

A Warmth from the Fire of God in the Heart of Germany: Pietism and Bach

As we saw last time, the late seventeenth century and the eighteenth century was the rise of the Enlightenment and its rebellious offspring, Romanticism. But it was during this same time, when we have the Enlightenment and Romanticism flourishing, that we have revival in the church. Fortunately, the churches began to wake up to the task that was before them in confronting their culture in the name of Christ, and revival came. It came first to Germany.

In the late 1600s in Germany the movement that we call Pietism began, and we are going to look at that in this lesson. And then from Germany, revival spread in the early 1700s to England, which is known in history as the Evangelical Revival. And then part of that movement moved to the American colonies in what we call the Great Awakening. We will look at the Evangelical Revival and the Great Awakening later. And it was during this same period that Protestant church music reached its greatest expression, I think, in the wonderful music of Handel and especially of Bach. Both of those German composers were born within a few months of the great work of Isaac Newton, with his discovery of the theory of gravity and other scientific theories that he expounded in *Principia*, which was published between 1686 and 1687.

As we come to look at Pietism, and Bach, I would like to begin with a prayer from one of the great Moravian leaders. And we will end the lesson with a prayer from Johann Sebastian Bach. Count Zinzendorf was the leader of the second phase of the Pietist movement, a movement that focused on the people called Moravians. Zinzendorf was a wealthy young lawyer, a count, in Germany, sometimes called “the rich young man who said yes,” because he did give his life to the service of the Lord. There is a story about Zinzendorf, that at one point he was viewing a very famous painting by the artist Domenico Fetti, the painting called *Ecce Homo*, “Behold the Man.” It pictures the scourging of Jesus at His trial before His crucifixion. With the inscription at the bottom of that painting were these words: “I have done this for you. What have you done for me?” And Zinzendorf wrote, “I have loved Him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for Him. From now on I will do whatever He leads me to do.” And certainly from that point on, his life was dedicated to the service of his Lord. He wrote a number of hymns, and I would like to use two verses of one of those as our opening prayer for this lecture. These are words from Count von Zinzendorf. Let us pray.

*“Jesus, lead Thou on till our rest is won;
And although the way be cheerless,
We will follow calm and fearless:
Guide us by Thy hand to our fatherland.”
Jesus, lead Thou on till our rest is won;
Heav’nly leader, still direct us,
Still support, control, protect us,
Till we safely stand in our fatherland. Amen.”*

We come in this lesson to the problem of dead Orthodoxy. I wish we did not have to come to that problem, but we do. And I need to talk a little bit about it. It comes at the very time when Orthodoxy, with its rich heritage from the Reformers and their successors, should have been alive and vital in preaching the Gospel and living the Gospel in the Western world, which was beginning to be turned away from that Gospel. In that very time when it should have been powerful to counter the new trends unleashed by the Enlightenment, there developed in the Christian church what we commonly call a dead Orthodoxy: confusion of confessional adherence with a life of faith. Believing in the doctrine of

justification by faith is not the same thing as being justified by faith, and in the Confessional churches in Europe there was a satisfaction with being Orthodox in doctrine—being Lutheran or being Reformed—and not seeking to apply those great doctrines to the issues of human life. Another way to put it would be to say that there was a separation between doctrine and life, or between head and heart. These things held together by the Reformers and others that followed them now began to be separated. It was true of the Reformed churches, especially on the continent—churches in Holland, Switzerland, France, and other places—but this trend was, perhaps we could say, even more true of the Lutheran churches, where the doctrinal element was decisive, and church discipline hardly existed. A Swedish Lutheran bishop put it this way. He said that “nothing in Christianity is more slack than slack Lutheranism.” I did not say that; a Lutheran said that, and he should know what he is talking about.

It was among the German Lutherans that revival first came. Not only did deadness develop in the Lutheran churches, but the new life, the revival that would bless the continent and the British Isles and North America, first came through the Lutheran Church. “Warmth from the fire of God in the heart of Germany.” These are the words of Cotton Mather, who was very far from Germany in New England. But he felt the warmth that issued from the revival in Germany. And that revival is the movement of the Pietists.

There were two parts to the Pietist movement: one focused around the man Philip Jacob Spener, and the other focused around Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. Spener was a Lutheran pastor. Like all Lutheran pastors, he was very much influenced by Luther, which is good. But Spener began to detect something in Luther that he felt contemporary Lutherans were forgetting. He said, “If Luther should rise again today, he could not recognize as his disciples many of his spiritual descendents.” And what Spener saw in reading Luther is that Luther emphasized both head and heart, both doctrine and piety. Spener felt that too many Lutherans in his time were just satisfied to be Orthodox and did not live for the Lord and love the Lord with all their hearts. This German Lutheran pastor was also influenced by the Dutch Second Reformation, which we talked about earlier in the course, and its parallel movement of English Puritanism.

Spener became a pastor in Frankfurt, and, serving in his Lutheran state church there, he did something very unusual. It does not sound unusual to us, because it is part of normal church life today, but when Spener did it, it was unusual. He began to meet with members of his church in small groups for prayer and Bible study. He called them “*Collegiae Pietatis*,” colleges or groups of piety or spirituality. I suppose this is the beginning of the small group movement, which has been used in various ways from this point on down to the present. And Spener also wrote to promote the spirituality that he hoped to create within his church by small groups of prayer and Bible study. To promote that, he wrote a book, or actually a long preface to a reprinting of another book by Johann Arndt, which is called *True Christianity*. Arndt was a Lutheran pastor who studied with Melancthon and stressed the importance of the work of God and the work of Christ in the heart of man, not just Orthodox head but a renewed and spiritual heart. You can see why Spener would be attracted to Arndt’s writing, and he wrote his own long preface called *Pia Desideria*, or *Heartfelt Desires for a God-Pleasing Improvement of the True Protestant Church*. And in that book that Spener wrote, there is a bold attempt that the church be reformed. Spener mingles frank criticism of the Lutheran Church with a program for renewal and revival that I will try to summarize shortly.

After his time as pastor in Frankfurt, he became connected with the new University of Halle. Actually, Spener had had to make several moves because doing what he had done caused some Lutherans to think that he was not Orthodox. There was something different with this minister, and they were not altogether comfortable with him. So controversy surrounded him, and he moved a number of times, finally going

to Berlin in 1692 at the invitation of the elector of Brandenburg and to the new University of Halle, having just been founded, which now became the center for the Pietist movement. Spener went to Halle, and Halle became synonymous with Pietism in Germany and its influence worldwide.

At Halle, Spener had a very unique colleague, a man named August Hermann Francke. Francke was 27 years younger than Spener, but these two men worked together to further the Pietist movement. Francke was invited by Spener to Halle to serve as professor of Greek and Hebrew. But soon a whole series of institutions began to spring up at Halle. An orphanage, printing press, house for widows, and numerous charitable institutions began to be developed at Halle. As someone has said, these were supported by Francke's faith and not much else. This was not ministry that the state church was supporting, but it was something that Francke believed God would have him do. And Francke wrote a book called *Pietas Hallensis* (Piety of Halle) or—and this is a significant subtitle—*A Public Demonstration of the Footsteps of a Divine Being Yet in the World* about his believing God to create these various institutions. Francke was attempting to say that by believing that God will do great things in the world and praying to Him to do these things, then we can see that God yet exists in the world. That book had great influence in church history. It influenced George Mueller, a German who went to Bristol in England and founded the famous orphanage in Bristol. It influenced Hudson Taylor, who began the China Inland Mission to reach for Christ the Chinese in the inland of that great country. It influenced Amy Carmichael, who went to India and started the Dohnavur Fellowship, and it influenced Francis and Edith Schaeffer, who went to Switzerland to found L'Abri, believing that God would provide for their needs and praying to Him for support of these ministries. Well, that is the first phase of the Pietist movement: the Spener, Francke, Halle movement.

There is a second phase I want to talk about now: the Moravian movement connected with Count Zinzendorf. Spener died in 1705. Zinzendorf was a little boy, only five years old then, but he later became a student at Halle and a lawyer and a Lutheran minister. He combined a number of careers. But he was a man of determined devotion to the Lord: "I have one passion," he wrote, "It is He."

Zinzendorf found his life's work, providentially, when 300 Christians—refugees—called Moravians, came to his estate at Herrnhut in 1722. These Moravians trace their spiritual ancestry back to John Huss, the Protestant martyr of the fifteenth century. And they had been persecuted and exiled from place to place, wandering about, seeking a refuge, when they found Zinzendorf's huge estate. The fact that 300 people can move in with him shows that it must have been a pretty big place. And he took them all in. Nothing much happened for a few years. The Moravian group was disorganized and somewhat embittered by what had happened to it, and certain tensions developed in the fellowship there. And Zinzendorf was discouraged with the whole process of trying to absorb and help these Christian people. But something happened in the summer of 1727 that the Moravians like to speak about as the "Golden Summer." Revival came to this group at Herrnhut, and they were united and blessed by God and used mightily in the work of the Lord in so many ways that I will try to describe in a moment. Eventually these Christians became a separate church, called the Moravian Church, or the United Brethren.

Let me talk now about the distinctives and the contributions of the Pietists and the Moravians. We usually refer to the two movements as separate, but I see it as one movement of Pietism, with the early and later development. And their distinctives are very similar. First, spiritual awakening, revival, renewal in the church, was a concern of the Pietists and the Moravians. And they attempted to do this in two simple ways. First was Bible study. You might think this would have been so obvious that people would have been doing this all along, but by the time we come to the Pietists, people who studied the Bible were the ministers and the church leaders, and people in the church did not study the Bible much. They just listened to the long doctrinal sermons that they were being given week by week. But under the

influence of Spener, personal Bible study and small group Bible study became important in the life of the church and in the life of the individual Christian.

I think as a result of that, we can see something we call biblical theology develop. Whenever you have an emphasis on biblical theology, over against systematic theology, there is a pietistic word somewhere there to underscore and emphasize the need to study the Bible consecutively, as it was written. One of the great Lutheran pastors and Pietists who did so much to further the study of Biblical theology was Johannes Albert Bengel. He wrote a commentary on the New Testament, a penetrating and lengthy exegesis of the New Testament, which was used and admired by John Wesley.

There was not only an emphasis on Bible study, but also an emphasis on prayer. The prayer meeting now became an important part of church life, at least in Pietist circles. Not just the formal Sunday service, but prayer meetings, frequently through the week. In fact, in the Golden Summer of 1727, a prayer meeting started that is very famous in church history. It is a prayer meeting that lasted 100 years. Now, it is not that the whole community prayed for 100 years, but around the clock, 24 hours a day, one man and one woman from the Moravian community at Herrnhut committed themselves to praying. Any time of the day or night at that Moravian center, there were two people praying. And that went on for 100 years, so it is no wonder that prayer is a very important part of the Moravian revival, and it is no wonder that Moravians were able to do some great things as God blessed them and answered their prayers.

One of the important things that the Moravians did was focus on issues of social concern. Certainly Christians had been concerned about the poor and the needy before this, but so often these people, hurt in society and in great need, were forgotten. But the Moravians lived in such a way that they would be able to reach out to those in need. Moravians adopted a very simple lifestyle. They dressed simply and lived simply. They lived in communities in order that they could share what they produced with the needy: the poor, the prisoners, and the sick.

And then it is through the effort and faith of the Pietists and the Moravians that the Protestant church began to become involved in the worldwide mission of the church. We will look at the history of missions a little bit later and put this in context. The Catholics were already quite active for some time, but it took a while for the Protestants to see their responsibility in missions. And as we come to that lesson, we will try to discover why it took so long to happen. But the pioneer movement in Protestant missions was the movement of the Pietists and the Moravians.

The first Protestant missionaries to go out were the Halle missionaries, Pietist missionaries from Halle who went out to India in 1706. That is almost 100 years before William Carey, who is usually referred to as the father of modern missions. And then the second phase of the missionary work of the Pietists came with the Moravians. There is the story of the mission to Saint Thomas in 1732, the mission of Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann, missionaries who went to Saint Thomas to preach to the slaves in that Danish possession, as it was in those days. That story is told in a film called *First Fruits*, which is a very effective picture of the early efforts of the Moravian missionaries. These men knew that if they went to Saint Thomas to preach to the slaves, it could be that they would have to sell themselves into slavery in order to have access to the slaves, and yet they went anyway and began the work of preaching the Gospel in the West Indies.

When I lived in Jamaica, I often preached in large Moravian churches on the south coast and up in the Highlands of the island of Jamaica. The mission to that island was not long after the mission to Saint Thomas in 1732. A man named Christian David went to Greenland in 1733. His mission to Greenland is

celebrated in William Cowper's poem "Hope," which has the line "See Germany send forth / Her sons to pour it [salvation] on the farthest north." And Spangenberg was sent to Georgia in 1735 as a missionary to the American Indians. There is a famous painting in Moravian history that is often referred to. It is called "The Sampling of the Nations." It was painted just 15 years after the two missionaries went to Saint Thomas, and it shows Christ seated on the throne in heaven, surrounded by people from many lands and many countries, and these are actual people with actual names. Some of them are the first converts of the Moravian mission in their great work of "The Sampling of the Nations." Moravian missionary strategy was to go out and preach the Gospel and "sample the nations" to win to Christ some from every tribe and tongue and kindred. And they did that, and we certainly honor the Moravian Church for being the pioneer in the effort of world evangelization.

Now before I end this lesson, I want to talk about another man from Germany, Johann Sebastian Bach. He was born two centuries after Luther. He was born in 1685, just 15 years before Count Zinzendorf, and so his life overlaps to some extent the life of the great Moravian leader. Bach was a German Lutheran. He was not one of the Moravians. Although he greatly appreciated the life of the Pietists, he remained in the state church as a loyal Lutheran. He served for a time as a court musician, but he believed that God was calling him to devote his life to church music, and we know him as "the fifth evangelist." That means Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Bach. He is known as such because he wrote some 300 cantatas, musical sermons with the text usually taken from the Scripture lessons for the day. The minister would prepare the sermon with that text, and Bach would write the music. So, much of the great musical heritage that comes from Bach comes from his week-by-week production of these cantatas.

Bach was also a Bible student and a competent theologian. We know that his library contained many volumes of Luther, and also the writings of Spener and the Pietists. His Bible is at Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis—at least, one of his Bibles. Concordia says the Bach Bible is there, although Dr. Hans Bayer told me that he saw another Bach Bible in Germany one summer. And Bach may very well have had two Bibles. I expect he had a number of Bibles, but one of those Bibles has ended up in Saint Louis at Concordia and is one of the treasures owned by the seminary. It is interesting to have a look at that Bible that Bach owned. It is a version, a copy, of Dr. Martin Luther's great translation, and it has notes in it from one of the Lutheran Orthodox scholars whom I spoke about in an earlier lesson. But Bach had annotated the Bible in various places in the margin, especially in the book of Chronicles, where there is a great deal of information about music. And Bach had written his comments in the margin, drawing from Chronicles and from other places in the Bible, about what he believed is church music that is God-pleasing.

Bach was certainly a Christian who knew his Bible, and his music flowed out of his theological Orthodoxy and biblical knowledge and out of his own personal piety. Often on his musical manuscripts he would place the letters SDG, *solī deo gloria*, "to the glory of God alone." Or sometimes you will find the letters JJ, *Jesu juva*, "Jesus help me" as he worked on these great musical contributions to the history of the church.

Bach died on July 28, 1750. His unfinished chorale, "To before the throne, my God, I stand," which was being dictated because of his failing eyesight, reveals that Bach was genuine to the last bar. This closing verse was on his lips: "Grant that my end may worthy be / And that I wake Thy face to see." Bach often signed his name with his initials, Johann Sebastian Bach, drawn in a way that it looked like a musical note, and certainly we honor this man as one who has made a significant contribution to the history of the church. I was listening to Richard John Newhouse lecturing recently. He was explaining that when he left the Lutheran Church to become a Roman Catholic, one of his dismayed Lutheran friends said to

him, “But what about Bach?” The friend did not say Luther at that moment, but how can you possibly leave Bach?

And so in the history of the church, even though we have come to a period of dead Orthodoxy, there was life. There was life in this new movement of Pietism and its parallel movement, Moravianism, and also in people like Bach and others in the state churches of Europe. Even though in many ways dead Orthodoxy was settling over those churches, there were individuals who loved and served the Lord. I would like for us to end this lesson with words from Johann Sebastian Bach, in the form of a prayer. So, I will pray these words now as we conclude.
Let us pray.

*“Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord!
Be all Thy graces now outpoured
On each believer’s mind and heart;
Thy fervent love to them impart.
Lord, by the brightness of Thy light,
Thou in the faith doth men unite
Of every land and every tongue;
This to Thy praise, O Lord, our God be sung.
Alleluia, alleluia.” Amen.*

Now I will address common questions. What happened to the Moravians after the 300 settled at Herrnhut with Count von Zinzendorf? There were other Moravians elsewhere already, but it was the group at Herrnhut that organized and invigorated the whole movement. So Moravians were scattered throughout Germany, and they tended to move around and take with them their message. They went to England, and there was a very important movement of Moravians that influenced John Wesley. In fact, we will see that Wesley probably converted through the ministry of the Moravians. And their numbers never really grew to be huge, but their influence was very significant. The Moravian Church has lasted all the way down to the present. Two important Moravian centers in the United States are Bethlehem in Pennsylvania and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, both of which were settled by Moravians. But unfortunately the evangelical theology, the missionary vision, and some of the great things that we have been talking about that marked the early Moravian movement are not really characteristic of the modern church.

What is Moravian doctrine? It was Lutheran, but it began to take on these distinctive emphases. At the beginning I would say that Moravian doctrine was Orthodox Evangelical Protestant teaching. The Moravians did in time develop some unfortunate attitudes, I think, in terms of theology. I will just mention two. One was to emphasize a kind of rigidity in Christian living, which at first was very good. There were people who needed to rise up in German culture and say Christians ought to live like Christians. And I certainly think the early emphasis of Moravians was a correct one, but as Francis Schaeffer said, “Sometimes these things can become ends in themselves,” and there was a kind of list mentality that developed in the Moravians that was not altogether healthy. It at first was a real corrective very much needed in German Orthodoxy, then later a kind of end in itself, and then a kind of deadness began to set in.

By the time of the Great Awakening in America, Whitefield, for instance, wanted to like the Moravians. He wanted to feel that he was on the same side with them and they were on the same side with him, but he was suspicious that, in terms of theology, they were beginning to lose interest. So one of the difficult things in church history is to keep a balance. The Moravians corrected a false balance by bringing the

heart back in to go along with the head. And then sooner or later, they lost the head and had only the heart left. What began as a great movement to balance Orthodoxy ended up as an extreme on the other side.

The church polity of the Moravians was very much like the Lutheran Church. It was not congregational precisely, but it had some elements of congregationalism. Church polity was not all that significant for the Moravians, I think, although the organization of their communities was very significant. The Moravian movement was almost like a Protestant order, like the Roman Catholic orders, where people joined and moved together and lived together and ate together and fellowshiped together and worked together. There were not vows like the Roman Catholic orders required, but a kind of communal life existed among the Moravians.

Was Handel equally concerned about church music? Handel and Bach were born at the same time. The very fact that I just mentioned Handel and gave a few minutes of a lesson on Bach shows my impression that Bach was the man whose life was really devoted to God as a church musician. I do not want to judge Handel, because I do not know as much about him, but my impression is that he operated somewhat on another level, and when you look for an example of a person who uses great music for the edification of the church—certainly *The Messiah* was wonderful and has done that—Bach was producing this work constantly, relatively unknown in his time. I have always been amazed to read the biography of Charles Hodge by his son, A. A. Hodge, who tells about Charles Hodge's going to Germany in the early part of the nineteenth century and his letters back home. One of them said, "I just heard music from an old composer that seems interesting, and nobody much knows who he is or talks about him much, but maybe someday he will be better known." And his name was Bach. Hodge was just hearing that music in Germany, so even in Germany it was not as well known as it is today.