The Spirit of Pietism

Robert J. Koester
To my wife, Cathy
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Loescher, *CTV: Part One or Two*—When the English translation is quoted. An asterisk (*) after the *CTV* indicates minor changes have been made in the English translation for clarity. In the relatively few cases where *VTV* is used, the material referenced comes from the original German.


The fact that you have this book in hand means you are interested in the Pietist Movement. This is good, because your interest will give you patience and perseverance to wrestle with the complexities of Pietism and the many different ways it has been evaluated.

The clash between Pietism and Lutheran orthodoxy, like most church battles, was far from a dry, doctrinal struggle. It was a violent clash between the established church and a group from its midst that dared to challenge it.

On the surface, the clash between Pietism and orthodoxy dealt with the question of Christian life. The Pietists were intent on analyzing the state of the Christian’s mind and heart. They asked, “How should Christians view their relationship with God, or we might say, how should they develop their daily ‘walk’ with God? When has a Christian got it right in trying to balance heart and mind? What constitutes true spiritual life? What does it mean to be truly converted? What makes a good minister and a good church member? How do Christians solve the problems that inevitably creep into every church body?”

We can sense tension in the names given the two parties. Pietism and orthodoxy come from the words \textit{piety} and \textit{right teaching}. It immediately raises questions when these terms are used in opposition to each other. They refer to two things that should not be at odds. How can right teaching and a pious life be in competition?

For this reason, many people find it difficult to identify with just one side of this controversy. Some have heard the term \textit{pietist} used in a derogatory way, but they don’t know why. They wonder: “Is being called
a pietist a compliment or a criticism?” Others have heard the phrase *dead orthodoxy* and wonder how orthodoxy, or “right teaching,” can really be dead. A desire to answer these questions and resolve the tension inherent in this topic is unavoidable. If these kinds of issues interest you and you see a need to struggle with them in your own life or in the life of your congregation, you will find this subject interesting.

Pietism is not a dead movement. Much of American Christianity has been influenced to some degree by the spirit of Pietism.¹ Much of Lutheranism, specifically, many of the churches that make up the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), was started by missionaries sent out from the pietistic University of Halle or other agencies who shared its spirit. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, was directly influenced by the Pietists, and his experiential theology was shaped by theirs. In the late 1800s Methodism gave rise to the holiness bodies, which in turn became the seedbed for the Pentecostal church. The early success of the Methodist tent revivals and their emphasis on decision theology heavily influenced many Baptist churches, who found success in adopting their methods. This is not to say that Pietists were Methodists or Baptists in disguise. Yet the goals and spirit of Pietism went a long way to influence and encourage these denominations. As one writer said, “To write the history of Pietism is to write the history of modern Protestantism.”²

A study of Pietism enables confessional Lutherans to understand themselves in relation to many in other Christian churches who seem to be more “alive.” Pastors of confessional Lutheran churches are often compared unfavorably with fiery TV speakers. Sometimes they are looked down on as second-class shepherds by neighboring Baptist or Pentecostal pastors, who have experienced a “second birth.” For orthodox pastors in Germany living in the midst of Pietists, this tension was often much more obvious than their theological differences.

Confessional Lutheran churches and their members can also learn from the problems that gave rise to Pietism. Confessional Lutherans must always evaluate their own faith and ministry. To use Paul’s words, they must watch their life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16). Failure to do this not only harms their personal faith, but it opens their

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church to the kind of criticisms the Pietists leveled against the orthodox. Unless confessional Lutherans discipline and correct themselves in a God-pleasing way, they will find others willing to correct them in ways that may go beyond Scripture.

This study has been written to help you see the undercurrents at work as the movement emerged and developed. I will suggest some possibilities of why the movement arose when and where it did. I do not claim to be able to use the past to predict when such things might happen today. But I believe this story from history will give us confessional Lutherans insights into ourselves and the forces always at work against confessional Lutheranism. May this book help serve the truth we are striving to preserve.
This book is divided into three parts, each approaching the Pietist Movement from a different angle. In Part One, we will explore why the movement started. The answer to this question can only be found in the historical background of the movement. Such background material is often omitted in books on Pietism, or it is dealt with in a cursory way. This has been a personal source of frustration. Studying the background is the only way we can get a feel for why the Pietists challenged the orthodox church of their day and whether or not the orthodox were justified in defending themselves. Without this material, an author can justify his approach to Pietism on little more than cherished clichés.

Looking ahead, in Part Two, we will watch Spener and Francke launch and develop the movement. We will attempt to understand these two men who sincerely wanted to maintain the cause of true orthodoxy, but who ended up starting a movement that did, in fact, undermine orthodox teaching.

In Part Three, we will see how the pietistic spirit manifested itself. The Pietists were convinced they were the true followers of Luther. Their claims were challenged by the last great German orthodox theologian, Valentin Ernst Loescher. Our analysis will rely on primary resource material from the one important debate between the orthodox and the Pietists—that between Valentin Loescher and the Pietist theologian Joachim Lange.

Throughout this book, we will constantly refer to the picture of Germany that is painted here in Part One. We will build on conclusions we draw at the end of this part as to why 17th-century Germany was ripe for this movement.
Chapter 1

An Introduction to Pietism

Pietism in a nutshell

The Pietist Movement was “the single largest movement in the Protestant church in Germany between the Reformation and our day.”¹ It began in the Lutheran church in Germany about 135 years after Martin Luther’s death and about one hundred years after the Lutheran Confessions were assembled into the Book of Concord. The Book of Concord settled the doctrinal disputes that had torn the Lutheran church apart after Luther’s death, and it established peace and a fair amount of unity within the Lutheran church.

Between the printing of the Book of Concord in 1580 and the start of the Pietist Movement in 1675, the Lutheran church went through its share of struggles. Theologically, the church continued to wrestle with opposition from the Reformed and Catholic churches and to refine its answers to their doctrinal challenges.

The Reformed church grew out of the Swiss Reformation under Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin and has been referred to as the second branch of Protestantism. Many Lutherans remained faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. Yet some held a more lenient attitude toward the Reformed. After Luther’s death, there were overtures within the Lutheran church to make peace between the two churches and even to merge them. These desires continued to make themselves felt in the 1600s in what was called the Syncretistic Movement.

The Lutheran church continued to be a state church. The state believed that the church’s main duty was to provide instruction in faith

and morals for the preservation and improvement of society. The state, in turn, protected the church against false teachers and other opponents who tried to harm it. Sadly, a true appreciation of Lutheran teaching and a love for the gospel only occasionally guided the rulers in their relationship with the church.

As an institution, the church fared well during the years of peace following the adoption of the Book of Concord. But the Thirty Years’ War, which ravaged Germany for much of the first half of the 17th century, made church life difficult in the parts of Germany where the armies clashed. The church endured its share of pillage and destruction of property, and its members shared in the increase in immorality that beset much of Germany. This war set back Germany’s development as a nation by a century.

These and other factors caused the church many problems, which some thought called for immediate attention. In 1675, a young pastor in the city of Frankfurt, Philip Jacob Spener, wrote a book called Pia Desideria. The title can be translated as “Pious Desires.” In the Pia Desideria Spener pointed out what he felt to be the church’s faults, and he offered proposals to solve its problems. Spener wanted church members to grow in Bible knowledge and in pious living. Although other Lutheran church leaders had already expressed much of what Spener wrote, Spener did so in a way the seemed to strike a chord in the hearts of many of his fellow pastors, and many listened to him. His proposals on how the problems in the church could be solved were concrete and easy to understand. The Pia Desideria was widely read, and many of Spener’s proposals were adopted by territorial princes and church leaders throughout Germany. Although some opposed him, they were easily refuted. In time, Spener’s followers came to be called Pietists.

If things had not progressed beyond Spener’s proposals, there might not have been a Pietist Movement. In the late 1680s, however, a theological student at the University of Leipzig, August Hermann Francke, became one of Spener’s followers. After struggling with his own lack of morality, Francke had a conversion experience and aggressively began promoting spiritual renewal among his fellow students. Like Spener, he was a brilliant man with extraordinary intellectual and organizational gifts. He immediately drew fire from the established Lutheran church and formed a lifelong partnership with Spener. At this time, Spener was serving as a pastor in Berlin in close association with the Elector of Brandenburg. Francke took the lead in advancing Pietism, and Spener was in a prime position to influence the state on behalf of the Pietists.
After a turbulent start, Francke was called to serve a small congregation on the outskirts of the city of Halle and to teach at the new university there. The university had been started by the Elector of Brandenburg. There Francke’s brilliant organizational abilities, teaching skills, and far-sighted planning helped carve out a center where his ideas, which largely shaped Pietism, found a safe haven and from where it could be spread throughout Europe. With Spener’s help and protection, Francke established a little kingdom at Halle from where he disseminated pietistic ideas and programs.

The Pietists threw Germany into turmoil. Many Lutheran churches became openly pietistic. Many remained orthodox. Both sides tried to use secular leaders to thwart the plans of the other side. Both sides tried to control the universities and the training of the next generation of pastors. Official edicts against Pietism were enacted in one territory after another. Some rulers turned a deaf ear to the controversies. In other territories, the secular leaders supported the new movement.

The orthodox Lutherans also had their spokesmen. Most were less than a match for the Pietists, especially in the early years when Pietism was not fully understood. Spener easily defended himself against specific charges of false doctrine, and this frustrated the orthodox, who continued to feel that something was not quite right with the Pietists. They saw similarities between the Pietists and various sectarian religious groups, but when they accused the Pietists of holding the teachings of those groups, the Pietists, who were indeed Lutheran and had all been taught at orthodox Lutheran universities, could point to their books and sermons to demonstrate their strong Lutheran stand.

A few years after Francke began working at the university at Halle in 1692, a young theologian, Valentin Ernst Loescher, began questioning what the Pietists were doing. Loescher lived from 1673 to 1749, which roughly corresponded to the beginning and the end of the Pietist Movement. Loescher would later be recognized as the last great orthodox Lutheran theologian. He began studying Pietism early in his career. At first, he applauded many of the Pietists’ goals. In fact, throughout his ministry he tried to put some of Spener’s proposals into practice in a way consistent with orthodox Lutheran theology and practice. But he too felt that there was something not quite right with Pietism. He came to a point where he could list major differences between Pietism and orthodoxy.

As soon as Loescher began to write against Pietism and to work to correct what he saw were its problems, he drew heavy fire from Francke
and the other Halle theologians, particularly Joachim Lange. For some 20 years, the German Lutheran church watched as Loescher and Lange battled it out. The general consensus is that Loescher was shown to be the better theologian, both from the standpoint of theology and piety of life. But the handwriting was on the wall. Even as Loescher and Lange started their debate, Pietism had come to dominate many, perhaps most, of the chief Lutheran churches in Germany.

Loescher finally met Francke in person at a meeting in the city of Merseburg in 1719. Loescher was still hopeful that the Pietists and orthodox could come to an agreement. But that was not to happen. The meeting merely served to solidify the walls between the two parties.

In the years after that meeting, orthodoxy gradually died out as a force in the Lutheran church of Germany. Within 30 years, what is called Enlightenment thought and rationalist methods of determining truth would infect the German universities, even universities dominated by the Pietists like those at Halle and Giessen.

Pietism hung on, however, in the personal religion of many German people. Small groups of Pietists continued to meet in churches and in the universities. There Christians could find an alternate means for spiritual growth as they saw their churches adopting a rationalistic view of Scripture and changing the meaning of salvation. Orthodoxy also hung on, but there were few truly orthodox ministers around.

In the early 1800s orthodoxy made somewhat of a comeback in Germany in the German Awakening, which was a reaction to the prevailing rationalism in the German universities. Most notable for American Lutheranism is the emigration of a group of confessional Lutherans to the United States, who would found the Missouri Synod.

**Challenges to studying Pietism**

Interest in the Pietist Movement started immediately after the movement began and has remained constant over the years. Major works about Pietism or one of its leaders began to appear already when August Francke was still alive, and such works proliferated in the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, interest in studying this three-hundred-year-old movement increased dramatically in the second half of the 20th century, mostly in Germany, where a group of scholars has been

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2 Baron von Canstein, a close associate of Spener, wrote the first book-length biography of Spener, published as a forward to Spener’s *Letzte Theologische Bedenken*, a collection of Spener’s thoughts on various topics, published a few years after Spener’s death.
researching primary documents and publishing a constant stream of books and articles.³

The term movement suggests something nebulous, something made up of disparate elements that all revolve around a central theme. Finding the central theme of Pietism is the key. Making one of Pietism’s components into its central theme must be avoided. This was the main fault of the first orthodox critics of Pietism, who drew up long lists of Pietism’s faults and doctrinal errors but failed to understand the real essence of the movement.

Those who study the movement must realize that scholars always filter Pietism through their own theological convictions, which makes it difficult to pick up a book on Pietism and think you are reading an impartial account. (This book is no exception.⁴) For example, most authors in America who write on Pietism have pietistic or pietistic type roots. Almost always, books written in America are sympathetic to Pietism, or if they are critical, their criticism is limited to one or another aspect of Pietism but not to the essence of the movement itself.

American writers face challenges when trying to access material about Pietism. Most research on Pietism has been carried out by German historians, who have explored much of the primary material. But often their books are inaccessible to American writers either because they are hard to find or because they are written in German.

But even Germans find studying Pietism a daunting task. Martin Schmidt, a German and one of the chief 20th-century Pietism scholars, lists three reasons why the study of Pietism is difficult. (1) Pietism is not a unified movement. It had a wide circle of leaders, not all of whom agreed with one another. (2) Those who write on Pietism are likewise divided over their analysis of the movement. So one’s understanding of Pietism will be colored by what secondary sources he reads. (3) The sheer mass of material, rather than helping the scholar, is one of the greatest hindrances to studying the movement. Schmidt writes, “No scholar has a complete overview of the wide ranging events surrounding

³Martin Schmidt, “Epochen der Pietismusforschung,” in Der Pietismus als theologische Erscheinung, Gesammelte Studien zur Geschichte des Pietismus, Band II, (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 34-83. In this article, Schmidt presents a comprehensive survey of Pietism research since its beginning.

⁴It must be stated that this author does not identify with the Pietist Movement. I would have identified with the orthodox Lutheran church of the day, specifically with Christians in the orthodox church who saw the problems and wanted to correct them but were sensitive enough about the nature of confessional Lutheran theology and its spirit that they refused to move outside Lutheranism to do so.
Pietism, and no one has the ability to read all the literature that deals with the subject.” Schmidt writes of his own experience:

There is a huge amount of primary source material, which a single person could not possibly master. He should be happy if he has the opportunity to gain some degree of understanding of the nature, scope, beginnings, and meaning of the movement. I learned this only too well when I was 30 and in June of 1939 stood in the stacks of the main library of the Francke Foundation in Halle and had to ask myself, “And you are going to read all this!” There were about 100,000 volumes there.

If this frustration is true for the person who has everything at his disposal, it is certainly true of the American scholar whose resources are more limited.

Primary resource material on Pietism is available, but the books are few and far between. This may change as organizations like Google Books (books.google.com) attempt to put online everything ever written. Google’s Web site already offers significant resources. Some publishers have photocopied and bound primary material in multivolume sets, but these sets offer a limited amount of material and are very expensive. At the time of this writing, the best sources of primary material in the United States are university libraries, especially in the East and Midwest, whose founders lived when Pietism was still a fairly recent phenomenon. Scholars who came from Europe to teach in the new American universities would have had a row or two of pietistic literature in their personal libraries. When they died, many of their books found their way into the libraries of the universities where they taught and are now sitting in rare book rooms. Searching out those books is challenging, and being able to remove the books or photocopy them for use at home can be a problem.

Secondary resource material is much more common. As mentioned above, much of American research is by scholars with pietistic roots. Confessional Lutheranism is represented by some fine scholars who have written papers on Pietism. But I think it would be safe to say that not many have taken the time to travel to Germany to dig through the

\(^5\) Schmidt, “Epochen der Pietismusforschung,” in Der Pietismus als theologische Erscheinung, p. 34.

\(^6\) Schmidt, “Epochen der Pietismusforschung,” in Der Pietismus als theologische Erscheinung, p. 35.
mountains of primary material Schmidt refers to above. The best secondary resources are written by German scholars, who in their typically thorough way have provided many in-depth studies.

The second half of the 20th century saw a flurry of activity on Pietism, unparalleled since its beginning. German publishing houses have sponsored series of books containing a wealth of articles on Pietism, but these books are very expensive and one needs time to find the major universities that can afford these works and secure the borrowing privileges to use them. Used book stores, accessed over the Internet, are another fruitful source of Pietist literature, but that source is hit and miss.

I mention this so you understand the limitations this author or any author faces as he tries to analyze Pietism. This book is written with the same spirit of humility, and more so, that Martin Schmidt expressed above. No one can see the whole picture or even begin to read all the books on the subject. That does not mean that analysis of the movement is impossible. But it does mean that the reader must accept the fact that the conclusions found in any book on Pietism—this one included—are subject to some degree of modification as the author reads more material.

What you will find in this study of Pietism

A few general remarks are in order on how this book approaches Pietism. Long before aberrations in teaching surfaced in the German Lutheran church, a spirit showed itself in subtle ways—shifts in emphasis, errors of a lesser nature that seemed rather benign at first, and ways of speaking that departed from the norm but could not really be criticized. At this early stage it was much harder to put one's finger on the problems.

In this book, especially in Part Two, I have attempted to explain the subtleties of the pietistic spirit rather than focus merely on doctrinal issues. You, the reader, must understand this, or you might be looking in vain for a strictly doctrinal approach to the issues, and you will become frustrated. The orthodox theologians, trained to evaluate everything doctrinally, attacked the Pietists for doctrinal errors, which the orthodox often had a difficult time proving existed. I don't want to repeat that mistake. Pietism existed in a much more nebulous environment—of methods, motives, and shifted emphases. We will seek to discover that illusive essence, that spirit, that single starting point which will enable us to evaluate all the elements that make up Pietism.

In Part Three, I have attempted to show how the spirit of Pietism shaped the doctrinal aberrations of the movement. As Pietism devel-
oped, it became clear that there were indeed doctrinal differences between Pietists and the orthodox. We will come to see that these differences were not chiefly generated by arguments over Scripture’s interpretation but by the presence of a spirit that to this point had not surfaced in the Lutheran church. When we understand this, we will be able to understand why the Pietists taught and spoke as they did and we will grasp what was behind their doctrinal aberrations. We will be able to see why the Pietists and orthodox Lutherans could remain so close to each other in doctrinal expressions, but still live in very different religious worlds. And we will understand why the doctrinal controversies evolved as they did.

Germany at the time of the Pietist Movement

It is tempting to start an account of Pietism with its founder, Philip Jacob Spener. But such an approach will leave us frustrated. Pietism did not begin apart from its historical context. The more a person studies the Pietist Movement, the more important the background material becomes. We will look at this in Part One. I ask the reader’s patience in working through this background material. I am convinced that this amount of background material is not overkill but necessary if we are to come to any conclusions at all about why Pietism developed.

Chapters 2 through 4 in Part One are divided into subjects and situations that we will call topics. These topics have all been suggested as factors contributing to the movement, some by the Pietists, some by the orthodox, and some by later historians. I’ve divided those topics into three groupings: (1) topics relating to the political and demographical makeup of 17th-century Germany, (2) topics relating to the German Lutheran church itself, and (3) topics relating to spiritual trends going on in the world around Germany that influenced German Lutherans.

To illustrate the problem we will address in these three chapters, some say Pietism arose because of the problems caused by the state-church system in Germany. Others say the Pietist Movement arose because of the unedifying way orthodox preachers preached and because they were derelict in their duties. Others say it arose because of the decline in morality in the Lutheran church of the day.

In response, we might ask a series of questions: Which alleged factors were merely things that happened to be going on when Pietism broke out and really didn’t contribute to the outbreak of the movement at all? Which factors had what we might call an indirect influence on Pietism’s outbreak, that is, things that perhaps helped Pietism develop in 17th-century Germany but which would not be necessary in
another religious setting for a pietistic-type movement to develop there? Finally, which factors are elements that are always associated with Pietism and might lead to something like Pietism developing in any historical context?

For example, if a political situation that parallels the state-church system in Germany is not present in the United States, does that mean that confessional Lutherans in the US will never see something like Pietism develop in their churches? Or if Pietism is justified as a reaction to poor preaching or immorality in the church, does that mean the church cannot address these problems short of something like a pietistic movement? It would be sad to attribute Pietism to some particular factor, only to see Pietism come in through the backdoor, so to speak, because of other factors that were overlooked.

To put it yet another way: which factors are historically connected to German Lutheran Pietism and which are transcultural and would contribute to an outbreak of Pietism in any culture? I believe it is not necessary to duplicate the social and religious context of 17th-century Germany to have a fertile place for Pietism to grow. It can grow in any environment.

That said, it is my conclusion that certain conditions and trends will likely be present in a religious community—at least to some extent—for Pietism to find fertile ground there. At the end of chapter 3, I will draw these topics together and offer my opinion on which factors are transcultural. You may or may not agree with me, but I hope that at least you will have acquired a framework on which to draw your own conclusion about why Pietism came about. At the least, you will understand a little about the world in which Philip Spener and August Francke lived and realize that what they did and said did not come about by chance.

The German political setting

To understand many of our topics, it is necessary to understand the German political setting at the time of the controversy.

When you study Pietism, you read about counts, margraves, barons, dukes, princes, electors, and other titles given the landholders, rulers, and nobility in Germany. For example, you will come across Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a Pietist nobleman, who opened his lands to Christians who had been driven out of their own lands and were in need of a place of refuge. You might hear about Baron von Canstein, a nobleman who did not reside on an estate but was one of the many noblemen who served at the court of some important prince. Von
Canstein worked in the court of the Elector of Brandenburg and used his post to aid the Pietists.

You hear about territories, free cities, estates, and an empire ruled by an emperor who ironically lived outside of Germany. Referring again to von Zinzendorf, he was a relatively minor nobleman who owned a relatively small piece of land, one of the three hundred or so distinct parcels of land into which Germany was divided. To confuse matters even more, many of these smaller territories were located within the boundaries of a larger territory ruled by a prince. In most cases, the prince’s territory would lie in the territory of an elector, an even higher power yet.

A study of German Lutheranism and of the Pietist Movement would be easier if Germany had been a single nation with a ruler who either accepted the movement or fought against it. Then Germany’s history would parallel the religious history of nations like France or England, where a single religion dominated the country and where minority religions were suppressed. But Germany was not really a country at all; it was a collection of independent or semi-independent estates, territories, and cities. Each territory had its own history of how it accepted, tolerated, or rejected Pietism. Small territories often had to deal with the politics and religious beliefs of the ruler of the larger territory it was in.

When we look at a map of 17th-century Europe, we see various countries with distinct borders. There is a lot of white space between the borders, which indicates a relatively large area under a single ruler. Some of the countries are familiar to us from our knowledge of modern Europe. Moving clockwise from the north, there is Poland, Austria, Bohemia, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands, England, and the Scandinavian countries.

But right in the middle of those nations we see what looks like a can of worms. That’s Germany. What we are looking at is a cluster of lands, like little countries, all bound together by a common language and a national consciousness.

Why Germany was a can of worms

To understand why the map of Europe looked as it did, we must go back to ancient times when the Roman Empire captured the vast lands that lay to its north, which today we call Europe. Rome maintained control of those northern lands for several hundred years. Eventually, the inhabitants of those lands, whom the Romans called barbarians, overran Italy and Rome and themselves became the rulers of the Roman Empire.
The natural way to govern this area with its vast forests and relatively sparse population was through local rulers, who controlled large parcels of land. In general, these rulers lived in fortified towns, where the townspeople would provide the normal products and services the town needed. Outside lived the peasants, who tilled the land and supplied the territory with food. This arrangement was called the feudal system, and it served Europe well enough in the days before more centralized governments were established. The Church of Rome was always active doing mission work among the early Germanic tribes and attempted to meet the spiritual needs of the people, while the rulers administered secular affairs.

During the years after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Church of Rome, under the pope, supplied some stability to the western part of the Roman Empire. (The eastern part of the empire had it hands full with the Muslims, who were quickly advancing north and west into what had formerly been the heartland of Christianity, namely, Israel and Asia Minor.) About A.D. 800, the pope arranged for the ruler of one of the barbarian nations to become king over the lands of what had been the Roman Empire. Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, was named “Caesar” over what the pope called the Holy Roman Empire. The resurrected Roman Empire would now be ruled by a non-Roman who would protect the people and their faith. The pope in Rome would be the spiritual head over the empire, and he retained for himself the right to crown subsequent rulers—emperors, as they were called—of the Holy Roman Empire.

The empire was divided into three kingdoms. The western part became France. The central part, which stretched from the North Sea southward, broke up into a number of smaller territories. The modern nations of Belgium and Luxembourg are among the remnants of those territories. The third kingdom, the Germanic kingdom, lay to the east of the Rhine River. This latter group of territories, under the leadership of the emperor, continued to be called the Holy Roman Empire and was the political arena in which the Reformation and Pietism arose.

After Charlemagne’s dynasty died out, there were no clear rules for appointing successors. Subsequent emperors were chosen by vote of the empire’s feudal rulers. At first, the Holy Roman Emperor was chosen from among the empire’s chief rulers. In time, however, dynasties developed, the last and greatest being the Hapsburg dynasty. This dynasty

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was in power all during the Reformation years and throughout the pietistic controversy. Europe lived under this arrangement until 1807, when the empire was disbanded.

Over the years changes took place in the empire. First, the election of the emperor changed from a vote of the feudal rulers to a vote by a select group of rulers called electors. At first, there were six, then seven, who held this position. Three were church leaders, who by this time actually ruled over German territories, and four were secular rulers. The electors of Saxony and Brandenburg played major roles in the Pietist Movement.

The boundaries of feudalism morphed into a vast system of territories, and feudal rulers became the princes, dukes, counts, and other rulers who were in power at the time of the Reformation and the later Pietist Movement. At the time of the rise of Pietism, Germany was divided into roughly 30 major territories and hundreds of subterritories. The borders of these territories twisted and turned over the German countryside. From time to time the borders changed, either because of wars, political agreements, or marriages. Each decade brought changes—some minor, some major.

In the centuries before the Reformation, the territories throughout the empire that shared a common language and culture were being unified under powerful rulers. The smaller territories within the borders of those emerging nations allied themselves under a single ruler, a king; and the territorial princes became administrators under a king rather than actual rulers. These territories became the European countries we know today: Spain, France, England, Poland, and Hungary. (Austria was part of the lands still referred to as the Holy Roman Empire. Austria is where the emperor lived and had already been unified under his direct control.)

The only nation that didn’t coalesce into a single nation was Germany. Germany kept the deeply entrenched political divisions it had lived under for centuries. One historian compared the other nations to whirlpools, where everything swirled into a single center of power, while Germany was like the blades of a propeller, where the forces were actually working to spin control away from a central point.

In light of the hundreds of political units out of which present-day Germany was made, the political history of Germany in the 16th century makes the knees of the even the most intrepid historians grow

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8 Wilson, From Reich to Revolution, p. 22.
weak. Studying the history of nations like France or England presents many challenges, but at least their histories can be told using the outlines of kings, queens, centralization of power, major battles, and various movements and individuals that stand out above the rest. In Germany, however, each territory (or estate) had its own private history. It is possible, but difficult, to study the interplay among these many territories, the changes of their borders, their growth and decline in power, and the characteristics of their rulers.

A complete understanding of German politics is not necessary for a study of Pietism. But a description of the earlier Reformation period will afford some concrete examples of how German politics was deeply intertwined with the spread and development of the Reformation. They illustrate how things worked in Germany during the development of Pietism.

The Lutheran Reformation didn’t actually start in Germany (the general region) but in one of the more powerful territories of Germany: Saxony. Humanly speaking, if Luther had started his work in another territory, the Reformation might not have happened. (Saxony also remained the seat of confessional Lutheranism throughout the pietistic period.)

Saxony was one of the larger territories, located in central Germany, a little to the north and east of center. Saxony was the territory of one of the seven electors. In fact, it was home to one of the most powerful of the electors. The electors as a body were responsible for choosing a new emperor. Should an emperor die suddenly, however, some of his power would be at the disposal of one of the electors, who would exercise that power until a new emperor was chosen. If there was no emperor for a longer period, the elector of Saxony would temporarily assume the role of emperor.  

When Luther began the Reformation—as a professor at the new university that the elector of Saxony had started in the city of Wittenberg—he drew immediate fire from the pope. He also drew fire from the emperor, a member of the Catholic Hapsburg dynasty, who wanted to stop Luther both to support the pope and to maintain unity in the empire. During this time, territorial leaders saw religious plurality as a threat to national security. But the elector of Saxony, Frederick the

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11 Wilson, *From Reich to Revolution*, p. 21.
12 This attitude was not limited to Catholics. Lutheran princes shared this attitude and were often not open to more than one religion existing in their territories. Wilson writes,
Wise, was not willing to hand Luther over to the emperor, nor was he willing to stop Luther himself.

Soon after Luther spoke out publicly, he was called to stand before the emperor and defend his teachings at one of the regular business meetings of the empire. The meeting was held in the city of Worms, outside the territory of Saxony. At that meeting, Luther was not given a chance to defend himself but told to take back everything he had written. To that, Luther exclaimed, “Here I stand.”

Luther was immediately declared to be an outlaw of the empire, fair game for anyone to kill. If this had been France or even England, Luther would have been put to death immediately. But the Lord used the politics of the empire to keep Luther and the Reformation alive. Elector Frederick had Luther kidnapped immediately after he left Worms and spirited away to a castle inside Saxony, where Luther was kept until it was safe for him to return to public life under the elector’s protection.

Why didn’t the emperor prepare his army and force Frederick into submission? For at least two reasons. First, the emperor’s own army was not always that powerful. From a military standpoint, he was often not as strong as one of the territories he ruled. Some of the princes he oversaw could gather an army large enough to defeat him in battle, which did, in fact, happen on one occasion later in Reformation history.13 Second, the empire itself was being threatened by an outside power. The Muslims had taken much of Hungary, which bordered the

“Despite their deep doctrinal divisions, all Catholic and Lutheran rulers regarded religious conformity as an essential prerequisite for political stability” (Wilson, From Reich to Revolution, p. 32). This would vary by prince, of course, but it was not until after the Thirty Years’ War that this began to change, when “Territories were henceforth designated as Protestant or Catholic according to their predominant religion in 1624. Their rulers were still free to convert, but could no longer compel their subjects to follow suit. Minorities who had existed in 1624 received the formal protection of imperial law, breaking the earlier insistence that political stability required religious conformity” (Wilson, From Reich to Revolution, p. 139).

Wilson gives us some details: “. . . while 31 leading princes converted to Catholicism between 1652 and 1769, including the rulers of Saxony (1697), Wuerttemberg (1733) and Hessen-Kassel (1754). Each ruler was obliged to issue formal guarantees, known as Reversalien, protecting his subjects’ faith and religious institutions” (p. 149). Holland was one country that allowed complete freedom of religion, and it became a home for radical sects. Many radical books were published there and disseminated throughout Europe.

13After Luther’s death, the emperor united the princes who remained faithful to the Catholic church and he went to war against the Lutheran princes. He defeated them in what is called the Smalcald War. He was able to defeat them only because a Lutheran prince defected to his side with the promise that if the emperor won, this prince, Maurice, would be made elector of Saxony. In time, however, Maurice realized his mistake. To make things right, he assembled his army, attacked the emperor, and defeated him.
empire on the east, and threatened to continue their march westward. Since the emperor needed the armies of the territories to help him defeat the Muslims, he had to maintain political peace in the empire.

Some nine years after the imperial meeting at Worms, another imperial meeting was held in Augsburg. By this time many princes had become followers of Luther. At that meeting, the Lutheran princes presented to the emperor their confession, which came to be called the Augsburg Confession. The power of the princes and Luther’s spiritual zeal kept the emperor at bay until after Luther died.

This history is familiar to anyone who has studied the Reformation. I tell it because it helps us understand the political dynamics at work in Germany. This brief example shows us (1) the relative sovereignty of the German territories, (2) the fact that the emperor was an elected monarch rather than a true sovereign leader, (3) the power of the electors, and (4) the fact that although it was divided up into many territories, Germany viewed itself as a single nation, ready to defend itself against outside power, in this case the power of the emperor.

Over time, this relationship would change a bit. After the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), the emperor was weakened. His political goal in the war had been to undo religious and political division in the empire caused by the Reformation and to unite the Holy Roman Empire, particularly the German territories, under his leadership. He was not able to accomplish this and suffered in trying. As we move into the years after the Thirty Years’ War, a number of things gradually began to change in Germany. The country became more secular. Princes began solidifying their power, current political theory stressed more toleration for all religions, and we see the position of “prince” shift from a father figure in his own territory to a more formal governmental position. There were fewer princes, holding more power, and administering their territories with large courts filled with many lawyers and administrators.

This description of German politics helps us understand how Pietism spread. More often than not, it spread through the royal houses of Germany. The centers of pietistic activity were, for the most part, the large city churches, which were closely overseen by the state, and the universities, which were all built, funded, and staffed by the rulers of the territories where they were located.

As we will see, the Pietists and the orthodox both used the political system to advance their cause. In one area of Germany, Pietism could be nearly outlawed, while in another area it was allowed and even encouraged, all depending on the prince’s religious convictions. In some territories, edicts against Pietists were enacted but were not effective,
since the offending Pietists simply found a more congenial territory in which to live and work. Ironically, the University of Halle, the center of pietistic influence, was fostered by the non-Lutheran elector of Brandenburg in order to undercut the influence of the orthodox Lutheran princes in his territory and to consolidate the Pietists’ power in his court.

In spite of all its divisions, however, Germany considered itself a single nation. It spoke one language, held the same customs, and used a common organizational framework. The German Lutheran church considered itself one church. And when it came to training pastors and staffing congregations, engaging in theological debate, and, of course, evaluating false teachers in its midst, the German Lutheran church considered itself a single entity.

**Major territories and cities of interest**

The territory of Electoral Saxony, located near the center of Germany, was one of the most powerful territories; its ruler was an elector. This is where the cities of Wittenberg and Leipzig were located. Saxony was where the Reformation began, and it remained the center of Lutheran orthodoxy. Valentin Loescher served as a professor at the University of Wittenberg before moving to Dresden, at that time the Saxon capital and home of the Saxon elector. The university’s officials and Leipzig’s leaders drove out August Francke for his unorthodox tendencies.

To the north of Saxony lay Brandenburg, also the home of an elector and an important player in the pietistic controversy. The elector of Brandenburg was non-Lutheran, a member of the Reformed church. He started the University of Halle (a Lutheran city) in his territory. Halle was located in a small detached section to the south of the main territory of Brandenburg, not far from Leipzig and Wittenberg. There, right at the doorstep of Lutheran orthodoxy, the University of Halle became the center of the Pietist Movement under August Francke’s leadership. Near the end of his life, Philip Spener was called to supervise the Lutheran churches in Berlin. There he proved invaluable to the Pietists by influencing the elector to supply the University of Halle with Pietist professors and in general giving advice to the Berlin court that would help the Pietists.

The territory of Hesse-Darmstadt—whose prince was a pious, orthodox Christian—was among the first territories to adopt Pietism under the influence of Philip Spener. That territory lay to the west-southwest of Electoral Saxony. Adjacent to it was the imperial city of Frankfurt. Frankfurt was the place where Spener would become pastor and where the Pietist Movement began. An imperial city, also called a free city,
was another organizational piece of the German political puzzle. Free cities were under the direct control of the emperor and were independent of princes in the territories surrounding them. We will see that this distinction gave Spener a certain freedom to carry out changes in his own congregation without outside interference. Hamburg was another imperial city, one of Germany’s port cities near the North Sea, and a strongly confessional Lutheran city. Hamburg would be heavily influenced by Pietists and became a seat of strong anti-Pietist sentiment.

The territory of Wuerttemberg to the south developed its own brand of Pietism. We won’t deal with Wuerttemberg Pietism in this book. It was a mild form of Pietism that worked within the established church. The famous Pietist and Bible scholar Albrecht Bengel lived and worked in Wuerttemberg. His was one example of a distinct style of Pietism.

**The three social classes**

German society at this time, like most of Europe, was divided into three estates: the clergy, the nobles, and the commoners. The three estates were marked by the way they were addressed, by seating arrangements at public functions, and by their clothing. The class society reflected the attitude that people were born with unequal amounts of energy and ability, and that the estates were to contribute to a stable society according to their abilities. The American idea that a person can rise from the stockroom to the boardroom, or that anyone can become president of the United States, is the opposite of the class system. The class system helps us modify our judgment on orthodox Lutheranism when we are tempted to criticize it for keeping the laity largely out of the decision-making process in the church. The church was simply reflecting class consciousness. With all their talk of the priesthood of all believers, mainstream Pietists did not freely cross class lines in the administration of their churches either.

The clergy were called the first estate, since their work was to pray for the salvation of the nation. Clergy at this time made up about 2 percent of the population. To some extent the clergy resembled a class, since many clergymen came from families whose fathers and grandfathers had

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14For a discussion of the three classes, see Wilson, *From Reich to Revolution*, pp. 63-78, and Gagliardo, *Germany Under the Old Regime*, pp. 152-176. Gagliardo cautions against oversimplifying the three-tiered structure and notes a much more complicated ordering of society within the three classifications, p. 152. Wilson adds another category, “outcasts,” or those who were not part of any class, pp. 75-78. Nevertheless, while reading literature of the early 18th century, one does run across references to the three estates.
been pastors for generations. Yet some were drawn from the upper levels of the third estate and entered the pastoral estate through schooling and ordination. Few nobles became members of the clergy because of the low pay and their complete dependence on the princes, and few peasants became pastors because of costly educational requirements.

The second estate, the nobility, was hereditary. To the common person, the nobility was actually viewed as the first estate because of its power. By 1800 there were about 50,000 families representing about 250,000 individuals who could claim nobility. Unlike the clergy, only rarely did a member of one of the other two estates become part of the nobility. Rarely did a member of the nobility marry outside his or her class. There was the “landed nobility,” that is, nobles who owned and administered an estate. Many noblemen, however, did not own land, but served at the courts of the more important princes and electors. Many served as officers in the military. In Germany, the nobility was not a leisure class. It was a working nobility, “and the lifestyle permitted the vast majority of nobles by their income, regardless of its source, was generally modest and in more than a few cases downright frugal.”

The third estate was made up of the vast majority of people. Most were peasants, working the land outside the cities. The rest lived in towns and were spread along the usual spectrum of urban dwellers—the poor and what we would call the middle and upper-middle classes. The nobles owned almost all the land. Besides farming, German peasants also engaged in industries like mining, but although they had rights, their status was little better than that of a serf.

The class distinctions were rigidly observed, even in church, “where elevated and upholstered places were reserved for the upper classes and only the common people sat on hard seats in the nave. The upper classes often insisted on having their baptisms, weddings, funerals, and communions in private (whether in the church or at home). . . .”

**Size and population of Germany**

Finally, it will be helpful to understand the size and population of Germany. When we speak about emperors, kings, counts, and princes, we may envision grand cities crowded with people and a prosperous

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15 Gagliardo, *Germany Under the Old Regime*, p. 159.
16 Gagliardo, *Germany Under the Old Regime*, p. 5.
peasant population providing the land with wealth. The following statistics should help us put Germany into perspective.

In 1600, Germany (or more accurately, the German part of the empire) had between 16 and 17 million inhabitants, with a population density of 75 to 80 people per square mile. Very few towns had more than 50,000 or even 25,000 permanent residents, with 90 percent of the towns having fewer than 1,000 people.

German lands in the 17th century were about the same size as Texas, with a population density roughly the same as that of Wisconsin minus the larger cities of Milwaukee and Madison. It would have had the same demographic feel as most of Wisconsin—the countryside filled with forests and farms, sprinkled with small and medium-sized towns. And so, a prince’s subjects might number in the mere hundreds, a large territory might be equivalent to a half dozen Texas counties, and a great university might offer several advanced degrees, but be no larger than a local community college today.

With this background we can now discuss the first topic that plays a role in the emergence of Pietism, the state-church system.