

**Modern Church History**  
**(Part 3: Pietism, Moravians, Socinians, Unitarians and Modernists)**  
(Taken mainly from B. K. Kuiper's *The Church in History*)

**I. Pietism; the Moravians.**

**A. A New Movement in the Lutheran Church.**

1. The father of pietism was Philipp Jacob Spener, born in western Germany in 1635, a contemporary of Bunyan and Fox in England. He was a Lutheran.
2. In his days, dead orthodoxy prevailed in the Lutheran Church – which emphasized doctrinal purity and the defense of the Lutheran faith over the experiential elements of Christianity. There was no call to serious Christian service and life. Being faithful meant merely knowing the catechisms, attending services, listening to doctrinal sermons, and participating in the sacraments. Nothing was said regarding one's inner life and religious experience. Some of the pastors did not live holy lives, many of them were unconverted. Sadly, among the membership, there was a great deal of drunkenness and immorality.
3. This was the religious environment in which Spener grew up. But while young, he read a book entitled *True Christianity*, written by the German mystic Johann Arndt. The impression left by the book was strengthened by the devotional works of certain English Puritans, most notably Richard Baxter. For a time he lived in Geneva and other Swiss cities, associating with ministers in the Reformed Church, all the while remaining a loyal Lutheran.
4. In 1666, Spener became the chief pastor in Frankfort. He soon began to improve on the catechetical instruction. He gathered together those who were not satisfied with mere formal religion. They read and studied the Bible, prayed, and discussed the sermons Spener had preached on the previous Sunday. His purpose was to engender and encourage a deeper and warmer spiritual life. These meetings were called *collegia pietatis*, or gathering of the pious, from which the movement received the name *Pietism*.

**B. Spener Believes Christianity Is a Life.**

1. To promote a warmer and more spiritual Christianity, Spener established little churches within the church. These were groups of people from the local churches organized for the study of the Bible and watching over each other. Christianity was more than mere knowledge. Controversies over doctrine are unprofitable. Ministers needed better training; they needed to experience Christianity and live a holy life. Their preaching needed not to be doctrinal or controversial, but should build up the Christian life of the hearers. The only Christianity that was genuine was that which gave the evidence of devotion and service. It began with a conscious new birth and conversion.
2. Like the English Puritans, Spener was against theater-going, dancing, and playing cards, while Lutherans believed them to be indifferent. He also believed in moderation in eating, drinking and in attire.
3. Spener's teaching and practice drew attention to the immoral conditions that prevailed in the Lutheran Church of that day, and for that reason met with bitter opposition. After difficult pastorates at Frankfort and Dresden, he pastored joyfully at Berlin until his death in 1705.

### C. August Francke.

1. August Hermann Francke, one of the younger instructors at the University of Leipzig, in 1687, at the age of twenty-four, experienced what he regarded as the new birth. He went to Dresden and spent two months with Spener, joining the Pietist movement. In 1689, he returned to Leipzig and began to lecture to the students and townspeople. Soon, he had a large following. The students began to neglect their studies and criticize their other professors and the local ministers. Opposition arose that made Francke move from Leipzig to Erfurt, where he also ran into trouble. Finally, Spener was able to secure him an appointment to the new university that had been founded at Halle, where he remained until his death in 1727, making the University of Halle, a center of Pietism.
2. Francke had tremendous energy and a talent for organization. In 1695, he founded a school for poor children that emphasized experiential Christianity. He also established a home for orphans.
3. Francke had no money, but he believed in prayer and the use of means. Before long, donations poured in from all parts of Germany. He used every means of publicity and knew how to get others interested in his enterprises. His school soon became widely known and grew into a large educational institution.
4. In 1710, Francke persuaded a friend to establish a Bible Institute for the publication of inexpensive Bibles. This work, too, continues today.

### D. Francke Encourages Missionary Work.

1. Protestants had always been interested in missions. But for the first two hundred years after the Reformation, their energies were largely consumed in their struggle with Catholicism and the Wars of Religion. With the dawn of the eighteenth century, a new era began in the history of Protestant missions.
2. Frederick IV, king of Denmark, desired to establish mission posts in his colony in India. Pietism was favorable to missionary work because it strongly desired the salvation of souls. Francke had engendered missionary zeal in the hearts of many of his students, so when the king went looking for missionaries, he found them at Halle. During the eighteenth century no fewer than sixty missionaries went out from the University of Halle to the foreign field, the most famous of which was Christian Friedrich Schwartz, who preached the Gospel in India from 1750 to the end of his life in 1798.

### E. Defects Found in Pietism.

1. When Francke died in 1727, Pietism had reached its pinnacle. There was no one equal to Spener or Francke who appeared afterwards. The Pietists never separated from the Lutheran Church, so their numbers were never known. However, the movement did much to awaken the Lutherans in Germany out of their spiritual coldness.
2. Although it was a blessing in many ways, it also had certain defects. Before Pietism, Lutheranism suffered from a one-sided *intellectualism*, meaning their focus was on knowledge. Pietism reacted against this by insisting on Christian devotion and service. However, Pietism too was one-sided. It was ascetic in nature and emphasized severe self-denial. Francke did not allow the children in his schools much time for play. It was overly critical of those who didn't agree, and condemned as irreligious everyone who was not a Pietist. It would not allow that anyone could be a Christian who did not first go through "a conscious conversion through an intense struggle" (274). Pietism had little regard for doctrine. It over-reacted to the doctrinal leanings of the church and underestimated its value, thereby paving the way for Liberalism and Modernism.

## F. The Bohemian Brethren.

1. Persecution in Bohemia, which followed the death of Huss in 1415, had forced the Hussites into hiding, but had not destroyed them. They separated from the national church, moved into the dense forests of their native land, and formed an organization in 1457 called the *Unitas Fratrum*, or “Unity of the Brethren.” They called themselves *Brethren* and are generally known as the *Bohemian Brethren*, so as not to confuse them with the Swiss Brethren, which was the name given to the Anabaptists in Switzerland after 1530.
2. By Luther’s time, the Bohemian Brethren had grown to four hundred churches with 200,000 members. It was evangelistic and saw the importance of education. In 1501, it became the first church to adopt a hymnal. Their leaders had contact with Luther and Calvin, and benefited from their insights.
3. Through the Counter Reformation and the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), they were almost entirely destroyed. The last bishop of the original Bohemian Brethren, Comenius (1592-1670), famous in the history of education (he is considered to be the father of modern education and was asked to be the first president of Harvard University [Wikipedia]), called the remnant the “Hidden Seed,” which it later proved to be.

## G. Count von Zinzendorf.

1. Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, descendant of an ancient Austrian noble family, was born in Dresden, 1700. His father was a high court official in Saxony and a friend of Spener, who became the boy’s godfather. As a child, Von Zinzendorf showed strong religious commitment. “A picture of Jesus on the cross, with the words, ‘This I did for you. What do you do for me?’ made a profound and lasting impression on him” (275). His entire life was devoted to Christ and the winning of souls to Him.
2. When he was ten years old, he was sent to Francke’s school in Halle. Soon, his gifts of leadership were displayed. He organized some of the boys into a club that he called “The Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed.” Its purpose was to promote personal piety and the evangelism of the world. Before he had come to Francke’s school, when he was nine years old, he had read a missionary paper about the East Indies. It was there that the first missionary impulse rose in his soul. When he was fifteen, he and some of his classmates made a solemn promise that they would confess Christ on every occasion and seek the conversion of all kinds and conditions of men.
3. However, his family didn’t want him to become a missionary, but to enter government service. In obedience to their wishes, he studied law at Wittenberg University from 1716 to 1719. He was a convinced Pietist, but while in Wittenberg, he learned to appreciate the orthodox Lutherans. He entered into the service of the government at Saxony. The next year, he took part of his patrimony and purchased the large estate of Berthelsdorf from his grandmother, seventy miles east of Dresden.

## H. Herrnhut.

1. Christian David, a simple carpenter, for many years had been doing what he could to keep a remnant of the Bohemian Brethren together. During this time, he became a Pietist. He came to Zinzendorf, begging him to allow the Hidden Seed to take refuge on his Berthelsdorf estate. Zinzendorf was only remotely acquainted with who they were, but knew that they were being persecuted for the sake of religion. In 1722, he gave David permission to bring two families of the Brethren to the estate. By 1727, several hundred had come. It was at this time that Zinzendorf read a book by Comenius that outlined the doctrine and practice of the Brethren, and he became convinced that he was

called to devote his life to the reorganization of the *Unitas Fratrum*, that they might devote themselves to missionary work.

2. He assigned the Brethren a corner of his estate, where they built a community they called *Herrnhut*, or the “Lord’s Lodge.” Zinzendorf resigned his government position and settled in Herrnhut. He took advantage of the law that allowed newly established villages to establish its own rules of living, enabling it to form a community within the Church.
3. Because they had come from the province of Moravia, which was next to Huss’s land of Bohemia, the Brethren became known to history as the *Moravians*.
4. “Herrnhut grew rapidly following this event and became the centre of a major movement for Christian renewal and mission during the 18th century. Moravian historians identify the main achievements of this period as:
  - 1) Setting up a watch of continuous prayer which ran uninterrupted, 24 hours a day, for 100 years.
  - 2) The establishment of over 30 settlements globally on the Herrnhut model, which emphasised a lifestyle of prayer and worship and a form of communal living in which personal property was still held but simplicity of lifestyle and generosity with wealth were considered important spiritual attributes. As a result, divisions between social groups and extremes of wealth and poverty were largely eliminated.
  - 3) The sending out of hundreds of Christian missionaries to many parts of the world including the Caribbean, North and South America, the Arctic, Africa, and the Far East. The Moravian missionaries were the first large scale Protestant missionary movement. They were also first to send unordained ‘lay’ people (rather than trained professional clergymen), the first to go to slaves, and the first in many countries of the world. The first Moravian Missionaries were a potter named Leonard Dober and a carpenter named David Nitschmann, who went to the Caribbean island of St Thomas in 1732.
  - 4) The formation of many hundreds small renewal groups operating within the existing churches of Europe, known as ‘diaspora societies’. These groups encouraged personal prayer and worship, bible study, confession of sins and mutual accountability.
  - 5) Moravians were instrumental in the ‘conversion’ of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church and the best-known British leader of the 18th century restoration of Christian faith known as the ‘great awakening’. Early ‘Methodist societies’ owed many of their influences to the structure of Moravian ‘diaspora societies’ (Wikipedia).

### **I. The Moravians Organize as a Church.**

1. During a communion service in Herrnhut on August 13, 1727, the Spirit’s power was so strongly felt, they accepted this as the rebirth of the ancient *Unitas Fratrum* under the name of the *Moravian Church*.
2. Zinzendorf, along with some of the Moravians, developed some unique ideas, laying extreme emphasis on Christ as the heart of religion, leading him to introduce great sentimentality in sermons and hymns. Christ’s suffering also occupied his mind, especially those involving Christ’s wounded side, spawning ideas that were often both “fanciful and sentimental” (277). Gradually, both Zinzendorf and the Moravians discarded many of these peculiar ideas.
3. Zinzendorf was a Lutheran and a Pietist. He wanted the Moravians to become members of the Lutheran Church, following Spener’s ideas of the “gathering of the pious” and “a church within the church.” In the end, they organized themselves as a separate church

with bishops, elders and deacons, having a form of church government closer to Presbyterian than Episcopal.

4. Zinzendorf favored the founding of towns where no one but a member could own real estate and where the Church controlled all the industry. Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Lititz, Pennsylvania were founded on this plan.

#### **J. The Moravian Pioneer in Missions.**

1. Zinzendorf looked upon the members of the Moravian Church as the soldiers of Christ, who were to conquer the world for their King. "To the Moravians belongs everlastingly the honor of being the first Protestant body to take seriously the Great Commission. Eventually, they established missions in Africa, Asia, Greenland, Lapland, and among the American Indians. They were also very active in home missionary work. Their most outstanding missionary was perhaps David Zeisberger. When in 1808 he reached the age of eighty-seven, he had labored among the North American Indians for sixty-three years. This is the longest missionary career on record" (278-279).
2. Today the Moravians continue their missionary work in Greenland, Labrador, Alaska, the West Indies, in South and East Africa, Victoria, Queensland, Tibet, and among the North American Indians.
3. The church is still small, with total membership in the United States at less than 70,000 members. But their influence on other denominations in the area of missions has always been much greater than their size would suggest. They were the first, under Zinzendorf's leadership, to light "the torch of Protestant missionary zeal" (279).
4. "The motto of the Moravian church is: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love" (Wikipedia).
5. The Moravian Church in America is in full communion with the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Wikipedia).

## **II. Socinianism; Unitarianism; Modernism.**

### **A. The Most Distinctive Doctrine of Christianity.**

1. All world religions can be divided into two groups: *polytheists* (belief in many gods) and *monotheists* (belief in one god). "If you meet a man who believes in many gods, you know at once that he is a heathen" (280).
2. On the other hand, not everyone who holds to one god is necessarily a Christian. Both Jews and Muslims are monotheistic, but they are not Trinitarian. The doctrine of the Trinity is the most distinctive doctrine of Christianity, marking them off from both polytheists on the one hand, and non-Christian monotheists on the other.

### **B. Socinianism Denies the Trinity.**

1. This movement derived its name from two Italians, Laelius Socinus and his nephew, Faustus Socinus. Outwardly, they conformed to the Catholic Church, yet held some doctrines that contradicted the basic truth held by that church. Laelius gave up the study of law for theology, and from 1550 to 1551, he lived in Wittenberg, where he enjoyed the friendship of Melancthon.
2. The death of Servetus at the stake caused Laelius to turn his attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. He began to write down his ideas, which differed from those of the historic church, though he did not publish them, most likely for fear he would end up like Servetus. He did, however, try to open the door for his ideas by undermining true doctrine through the use of clever questions.
3. When his nephew, Faustus, was studying the Bible in Switzerland, his uncle's unpublished manuscripts came into his hands, greatly influencing his thought. In 1597,

he went to Poland where he published his views and, as a result, became involved in many controversies.

4. In 1605, one year after the death of Faustus, the *Racovian Catechism* was published in the city of Rakow, Poland. Largely the work of Faustus, it set forth the basic teachings of Socinianism: denial of the deity of Christ (he was only a man, but the best man who ever lived), denial of the atonement as a sacrifice for man's sin, and of total depravity. His followers in Poland inscribed on his tomb, "Lofty Babylon [ by this they meant the Catholic Church] lies prostrate. Luther destroyed its roofs, Calvin its wall, but Socinus its foundations" (282).
5. His writings were widely read and had a strong influence in the Netherlands, England and America.

### **C. Socinianism Becomes Unitarianism.**

1. Theophilus Lindsey, a Socinian clergyman in the Church of England, circulated a petition to relieve clergymen from their obligation to subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles and pledge their fidelity to the Bible only. In doing so, this would relieve them of the responsibility to submit to the doctrine of the deity of Christ, contained in the Articles. The petition received two hundred and fifty signatures and was presented to Parliament in 1772, but Parliament refused to receive it. Lindsey then withdrew from the Church of England and organized a Unitarian Church in London in 1774.
2. In 1779, Parliament amended the Toleration Act by accepting a profession of faith in the Scriptures instead of subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles, opening the door wide for every form of heresy. Later, Parliament removed all penal acts against those who denied the Trinity.
3. English Unitarianism insisted on salvation by character, rather than through Christ's atoning death, and rejected "all creeds of human composition," though they retained their own creed. They made heavy inroads among Presbyterians and General Baptists, causing their churches to decline. On the other hand, the Congregationalists and Particular Baptists were only slightly influenced, while their numbers increased and their churches flourished. As a result, they became more numerous than these former groups.

### **D. Modernism Rejects the Supernatural.**

1. The Socinians and Unitarians placed too much emphasis on human reason, but they still recognized the authority of the Bible as being greater. The Modernists, on the other hand, had no problem placing reason above faith. Their views basically grew out of the spirit of modern science and philosophy.
2. Modernists reject the supernatural, miracles, and consequently, the virgin birth and the deity of Christ. They do not believe in special revelation and an infallible Bible. The Bible is to them a record of the religious ideas and experiences of the ancient Jews.
3. Modernism is a complete departure from historic Protestantism and from historic Christianity. It has invaded to a lesser or greater degree most Protestant churches.