 1657. See [Vorlesung KG IV: Die Anfänge des Pietismus - Historische Entwicklungen und - Studocu](#).

⁹ “Reformed Pietism” refers to that part of the revivalist movement that was more strongly oriented toward the teachings of Reformed theology and the Reformed Church. It spread in East Frisia and Lippe-Detmold and developed independently in the Lower Rhine region (where conventicles sprang up alongside the established church in Mülheim an der Ruhr and other places). The well-known hymn writer Joachim Neander can also be classified with Reformed Pietism (“Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren”; “Wunderbarer König”).

¹⁰ A. Skevington Wood and Renate Biebrach, “Pietismus und Erweckung,” in *Handbuch: Die Geschichte des Christentums*, 434.

wrote a preface for the new edition of Johann Arndt's "Postille"¹¹ in 1675, which later appeared as a separate work. The title "Pia Desideria" gave Pietism its name. The Latin adjective *pius* means "pious" or "God-fearing." *Desideria* are "wishes," "longings," or "desires." Spener himself gives the following translation and explanation: "Herzliches Verlangen nach gottgefälliger Besserung der wahren Evangelischen Kirche" ("Heartfelt desire for the godly improvement of the true Evangelical Church").¹² The work aims at the spiritual renewal of the Lutheran Church and provides the impetus for the reform program of Pietism.

Under Spener's influence, the University of Halle established a theological faculty.¹³ August Herrmann Francke (1663–1727), who was called as professor of Oriental languages, put Spener's ideas into practice. He founded an orphanage, a school for the poor, various secondary schools, a publishing house, and other foundations in Halle. Under his leadership, Halle became the center of North German Pietism. Francke's Bible study groups sparked a spiritual awakening among the students in Halle. One of these students was Nikolaus Graf von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), who developed his own branch of Pietism. Although Zinzendorf's branch of Pietism was Lutheran in its basic principles, it also included some theological peculiarities and an emotional, almost mystical piety.¹⁴ In 1722, he allowed a group of Bohemian Brethren¹⁵ to settle on his property and founded the colony of "Herrnhut" with them. The Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine still exists today, and through the publication of the "Losungen" (daily devotionals) is widely known. During a communion service on August 13, 1727, the community felt that they had a special, spiritual experience, and that experience proved significant for the emergence of the Brethren Church: The believers were convinced and moved, ignited with new love and faith in the Savior, and grew together into a holy community.¹⁶ The experience resembles the so-called "baptism of the Spirit," which later became the outstanding feature of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements (see below).

The teachings of the Moravians were also significant for the Anglican clergyman John Wesley (1703–1791), who, influenced by Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, experienced his conversion in 1738 and sparked a revival in England with his sermons.¹⁷ In the Methodism founded by Wesley, personal sanctification was strongly emphasized from the beginning.¹⁸ And as had happened before in Herrnhut, John Wesley, his brother Charles

¹¹ A "postil" is a collection of sermons published as a book.

¹² Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria: Umkehr in die Zukunft—Reformprogramm des Pietismus*, ed. E. Beyreuther, 5th ed. (Giessen: Brunnen, 1995), 1.

¹³ The Friedrich University of Halle was founded in 1694. August Hermann Francke, who had previously worked as a Hebraist in Leipzig, taught scriptural interpretation there from 1698.

¹⁴ Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 106 p-v.

¹⁵ The Bohemian-Moravian Brethren trace their origins back to the pre-Reformation movement of the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus. The Hussite national church reform movement gave rise to the religious group of the "Bohemian Brethren" in 1457, which united other denominations and called itself the "Brethren Unity" (*Unitas fratrum*) from 1467 onwards. See *Theologisches Fach- und Fremdwörterbuch*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: EVA, 1985), 31.

¹⁶ Wood and Biebrach, "Pietismus und Erweckung," 436–37.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Sommer and Detlef Klahr, *Kirchengeschichtliches Repetitorium*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 239.

¹⁸ The name goes back to the religious association that John Wesley founded with some friends during his studies at Oxford: "Because of the somewhat mechanical order in their studies and edification, which placed great emphasis on everyone doing the same thing at the same time, they were mockingly called Methodists by other students." See Köhler, *Lehrbuch*, § 233 l. This student association, founded in 1729, was not directly responsible for the later revival. However, Wesley and his friends adopted the name that had been given to them

Wesley, and their comrade-in-arms George Whitfield had a special experience in 1739 after persistent prayer during the night: They felt that they were filled with divine power and united by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Wesley later espoused the view that a Christian could attain perfect righteousness in this life (perfectionism). However, this position is only possible because Wesley unduly restricted the actual statements of the Bible about sin and no longer considered involuntary transgressions of God's commandments to be sin.²⁰

George Whitfield traveled to North America in 1740 for a six-week preaching tour. He exerted a great influence on the Great Awakening begun by the revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758).²¹ The Second Great Awakening in the USA was significantly influenced by the revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875). Finney and the evangelist Reuben Torrey built on Wesley's experience of a special spiritual encounter that was supposed to equip believers with special power. From this idea, they developed the doctrine of the so-called "baptism of the Spirit." Its practical implementation led to conspicuous phenomena during the revival period, which were considered to be a special work of the Holy Spirit (e.g., people making animal sounds, falling over, or speaking in tongues).²² This eventually developed into the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century, with its special emphasis on baptism in the Spirit and speaking in tongues, as well as the Charismatic movement that emerged from the Pentecostal movement.

How was this spiritual renewal possible at a time that seemed to herald the decline of Christianity in Europe? In his writing, Philipp Jakob Spener painted a bleak picture of the spiritual conditions of his own time. But then he went on to say that the church could look forward to a bright future. Spener concluded this from the expectation of a general conversion of the people of Israel, which he read into Romans 11:25f, and from the expectation of the fall of papal Rome, which he found prophesied in Revelation 18–19. According to Spener, both things could only come about if the Lutheran Church returned to a much better state. To make this renewal possible, Spener suggested that, in addition to church services, Bible study groups should also be held so that God's Word could be brought more abundantly among the people. He also encouraged the establishment and diligent practice of the universal priesthood of all believers. He called for a Christianity of action, provided guidance on how to behave in religious disputes, and made suggestions for the reform of theological studies.²³

Considering the circumstances of the time, this optimistic attitude is remarkable. Tragically, however, it is based on a questionable exegesis, because Romans 11:25f does not announce the general conversion of the entire people of Israel. In the context of Romans 9–11, "all Israel" refers to the totality of all the elect from Israel who, like the full number of

mockingly because of their orderly lifestyle and later referred to themselves as "Methodists." See Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 109 e.

¹⁹ Wood and Biebrach, "Pietismus und Erweckung," 441.

²⁰ Wesley thus ultimately takes a similar view to that of the Roman Catholic Church: "Rome and Wesley limit the concept of sin to that which man consciously and deliberately does against God's commandments and remove from the category of 'sin' the innate evil inclination and involuntary transgressions." See Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1920), 37.

²¹ Wood and Biebrach, "Pietismus und Erweckung," 443.

²² John Brenner, "Key Events in Church History: Part IV," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98 (2001): 296.

²³ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 40–82.

Christians born as Gentiles, will be saved through faith in the Messiah Jesus Christ.²⁴ Based on the biblical statements, therefore, one cannot expect the full conversion of the entire people of Israel, nor does this necessarily involve a renewal of the outwardly constituted Lutheran Church, which, according to Spener, is supposed to enable the conversion of Israel. Jesus has promised that the gospel will be preached until the Last Day and that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church (see Matthew 16:18; 24:14). But this promise refers to the one holy Christian church and not to a specific visible church community. So, there will always be true Christians until the Last Day, even if there are perhaps only very few of them.²⁵

The fundamental criticism of the Pietists at that time (and in many cases still today) is directed at state Christianity. In state churches, all baptized persons are automatically regarded as members of the church, without any inquiry into their personal faith or Christian life. People are simply considered Christians because they were baptized as children and pay church taxes. Yet many of them are completely unfamiliar with the message of the Bible and have hardly ever seen the inside of a church. However, the Pietists did not blame the questionable system of the state churches for this. Strangely enough, many of them still adhere to it today and refuse to leave the state churches.²⁶ At that time, the Pietists accused the orthodox Lutherans of being responsible for the collapse of piety because they had neglected personal piety in their quest to preserve the purity of doctrine. The Pietists wanted to recognize as true Christians only those who had experienced a personal conversion and lived according to the will of God.²⁷ Spener still took a more moderate stance. He did not deny that rebirth occurs in baptism. But he pointed out that one can afterwards reject the grace received, and then be renewed again through the work of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ However, August Herrmann Francke already attached particular importance to the so-called conversion experience.²⁹ While preparing a sermon, he realized that he himself did not have the faith he wanted to call the congregation to. So, he sought help in many places, falling into an ever deeper crisis, struggling with doubts and wrestling with God. Through the conversion experience, Francke became certain of his personal, gracious God. And from that day on, he was ready to give his life for this God.³⁰

²⁴ G. Stöckhardt, *Commentar über den Brief Pauli an die Römer* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1907), 540–41.

²⁵ Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 4:1 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3 make it clear that no visible church community is given the “privilege of existence” by God’s Word. It is not only individual church communities that can fall away from pure doctrine. It is even possible that all visible churches will fall away from the truth. Nevertheless, there will still be true believers at such a time, since according to Jesus’ promise, the invisible church will not perish. See Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, vol. 4 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), 165–66.

²⁶ Christians who are close to Pietism therefore gather in “state church communities.” They still belong to the state churches and make use of the services of the church such as baptism or confirmation. In addition, however, they gather for their own community meetings, during which the Holy Scriptures are interpreted by trained preachers or lay preachers (who have no special training).

²⁷ David Kuske, *Die Bibel richtig verstehen*, 3rd ed. (Zwickau: Concordia-Verlag, 2018), 25.

²⁸ Wood and Biebrach, “Pietismus und Erweckung,” 439.

²⁹ August Hermann Francke, originally born in Lübeck, began his academic career in Leipzig at the age of 22. In 1687, he traveled temporarily to Lüneburg to expand his knowledge in the field of Old Testament interpretation. There he was asked to give a sermon and chose John 20:31 as his sermon text. The preparation of this sermon became the starting point for Francke’s conversion experience. See K. Aland, *Geschichte der Christenheit*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1991), 223–24.

³⁰ Aland, *Geschichte der Christenheit*, 223–24.

Pietism and Methodism developed their *Durchbruchstheorie* (“breakthrough theory”) from the knowledge of the necessity of conversion and rebirth. It describes conversion as a struggle for repentance, which man wages at least in part with his own powers and which ultimately ends in a “breakthrough” often accompanied by intense emotions and other experiences.³¹ C.F.W. Walther³² reports how, as a student, he joined a Bible study group and met a Pietist there. The Pietist explained that one is only a Christian once one has undergone a proper struggle of repentance and is truly converted. Walther read books recommended to him by the Pietist and was deeply tormented by them. He only found his way out of these trials when a letter from a Lutheran pastor pointed him to the promises of the gospel.³³ The Lutheran Pietist Johann Philipp Fresenius (1705–1761), whose books were recommended to Walther by his Pietist fellow student, distinguished between revival and conversion. A person who has been awakened by God’s grace should then struggle with his own strength through persistent prayer and struggle until he is truly converted and attains God’s grace. What this means is that one feels the peace of God in one’s heart and thereby becomes certain of one’s salvation. “Such people then call this grace, this sweet emotion that satisfies the heart. That is supposed to be grace, even though grace is not something in my heart, but in God’s heart. I must seek grace not within myself, but outside myself.”³⁴ So says Walther in his 15th evening lecture.

It is certainly true that Christians should pray daily and fight against sin, doubt, and all outbursts of their old nature. But all these are fruits of justifying faith, which the Holy Spirit produces in believing Christians. An unconverted person cannot do any of these things until God’s Spirit has worked justifying faith in his heart through the means of grace. Therefore, according to Scripture, there is no difference between “awakening” and “conversion.” Rather, the two terms in Scripture are simply different words for the same thing. And God’s saving grace is not a feeling in our hearts that we must earn through our own religious efforts. When Holy Scripture speaks of God’s grace in relation to us sinful human beings, it means “God’s gracious disposition, which God cherishes toward sinful human beings for Christ’s sake, and which consists in his not imputing sin to human beings in his heart, ‘before his inner forum,’ but forgiving them.”³⁵

It is “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” to blame the pursuit of pure doctrine or even the means of grace for the collapse of piety in Europe. After all, only the Holy Spirit can make us spiritually alive and bring about a living faith in us. And the Holy Spirit does not do this “just like that.” He uses Word and sacrament to awaken a spiritually dead person to spiritual life. And justifying faith isn’t the only thing the Holy Spirit works in us through the good news of the redemption accomplished by Jesus. He also awakens in us a love for God’s

³¹ Otto Eckert, “In an Instant and in a Moment,” in *Our Great Heritage*, vol. 3, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), 18.

³² Carl Ferdinand Wilhem Walther (1811–1887) was born in Langenchursdorf and studied theology in Leipzig starting in 1829. At that time, Rationalism was in full bloom at Leipzig University. However, a circle of devout students had formed, which Walther joined and where he also found a living faith. When he had to interrupt his studies for six months due to health reasons, Walther studied Luther’s writings intensively and thus became a devout Lutheran. Later, he joined the emigration movement led by the awakened Dresden pastor Martin Stephan and, together with other Bible-believing and confessional Lutherans, founded the Missouri Synod in North America. See Martin Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther: Lebensbild* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1890), 2–13.

³³ C.F.W. Walther, *Gesetz und Evangelium* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1946), 132ff.

³⁴ Walther, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, 135.

³⁵ Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1917), 5.

Word and moves us to work for the preservation and proclamation of pure doctrine. After all, Jesus says, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32).

A Biblical Movement

Outward membership in the church alone does not make anyone a Christian. Only those who recognize themselves before God as lost sinners and through faith take refuge in Jesus Christ, who through his sinless life and vicarious suffering reconciled all humanity with God, truly possess eternal salvation. That is why Paul warns his co-worker Timothy about people who have the appearance of godliness but deny its power (2 Timothy 3:5). But no one can produce this justifying faith on their own (see 1 Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 2:1). It is God’s gift of grace, because only the Holy Spirit can work and maintain this faith in us through the gospel (see Ephesians 2:8f; Romans 1:16f; Philippians 1:6).

Because Pietism is devoted to spreading a living faith in Jesus Christ, it has been a Bible movement from the very beginning. Spener clearly saw that God’s Word needed to be brought more abundantly to the people if anything was to change in the state of the church: “We know that we have nothing good in us by nature, but if there is to be anything in us, it must be worked in us by God. The Word is the powerful means to this end, for faith must be kindled from the Gospel.”³⁶ That is why he suggested that, in addition to worship services with a sermon, Bible study groups be introduced, in which Christians would come together under the guidance of the pastor and discuss their personal questions. In this way, they could become more familiar with the message of the Bible and then pass it on to others.³⁷

August Hermann Francke then attempted to establish such an edifying Bible study group. Francke had been working at the University of Leipzig since 1685 and founded the *Collegium philobiblicum* with like-minded friends. Initially, it was more of an academic event. But after his conversion experience, Francke reorganized the group into the *Collegium biblicum*. From then on, the Holy Scriptures were interpreted in the group in German and for personal edification. This led to a revival movement among Leipzig students, which soon spread to the citizens of the city. But there was also clear resistance to the Pietists. Ultimately, the student movement was suppressed. Francke was expelled from Leipzig University and went to Erfurt as a pastor until, in 1692, through the influence of Philipp Jakob Spener, he was able to take up a position as professor at the University of Halle and as a pastor.³⁸ In 1710, together with Baron Hildebrand von Canstein, he founded the first Bible society (“Cansteinsche Bibelanstalt”) here, which distributed a total of 80,000 Bibles and 100,000 New Testaments between 1712 and 1719.³⁹

Believers in Germany who are associated with Pietism are still committed to spreading the biblical message today. About 50 years ago, the Free Theological Academy (today: University) was founded to create a Bible-based alternative to theological studies at German universities. In the 1980s, former rector Helge Stadelmann published an impressive book in which he defended the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture against radical attacks

³⁶ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 50–51.

³⁷ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 51ff.

³⁸ Aland, *Geschichte der Christenheit*, 225.

³⁹ Aland, *Geschichte der Christenheit*, 236–37.

on the Bible by historical-critical theology.⁴⁰ I am grateful to say that this book was a great blessing to me in my personal development, because it called me out of my previous liberal stance and led me back to a Bible-believing Christianity. On the other hand, this book makes it clear that today's Pietism in Germany can no longer be described unreservedly as a Bible movement. It was written because a Bible teacher associated with Pietism adopted the principles of the historical-critical method developed by Ernst Troeltsch and wanted to use them for Bible-based theology in Germany.⁴¹ Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case. The historical-critical method has long since become established in many theological training institutions in Germany. But perhaps that is not so surprising. David Kuske clearly shows that Pietism held dogmatics in low regard and instead practiced a subjective, psychological interpretation of Scripture. The personal feelings of the interpreter and Bible reader became a decisive factor in determining the meaning of a Bible passage. What was important was what the passage in question said to the individual Christian for his or her personal life. Objective doctrinal statements received less attention.⁴²

And isn't it strange that the beginnings of historical-critical Bible interpretation were made in Halle, the center of North German Pietism? Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) attended a school run by the Francke Foundations and was influenced by Pietism there. Later, however, he turned to Rationalism and pursued a neological, i.e., rationalistic interpretation of the Bible.⁴³ The actual “father” of historical-critical Bible interpretation, Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), taught in Altdorf and Halle. As a student, he was repelled by attempts at conversion in the spirit of Halle Pietism and was influenced by the “transitional theology” taught by Sigmund Jakob Baumgarten. Semler rejected the doctrine of biblical inspiration. He declared that every interpreter must distinguish between the word of God and the word of man in the Bible.⁴⁴

Later, the historical-critical method that emerged from this was further refined and applied in an increasingly radical manner. And it experienced an unstoppable triumphal march through Germany's universities and theological training centers.⁴⁵ This radical denial of biblical teachings was certainly not what Spener, Francke, and other Pietists had in mind. Quite the contrary! But with their subjective interpretation of the Bible, which showed no interest in dogmatics and objective teaching, they paved the way for this development. Despite all its well-intentioned desires to spread the biblical message and personal piety, the

⁴⁰ H. Stadelmann, *Grundlinien eines bibeltreuen Schriftverständnisses*, 2nd ed. (Wuppertal and Zurich: Brockhaus, 1990).

⁴¹ Stadelmann, *Grundlinien*, 92.

⁴² Kuske, *Die Bibel richtig verstehen*, 25.

⁴³ The term “Neology” refers to the second phase of Enlightenment theology in Germany. Neological Bible interpreters criticized the biblical teachings of the Trinity, original sin, and justification. In addition, the canon of the Bible was subjected to rationalistic criticism with regard to what was considered morally beneficial. See *Theologisches Fach- und Fremdwörterbuch*, 119. For information on Johann David Michaelis, see *Kirchliches Handlexikon*, ed. Carl Meusel (et al.), vol. 4 (Leipzig: Naumann, 1894), 597.

⁴⁴ See *Kirchliches Handlexikon*, ed. Carl Meusel (et al.), vol. 6 (Leipzig: Naumann, 1900), 200–201; Erich Mauerhofer, *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Nuremberg/Hamburg: VTR/RVB, 2004), 13.

⁴⁵ It reached a preliminary peak in the 20th century through Rudolf Bultmann's “demythologization” of the Bible, which not only cast doubt on fundamental facts of salvation such as Jesus' physical resurrection and ascension, but also rejected the doctrine of Jesus Christ's sin-atonement sacrificial death as primitive mythology, ultimately ending in the so-called “Gott-ist-tot-Theologie” (“God-is-dead-theology”). See Stadelmann, *Grundlinien*, 7–8 and 35–36.

subjectivism of Pietist biblical interpretation weakened the church to such an extent that it was unable to resist the rationalism that was emerging at around the same time with its even more radical subjectivism.⁴⁶

An Ecumenical Movement

The subjective interpretation of the Bible, which became defining for Pietism, is also linked to the striking open-mindedness that usually characterizes people close to Pietism. This open-mindedness is not boundless arbitrariness. Spener, for example, understood there were dangerous errors in matters of faith. And it was important to him that faithful Christians lovingly help those who have fallen into false beliefs.⁴⁷

At the same time, however, Pietist Christians want to be broad-minded and therefore usually insist that Christians be truly united in their faith only on certain doctrines. Georg Calixt (1586–1656), a professor of theology in Helmstedt, wanted to limit the number of beliefs necessary for salvation to bridge the divide between the denominations. A balance should be achieved between the different denominations by emphasizing the beliefs that all denominations share. Calixt therefore proposed that the various denominations should agree on the dogma of the first five centuries as a common denominator (*consensus quinquesaecularis*, consensus of the first five centuries).⁴⁸ Similarly, Philipp Jakob Spener also distinguished between primary and secondary doctrines. For Spener, the fundamental doctrines on which faith and salvation depended were absolutely necessary. Of utmost importance, for example, was the recognition of our inability and unholiness. Equally indispensable was faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, who reconciled us with God through his work of redemption. And for Spener, this ultimately included Jesus giving us the strength and motivation for a new life, for which he is also the norm and rule. But the founding father of Pietism considered other beliefs to be secondary. Here, Spener wanted to show a spirit of freedom and tolerance and allow other Christians their private opinions. It was important that unbelievers personally recognize the merits and power of Jesus. Where this had happened, one could confidently leave it to the Holy Spirit to enlighten other believers with regard to further teachings of the Bible.⁴⁹

Zinzendorf then developed the so-called *Tropentheorie* (theory of tropoi or ways). Although the Moravian Church he founded was recognized in Saxony in 1747 as “Augsburg Confessional” (i.e., a fundamentally Lutheran community of faith), he understood the Christian denominations and groups as different ways of God’s education (τρόποι παιδείας). The Moravian Church did not want to be a new denomination, but rather to work within the denominations as a special community for the blessing of all Christendom.⁵⁰ Zinzendorf wanted to unite Lutheranism, the Reformed Church, and the Moravian Church into one congregation while retaining their doctrinal differences.⁵¹ Herrnhut thus very soon became a refuge for quite diverse groups.⁵² And Pietism thus became the precursor of the modern

⁴⁶ Kuske, *Die Bibel richtig verstehen*, 26.

⁴⁷ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 61f.

⁴⁸ Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 95 l.

⁴⁹ Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 41.

⁵⁰ Sommer and Klahr, *Kirchengeschichtliches Repetitorium*, 192.

⁵¹ Köhler, *Lehrbuch*, 532.

⁵² Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 106 q.

ecumenical movement, which not only strives for the union of all Christian churches while retaining their doctrinal differences, but now also seeks to unite different religions under similar conditions.

Spener, Francke, and Zinzendorf would certainly not have agreed with this. And in German state churches today, it is often believers associated with Pietism who raise their voices against such undesirable developments. This is commendable and certainly necessary to make people think and overcome abuses. On the other hand, it is still common in Pietism today to insist on the purity of certain doctrines while declaring other teachings of Scripture to be secondary because they are not considered essential for salvation. In such matters, believers do not need to agree to have fellowship and work together spiritually. Then, for example, it is not so important what one teaches about creation or about baptism and the Lord's Supper, if one holds fast to the gospel and personally believes in Jesus as one's Savior. Zinzendorf's theory of the different "ways of God's education" is also very popular today. Instead of speaking of pure and false doctrine, different denominations (or even different religions) are seen as equally valid approaches to God.

However, it is perfectly understandable and entirely in keeping with Scripture that believers long for spiritual fellowship with other believers. And the Bible expressly encourages us to work together for the spread of the saving truth (3 John 8). Christians are not "lone warriors." We need spiritual fellowship with others, and by joining forces we can do much more to spread the kingdom of God. But who gives us the right to distinguish between important and less important teachings in the Bible? And where does Scripture teach that agreement on some essential doctrines is sufficient for spiritual fellowship and working together as churches? God already tells us in the Old Testament, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 4:2). And the Apostle Paul urges us, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Romans 16:17). It is true that people can be saved through a happy inconsistency, even if they err in some areas of their faith, as long as they trust in their hearts in the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. But that does not entitle us by any means to conclude that agreement on the "most important matters of faith" is sufficient for spiritual fellowship and working together as churches, because other teachings of the Bible are not decisive for salvation and therefore less important.⁵³ How could what God tells us in the Bible be unimportant for us humans?

A Missionary Movement

Before his ascension, Jesus gave his disciples the following commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). Therefore, believing Christians cannot sit back complacently because they now live through Jesus in the glorious certainty that they are saved and possess salvation through faith. The joy of this and their love for their fellow human beings will move them to pass on the message of salvation to others, so that many more may find salvation in Jesus Christ.

⁵³ Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1924), 89–90.

From the beginning, Pietism has been a missionary movement. And this is perhaps the greatest blessing that God has given to Christianity through Pietism. The example set by the Pietists has had a positive effect on others and contributed to Christianity's renewed focus on its missionary mandate. The gospel was spread across borders in many countries. People found faith in Jesus Christ. And so it was only in the last few centuries that Christianity truly became a world religion.

August Herrmann Francke, for example, was committed not only to spreading the gospel in Germany, but also through the Lutheran mission to the heathen. In 1706, the Danish King Frederick IV founded a mission station in the Danish East Indian colony of Tranquebar, which was significantly supported by Francke. One of Francke's students, Ziegenbalg, was sent as the first missionary to the Tamils. He translated the New Testament into Tamil.⁵⁴ Also through connections with the Danish royal court, the Moravian Church began missionary work on the island of St. Thomas in the West Indies (1732) and among the Inuit in Greenland (1733).⁵⁵ The Moravians developed great missionary zeal and soon expanded their work to other areas. From 1737 on, a missionary worked among the Khoikhoi in the Dutch Cape Colony of South Africa. Although missionary work in South Africa had to be interrupted for a time, it was resumed in 1792. In Labrador, an initial attempt failed in 1752, but work was able to resume in 1771. Missionaries were sent to America to work among the indigenous peoples there. And those who remained in Herrnhut took a keen interest in all these undertakings. Almost every family had relatives in the mission field. The struggles, tragedies, and successes of the missionaries were shared by the sending congregations.⁵⁶

John Wesley and George Whitfield devoted themselves to spreading the gospel in England and North America. And the revivals that began at that time also awakened missionary zeal in these countries. Under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Bray (1656–1730), the first two mission societies in England (“Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge” and “Society for the Propagation of the Gospel”) were founded at the turn of the 17th to 18th centuries. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge participated in the Danish-Halle Mission and supported missionaries working in the English colony in India.⁵⁷

And in Germany, it was precisely the missionary spirit of the Pietists that contributed to numerous revivals and church renewal movements in the 19th century, ultimately giving rise to a new wave of piety out of the Enlightenment and the confusion of the Napoleonic Wars. Here, through His grace, God also awakened a new confessional consciousness in some places. For example, the Leipzig Mission was founded in 1836 as a Lutheran-oriented mission society. It took over the remnants of the Danish-Halle mission work in India. But even before that, Claus Harms (1778–1855) had republished Luther's 95 Theses with a commentary directed against Rationalism, ecclesiastical union, and the Reformed Church (1817),⁵⁸ thus triggering a new confessional consciousness.

The beginnings of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany can be traced back to such upheavals. In the mid-19th century, for example, the Lutheran pastor Friedrich

⁵⁴ Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 106 h.

⁵⁵ Heussi, *Kompendium*, § 106 r.

⁵⁶ Klaus Fiedler, “Mission um jeden Preis,” in *Handbuch: Die Geschichte des Christentums*, 454–55.

⁵⁷ De Jong, “Weltweite Ausbreitung,” 472–73, 476.

⁵⁸ Klaus Fiedler, “Erweckung in Deutschland,” in *Handbuch: Die Geschichte des Christentums*, 537.

Brunn was active in Hesse. His Bible-based Lutheran sermons had the effect of a cloudburst in the desert, transforming the spiritual wasteland into fertile ground after the spiritual drought of the Enlightenment and Rationalism. New spiritual life was awakened, and free Lutheran congregations were formed.⁵⁹ In Saxony, Lutheran associations were founded in several places, which later also gave rise to Lutheran congregations.⁶⁰ In 1876, these joined together to form a synod and founded the “Evangelical Lutheran Free Church.”⁶¹

Our sister church WELS also owes its beginnings to Pietism in Germany and Europe. In 1828, various mission societies in Barmen joined together to form the “Rhenish Mission Society.” One of its subdivisions was the “Langenberg Verein” (Langenberg Association) which worked among German emigrants in North America. Johannes Mühlhäuser, Johannes Weinmann, and Wilhelm Wrede were the three “founding fathers” of the Wisconsin Synod. They were all missionaries sent out by the Langenberg Verein. In addition to them, missionaries trained and sent out by the Basel Mission or the Pilgrim Mission St. Chrischona, also based there, were active in the Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota synods.⁶² Later, the synods merged to form today’s WELS. And God, in his grace, gave gifted spiritual leaders such as Adolf Hoenecke and Johannes Bading, who awakened confessional awareness, so that the WELS became a confessional Lutheran church.⁶³

The history of Pietism spans a period of almost 400 years. It is rich and multifaceted. For this reason alone, an overview such as this presentation cannot claim to be complete. Much could only be touched upon. There is certainly much more that would need to be said. Pietism has brought about many positive things for which we can be grateful. But mistakes were also made. And we must not overlook or downplay the weaknesses of Pietism. May God keep us all in a living faith in the Savior Jesus Christ, through whose perfect work of redemption we are reconciled with God. May he also help us to live a Christian life in this faith and to spread the saving message of the gospel in our world. Here, the Pietists, with their devoted missionary zeal, can certainly be a good example to us. For we too are commissioned to bring the good news to people, so that many more may find their Savior in Jesus. But may God also keep us aware that living faith and the pursuit of pure doctrine are not mutually exclusive opposites but belong together inseparably. To establish and practice church fellowship, it is not enough to agree only on the most important issues and not to regard lasting differences as obstacles to church fellowship. According to the testimony of Holy Scripture, full agreement in faith is necessary for this. Therefore, I would like to conclude with the words of the hymn that has become the anthem of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference: “God’s Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever; to spread its light from age to age shall be our chief endeavor. Through life it guides our way, in death it is our stay. Lord, grant, while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure throughout all generations.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Wilhelm Wöhling, *Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche in Sachsen u.a. St.* (Zwickau: Schriftenverein, 1925), 12ff.

⁶⁰ Wöhling, *Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche*, 46ff.

⁶¹ Wöhling, *Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche*, 188ff.

⁶² Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 2–3.

⁶³ Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 27ff.

⁶⁴ *Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2021), 640. The text is by Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), and the tune is by Friedrich O. Reuter (1863–1924).