



**DEEPER**

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# THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage (Part Two)

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush (lthrush@bicus.org) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, *Theologian in Residence (Great Lakes BIC)* mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com (631) 871-8339

## I. THREE STREAMS: THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

*What is it that makes us Brethren in Christ as opposed to any other variety of Christian?* This question is particularly important as increasing numbers of our congregation members and those of us in ministry come from outside of the denomination. For some, both traditional Brethren in Christ practices and doctrinal postures are first learned during our credentialing coursework rather than through lived experience. And even a lifelong affiliation with the BIC might not mean that one’s discipleship journey has been substantially informed by such values.

Lisa Weaver-Swartz and Zach Spidel (both members of the Great Lakes Conference) recently drew attention to these issues in the pages of *Brethren in Christ History & Life*.

Their conclusions are that the Brethren in Christ “*is in deep need of identity work*” (Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values,” 294) and that “*there is not now one consistent ethos that is identifiably Brethren in Christ*” (Spidel, “From Practice to Methods,” 353). These findings have revealed a need to recapture “collective memory” by developing “cultural resources” to reinvigorate a distinct BIC identity (Weaver-Swartz, 293-295).

The Brethren in Christ is currently engaged in such reinvigoration through the *Project 250* initiative, which is developing additional discipleship resources, investing in ministry and missionary training, and helping to better equip BIC churches to minister to the demographic realities of our communities. Although not a part of *Project 250*, the *Deeper* resource series is also produced towards the goal of promoting the Brethren in Christ identity.

This particular resource is the second part of a series that I have titled *THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage*. This series is designed as an introduction and overview of the three major

### In This Resource...

Three Streams: BIC Theological Heritage	1
The Pietists	2
Sidebar: Membership Covenants	3
The Pietists & the BIC	4
Additional Resources	7
Credentialing Update	7

theological traditions (Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism) that inform the BIC's statements of doctrine and practice. This edition focuses on the Pietist movement and how it has shaped the BIC's theological worldview.

## II. THE PIETISTS

Pietism is one of the most influential yet also lesser known traditions in Protestant Christianity. For many Christians a daily rhythm marked by prayer and personal devotion time is the primary means by which their faith is nourished. And we are sustained on our journey through small groups and Bible studies. If you count these among your spiritual practices, you likely received them in a context that was influenced by Pietism. But what *is* Pietism? The definition is a bit more complex than most folks assume. In his summary of the Pietist movement, Brethren in Christ historian Carlton O. Wittlinger remarked:

*In the midst of the doctrinal disputations and lack of Christian morality, characteristic of European life in the seventeenth century, the Pietists asserted that Christianity is essentially a personal, heartfelt relationship of the individual to God. Such a relationship, they believed, bore outward fruit in Christian love, resulting in a practical, applied Christianity. To produce this kind of religious experience, they stressed Bible study, prayer, and conventicles or gatherings of earnest Christians for mutual edification. (Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 8)*

Wittlinger's mention of "outward fruit" and "applied Christianity" is important, as the Pietists viewed one's personal relationship with God as closely tied with the needs of those around them:

*"Far from being a form of Christianity that ignores the world while focusing on the interior life, historic Pietism offers us a role model for embracing a holistic biblical faith. Keenly aware of the destructive movements in their social contexts, the original Pietists responded with hope and confidence in God's ultimate goal: the transformation of themselves and all Creation." (McDermond, "Pietism," 111)*

Pietism is noteworthy in that it influenced most Protestant traditions (including Lutheranism, Methodism, and, eventually, the Brethren in Christ), bringing about a lasting difference in how the Christian life, conversion, and personal piety were understood. This occurred because Pietism "*sought not to erect a new, distinctive church entity but to revive individual Christian life and practice. Its common denominator was a vital experience and relationship with God. It relegated such divisive issues as sacramental practice, church structure, and theological systems to secondary and marginal status.*" (Keefer, "Three Streams," 33)

The Pietist emphasis on a vibrant, socially-engaged devotional life continues to impact the Brethren in Christ theological outlook. It informs our social ethos as a community of prayer, fellowship, and commitment to one another in unity. And, as we shall see, this worldview blended naturally with the existing Anabaptist values of the earliest Brethren in Christ.

### History

Because Pietism was a reform movement *within* pre-existing denominations, its history can be briefly summarized. It must be stressed that these developments occurred in response to a perceived over-emphasis on doctrinal precision in various Protestant traditions and the social/religious turmoil caused by the *Thirty Years War*. A few highlights are worth noting to locate the earliest Pietists in their social contexts:

- **1618–1648:** The *Thirty Years War* between various European powers resulted in the deaths of several million Europeans. Against this background came calls for religious renewal and a return to simple Christian morals.
- **1675:** German Lutheran preacher Philipp Spener published the *Pia desideria* (from which we get the word “Pietist”). This work argued for a recommitment to Christian virtues through a greater focus on the devotional life, group Bible studies, and moral (rather than polemical) preaching.
- **1692:** Early Pietist leader August Hermann Francke was appointed as a professor at the University of Halle in Germany. Francke and his students developed hospitals, orphanages, schools for the poor, and other services. Their work helped spread Pietist values and was influential on the developing missions movement.
- **1727:** Count von Zinzendorf and the Moravian community at Herrnhut, Germany experienced Pietistic religious revival coupled with a missionary impulse. The Moravians quickly established missionary outposts in the Americas and Africa. This community’s ethos influenced John Wesley and the Methodist movement.
- **Late-1700s:** Martin Boehm, a German-speaking preacher, spread the Pietist idea of “new birth” conversion to Mennonites in the Lancaster, Pennsylvania region. Pietistic revivals during this period proved influential among the families and congregations that would eventually organize as the Brethren in Christ.

### Membership Covenants

New members of BIC churches are asked to join in a *Membership Covenant*, the wording of which reflects Pietistic values. Here is the text of the covenant:

*“As a member of the Brethren in Christ Church, I accept the Bible as the Word of God in which is revealed the way of salvation and the guide for faith and conduct. I witness to a personal experience of God’s saving grace in my heart and express desire and purpose to live a holy life, apart from sin and separated unto Christ. I covenant as a member of this Brethren in Christ Church to be loyal to the congregation, to consent to instruction in Bible doctrine, to support and sustain the services of the congregation by my regular attendance and prayers, to contribute to the program of the church as the Lord prospers me, and to foster a spirit of Christian fellowship and oneness within the church.”*

**Manual of Doctrine & Government (2022), pg. 61**

### Theological Views & Practices

A hallmark of Pietism was the belief that the Christian walk was *primarily* centered around a vibrant relationship with God rather than theological precision. The result of such centering was that Pietism developed *postures* and *practices* instead of detailed theological statements. Here are some major Pietistic beliefs:

**Personal Faith & Conversion:** The Pietists firmly believed that Christianity was a *lived* faith rather than a demographic description, and located the start of this faith in the idea of a *new birth*, or conversion. It was through personal conversion that the truthfulness of the Christian message (laid out in the Scriptures) was *internalized* on the part of the believer.

**Centrality of Love:** For the Pietists, the vibrancy of one's relationship with God was closely associated with how they loved others, especially those within the community of faith. The result of this posture was that mutual love often took precedent over doctrinal precision in terms of maintaining fellowship.

**Practicing Prayer:** A life deeply marked by prayer was near the center of the Pietist outlook. On this matter, see the collection of personal testimonies to the practice and power of prayer among 20th century Brethren in Christ families written by Ronald R. Sider, Professor Emeritus of Music at Messiah College (mentioned below).

**Emphasis on Fellowship:** In the Pietist understanding faith was nourished in community. They also believed in the priesthood of all believers. For this reason they stressed the benefit of "small groups for devotional study of the Bible, prayer, testimony, and intimate Christian fellowship" (Keefer, "Three Streams," 32).

**Social Consciousness:** Historical Pietists held a hopeful vision about Christian engagement and believed that sincere Christians ought to and in fact could improve society. They believed that the same Spirit who empowered the early church could transform their communities, and the devotional life cultivated by prayer and Bible study was pursued with such transformation in mind. This hopeful attitude led them to create orphanages, schools, and hospitals for communities ravaged by war. It also led them to engage worldwide in missions work.

### III. THE PIETISTS & THE BRETHERN IN CHRIST

Like Anabaptism, Pietism influenced the Brethren in Christ's theological worldview from an early date. In fact, Pietistic components of our heritage can be found in the earliest doctrinal statements produced by the BIC. Writing about those statements, BIC pastor, professor, and bishop Owen Alderfer observed:

*"Our deepest roots are in pietism and revival. The impulse of the spiritual ferment in Lancaster County in the latter third of the eighteenth century had risen in features discernible in pietism wherever it emerged: Reaction to nominal religion, biblical centrality, heartfelt religion, warm Christian fellowship, enhanced piety, and Christian discipline, Christian assurance, and spiritual idealism. Every shred of written evidence in our first hundred years testifies to such a heritage."*

(Alderfer, "Rationale for a Colloquy on the Holy Spirit and the Holy Life." Cited in Robert Douglass, "Understanding the Work of the Holy Spirit," *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): 355).

This influence can still be traced in our faith community two centuries later. Brethren in Christ theologian and historian Luke L. Keefer Jr. observed the impact of Pietism in five areas of the BIC experience:

- **Conversion:** both Pietism and the BIC assume a belief that personal awareness of sin, repentance, and the experience of God's grace are essential to the Christian life.
- **Preaching:** both traditions hold an expectation that God continues to speak in and through the church's preaching and teaching ministry.
- **Worship:** both traditions assume God's accessible presence with his people in prayer and worship.
- **Ethos:** the BIC commitments to corporate study of the Scripture, sharing to meet one another's needs, and a rejection of worldly attitudes and behaviors each reflect Pietist themes.
- **Missions/Evangelism:** From the Pietists the BIC has inherited a sincere desire to see others experience God's Kingdom through conversion. (Keefer, "Pietism, 'Heartfelt Religion,'" 461-462)

Traces of Pietism can also be found in our denominational statements. The following excerpts from the Brethren in Christ *Manual of Doctrine & Government* (2022 edition) include (or assume) Pietistic values:

***Coming to Faith***

“The response of faith is a personal reliance on God’s grace and a turning from sin to righteousness. Repentance involves an acknowledgement of sin. It is expressed in genuine sorrow, forsaking sin, and a change in attitude toward God, preparing for the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit. Repentance includes a willingness for reconciliation and restitution.” (*Manual of Doctrine & Government*, page 9)

***New Life in Christ***

“All who come to faith in Christ are born again, receive the Holy Spirit, and become children of God. They are acquitted of all guilt for sin, are granted the righteousness of Christ, and are reconciled to God. Persons thus justified by grace through faith enjoy peace with God, are adopted into God’s family, become part of the church, and receive the assurance of eternal life. We become new creatures in Christ, regenerated by the Holy Spirit. This change of heart becomes evident in the development of Christlike character and a walk of obedience to God. Conversion is expressed in a changed life with new direction, purposes, interests, and values. The new life in Christ is developed through Christian spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study of Scripture, fasting, self-denial, stewardship, and fellowship.” (*Manual of Doctrine & Government*, page 9)

***Congregational Governance, Article 3: Church Membership***

Members will have “expressed a personal desire to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and a desire to live as an obedient disciple, and evidenced new life in Christ.” (*Manual of Doctrine & Government*, page 60)

I also note with favor our denominational posture towards theological debates and disagreements:

“Believers should promote Christian community and fellowship in openness and concern for one another and in sharing one another’s burdens. Consideration should be given for those having differing opinions. Schismatic activities should be avoided, but when conflicts do arise, Christians should seek reconciliation as outlined in Matthew 18:15-22. It is inappropriate for Christians to involve a fellow believer in litigation (1 Corinthians 6:1).” (*Statements of Christian Life & Practice*, Article 3.1 [*Manual of Doctrine & Government*, page 20]).

In the spirit of Pietism, the Brethren in Christ has historically welcomed debate and disagreement on certain theological matters within the greater bonds of brotherhood and unity. Such debates have been carried out in our churches and denominational meetings, and also within the pages of BIC affiliated publications like *The Evangelical Visitor*, *Brethren in Christ History & Life*, and *Shalom! A Journal for the Study of Reconciliation*.



**A Blending of Traditions**

As we saw in the first *Three Streams* resource, the Brethren in Christ emerged in an Anabaptist context. But it would be more precise to state that the denomination's roots are in a mixed Anabaptist-Pietist tradition. Through the preaching of German speaking Pietists, the Anabaptist predecessors to the Brethren in Christ received and integrated Pietism into their worldview. This blending of traditions occurred prior to the earliest BIC doctrinal statements and was profoundly influential on our denomination's self-understanding. Keefer notes:

*“One can, for example, go through the early Brethren in Christ Confession and clearly identify its Pietist and Anabaptist sections. Heart-felt and life-changing conversion is there. So also is adult baptism and renunciation of the sword for the disciple of Jesus. But both traditions are altered by the synthesis. There is more concern for ordinances, church order and discipline, separation, and pacifism than in classic Pietism. The mode of baptism ... and the rather tolerant view of other Christians regarding baptismal practices suggests that the Brethren in Christ had modified some of the Anabaptist tradition.”* (Keefer, “Three Streams,” 35)

In this blending of traditions the Brethren in Christ experienced something unique: the emergence of a distinct denominational culture. This culture was subjected to significant challenges during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and such challenges prompted additional changes to the Brethren mindset.

The next entry in the *Three Streams* resource series will introduce another tradition that the early Brethren in Christ adopted: Wesleyanism. As we shall see, this third stream added to the synthesis by complementing and modifying the Anabaptist and Pietist values that had already been informing the Brethren in Christ. Taken together these three streams inform (or ought to inform) not just our formal doctrines but also our denominational life and general approach to matters of faith.

## IV. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### General Summaries & History

- J.E. McDermond, “Pietism: It’s Not What Your Grandparents Told You It Is (and That Guy with a Degree from an Ivy League Divinity School Isn’t Right Either)” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.1 (April 2019): pages 89-112.
- Roger E. Olson & Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition*
- Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*
- Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* Third Edition (pages 320-329 especially)

### Pietism & the Brethren in Christ; Brethren in Christ Heritage

- Dale W. Brown, “Love Theology: Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Brethren in Christ Tradition” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 19.2 (August 1996): pages 306-318.
- Robert Douglass, “Understanding the Work of the Holy Spirit” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 355-362.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “Pietism, ‘Heartfelt Religion,’ and the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 28.3 (December 2005): pages 454-464.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” Pages 31-60 in *Reflections on a Heritage* (E. Morris Sider, editor).
- Ronald R. Sider, “Pietism, Prayer, and People of Prayer” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 32.3 (December 2009): pages 463-490.
- Zach Spidel, “From Practice to Methods: Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology and the Mid-Century Transformation of the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 325-354.
- Lisa Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.2 (August 2022): pages 260-298)

## V. CREDENTIALING UPDATE

While it is my hope that this *Deeper* resource might be of benefit to anyone who reads it, it is particularly relevant for folks preparing for their **Doctrinal Questionnaire (DQ)**. The DQ asks questions directly related to God’s work of salvation and the Christian life that touch on Pietist values, and so some familiarity with that part of our heritage would be helpful. These questions are included below for your reflection:

### Part One (Doctrine). Section IV (Salvation). Question A:

*Discuss God’s redemptive plan for a fallen humanity in a sinful world. Be sure to include and define the following key salvation principles:*

1. Atonement, 2. Repentance, 3. Justification, 4. Regeneration.