

The Spirit Called Pietism – Historical Analysis and Contemporary Concerns*

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What is *Pietism*? Pietism is difficult to explain because the term has meant different things at different times to different people. It is difficult to define because it is a *spirit* or *mind-set* or *attitude*. It is sometimes hard to recognize because it is often a matter of degree of emphasis of a particular doctrine or overemphasis or misemphasis.

The German historian, Kurt Aland, explains the difficulty of writing about Pietism:

“Pietism”—as people continually refer to it—is an abstract entity which never existed as such. “Pietism” is not something tangible, but what is tangible is only its various manifestations which must be examined and evaluated separately. And not even Lutheran Pietism was a unified entity, but it was divided into several groups: the Pietism which came from Spener and Francke, that of the Moravians, Wuerttemberg Pietism, and finally the various circles of radical Pietism.¹

There are several reasons, however, to attempt this difficult task. Few things have proven to be as destructive to confessional Lutheranism as Pietism. Our own Wisconsin Synod has roots which reach back into German Lutheran Pietism. Much of American Lutheranism has been dominated by this spirit historically, and the spirit of Pietism is alive and well in America today. As an historical movement Pietism can be defined as a movement which arose among German Lutherans in opposition to what was perceived as a dead orthodoxism and lack of heartfelt Christianity in the state church. As a spirit Pietism can be defined as a spirit which emphasizes sanctification over justification and makes religion anthropocentric (man-centered) rather than theocentric (God-centered).

Under the title, *The Spirit Called Pietism: Historical Analysis and Contemporary Concerns*, we will consider: 1) The Origins of Pietism; 2) The Characteristics of Pietism; 3) Pietism in America; 4) Remedies for Pietism.

I. The Origins of Pietism

Luther’s Reformation was a doctrinal reformation rather than a moral or ecclesiastical reformation as opposed to most of the reform movements that preceded his. He considered doctrine to be more important than the Christian life or Christian love. Doctrine shows the way to heaven and therefore cannot be considered unimportant or uncertain. In his lectures on Galatians (1535) he explains,

With the utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small—although we do not regard any of them as small—be kept pure and certain. This is supremely necessary. For this doctrine is our only light, which illumines and directs us and shows us the way to heaven; if it is overthrown in one point, it must be overthrown completely. And when that happens, our love will not be of any use to us. . . Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. “One dot” of doctrine is worth more than “heaven and earth” (Matt. 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life.²

Good works flow from faith. Therefore correct doctrine is the source of morality because faith flows from correct doctrine, not from false doctrine. Luther writes,

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¹ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity*, vol II, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) p. 235.

² Luther’s Works, American Edition, vol. 27, p. 41.

When we speak about godliness and ungodliness we are not speaking about manners, but about convictions which are the fountainheads of the moral life. The man who is orthodox concerning God cannot help but do good works and be good in his life. Even if he falls seven times a day, he rises again just as many times. But the ungodly fall to the ground and do not rise again.³

Luther emphasized Word and sacrament. For Luther justification was the article on which the church stands or falls. He did not ignore sanctification but recognized that sanctification flows from justification. What the Christian does for God can never be emphasized at the expense of what Christ has done for sinners. Luther also understood original sin and was opposed to any thought of perfectionism. The old Adam clings to us until we die. That sinful nature cannot be improved or reformed but must be kept in line by daily contrition and repentance. He advocated careful instruction before introducing change for the sake of the weak. He did not want to trample on anyone's conscience.

Later a different spirit developed. The movement known as Pietism had its origins in 17th century Germany. It was not, however, an isolated phenomenon. German Lutheran Pietism had its counterparts in the Puritanism of England and America, and the Jansenism of France and the Netherlands.⁴ It seems as if many in the 17th century simply did not think that the Reformation had gone far enough. They thought that Christianity had not yet been raised to a high enough level.

There were a number of problems which set the stage for the rise of Pietism among Lutherans in Germany. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) had left much of the countryside devastated. People were often forced to do whatever they could do to survive. The strong preyed on the weak. Social order broke down. Morals degenerated. Thorough religious instruction became difficult, if not impossible.

Modern Americans have trouble grasping the horrible results of war because it has been so long since any part of our country has served as a battlefield. Imagine trying to carry out the duties of a parish pastor or teacher or Christian parent in some of the war-torn countries which we see on the evening news. Then recognize that parts of Germany were subject to the ravages of war periodically for nearly thirty years.

Lutheranism in Germany was also afflicted by caesaropapism. In other words, the state controlled the church. At the time of the Reformation Luther had turned to the territorial rulers for leadership in the church because they were the best-trained and most capable laymen available. But in the years that followed not all the rulers of Lutheran lands proved to be pious or to have a clear understanding of scriptural truth. Instead they used the church to foster their own political ambitions and appointed pastors to suit their own political needs. From the Peace of Augsburg (1555) on, the various states and principalities of Germany and most of Europe accepted the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (the ruler determined the religion of his realm).

Wherever there is a state church, certain spiritual problems develop. Since everyone is a member of the church by virtue of his citizenship, the Christianity of many is no longer a matter of personal conviction, but outward attachment. Moral standards and church discipline either decline or the state attempts to enforce discipline with the power of the sword. Since doctrinal controversy is disruptive to the state, the ruler either insists on conformity to a particular doctrinal standard or doctrinal differences are glossed over.

During the Age of Orthodoxy (1580-1715) Lutheranism was often fighting for its very existence. The Counter Reformation won back large areas of Europe for Roman Catholicism. Some Lutheran rulers converted to Calvinism as the Reformed faith spread. Lutherans countered with precise doctrinal formulations, extensive dogmatical works, and often-bitter polemics. Lutheranism of this age, therefore, tended to be a bit dry and to aim at the head more than the heart. Both the state church mentality and the fact that Lutheranism was often fighting for its very existence resulted in little emphasis on mission work.

³ WA, 5:28. Quoted in *The Doctrine of Man in Classical Lutheran Theology*, ed. by Herman A. Preus & Edmund Smits (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962; Concordia Heritage reprint, 1982) x.

⁴ Stoeffler even sees this spirit in Hasidism in Judaism. *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity*, edited by F. Ernest Stoeffler. (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976) 9.

It is not fair, however, to apply the term *dead orthodoxy* to this era. No one who has ever sung the devotional hymns of Paul Gerhardt (d. 1676) or read the works of John Gerhard (d. 1637) and John Quenstedt (d. 1688) or the writings of the great opponent of Pietism, Valentin Ernst Loescher⁵ (d. 1749), will make the sweeping generalization that this was an era of dead orthodoxy or lack of concern for personal piety.⁶ In fact, one historian has noted “that this period, so commonly reviled as that of ‘dead orthodoxy,’ possessed more true piety and spiritual life, than the period (18th century) which most decried it.”⁷

But there were problems. Church discipline had become difficult and the morality of some of the clergy and laity left much to be desired. In some academic circles there was an over-intellectualization of religion with little concern for practical application to the lives of the common people. Some confused the *knowledge* of right teaching with *faith*. There is always a danger for confessional Lutherans that “adherence to an orthodox system of doctrine will breed a self-righteous complacency that precludes personal conviction of sin and trust in the Savior of sinners.”⁸

Over the years many voices had called for a correction of these abuses, but the voice that succeeded in rousing people to action belonged to the Lutheran pastor, Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705).

Spener came from a very devout family. In his youth his favorite book next to the Bible was *True Christianity* by the German Lutheran mystic John Arndt (1555-1621). He also read German translations of the works of several English Puritans.⁹ He had a very strong conscience. Once when he was asked whether he had ever been bad, he replied:

Indeed I was bad, for I remember very well that when I was twelve years old I saw some people dance and was persuaded by others to join in the dancing. Hardly had I begun, however, when I was overtaken by such fear that I ran away from the dance and never since that time tried it again.¹⁰

Spener received his formal education at the University of Strassbourg. As a student he lived a “rather ascetic and secluded life.” He refrained not only from the excesses, but also from the more acceptable aspects of student social life.¹¹

After completing his studies and before becoming a pastor he spent two years traveling in Switzerland, France and Germany. In Geneva the French Reformed preacher, Jean de Labadie, made a lasting impression on him. During his travels Spener also became quite well acquainted with Reformed church life and organization.¹²

In 1666 he accepted a call to serve as “senior of the clergy” in Frankfort. His pastoral heart and concern for practical Christianity led him to strengthen the catechetical instruction for children and to attempt to revive the rite of confirmation.¹³

When asked to write a preface for an edition of John Arndt’s sermons on the Gospel selections for the church year, Spener responded with the work that is generally credited with launching the movement we know as Pietism. This preface became so popular that it was published separately under the title, *Pia Desideria* (pious wish or heartfelt desire). Historians have declared that, next to the writings of the Reformation, Spener’s *Pia Desideria* is the most influential book ever to appear within the evangelical church. The book was approved even by many

⁵ Loescher’s classic work against Pietism has been translated into English and published by NPH. Valentin Ernst Loescher, *The Complete Timotheus Verinus*. trans. by James L. Langenbartels and Robert J. Koester (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998).

⁶ E.H. Wendland, “Present Day Pietism,” *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol 82, #1 (January 1952) p. 22-23. This article is mistakenly ascribed to E.W. Wendland.

⁷ John Henry Kurtz, *Text-Book of Church History*, (Philadelphia: Nelson S. Quiney, 1881) vol II, 196.

⁸ Richard D. Balge, “Pietism’s Teaching on Church and Ministry.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 82, #4, (Fall 1985) p. 248.

⁹ See the introduction to Spener’s *Pia Desideria*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Theodore G. Tappert. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) 8-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10; cf. also Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 31.

¹¹ Tappert, *op. cit.*, 10-11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12. Most Lutherans in the 16th century rejected confirmation because of the association with the Roman Catholic sacrament.

Lutherans who later became Spener's opponents.¹⁴

In this work Spener pointed out the abuses which needed to be corrected and offered his own six-point plan for doing so. In the summary below note the modern ring of his suggestions.

1. Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the Word of God.
2. Attention should be given to the establishment and diligent exercise of the universal priesthood of believers.
3. Christian faith must be put into action. For it is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.
4. We must beware of how we conduct ourselves in religious controversies.
5. In the schools and universities attention must be given to the moral development and moral training of future pastors.
6. Ministerial students should be taught to preach sermons aimed at the heart and directed toward the life of their hearers. (Summary mine)¹⁵

Although *Pia Desideria* was initially received very favorably by most, some soon began to oppose Spener when they saw how he was carrying out his reforms. That opposition particularly focussed on his *collegia pietatis* (gathering of the pious). The *collegia pietatis* were private gatherings of the "better" members of Spener's congregation for Bible study and mutual edification. He had introduced these conventicles even before the writing of *Pia Desideria*. He hoped that these gatherings around God's Word would create pockets of God-fearing people in the state church congregations which would then work as a leaven for improving conditions in the church.

Spener's plans, however, did not achieve the results he had hoped for. As the conventicles grew in popularity, he began to lose personal contact. The groups became little congregations within the congregation. Pharisaism developed as the members of these groups began to consider themselves better than those who weren't participating in them. The conventicles began to split churches because the people in the *collegia pietatis* thought that it was necessary to separate from those whom they considered to be unconverted or second-class Christians in the established congregations. Spener's own descriptions of the condition of the church of his day led some to believe that their only hope was to break with it. Because of the overemphasis on the universal priesthood the public ministry was often disparaged as members challenged the authority of their pastors. So many problems developed that Spener himself "seriously questioned the value of introducing such meetings and consequently established no conventicles in his own ministry in either Dresden or Berlin."¹⁶ Pietism caused splits within Lutheran congregations again and again throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁷

Spener slowly moved out of the limelight as August Herman Francke (1663-1727) emerged as the new leader of Pietism. Spener was not an organizer, but Francke was. Francke's energy and leadership led the movement to new heights.

Francke's religious fervor was molded in part by a profound conversion experience while working on a sermon in 1687. He had been asked to preach on John 20:31, *These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* In the sermon he wanted to distinguish between a true, living faith and imagined faith based on mere assent to truth. Francke tells us that as he studied, "I began to realize that I myself did not have the kind of faith for which I was asking." In an instant, however, all his doubts were gone. Francke continues:

All sadness and restlessness of heart was taken away at once.... I was suddenly overwhelmed by a flood of joy so

¹⁴ Aland, *op. cit.* 238. Even Abraham Calov (1612-1686), the orthodox dogmatician and fierce opponent of syncretism and Reformed theology, praised the work. Cf. Martin O. Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," *WLQ*, Vol 82, #1 (Winter 1985) 7.

¹⁵ Spener, *op.cit.*, p. 87-118.

¹⁶ Brown, *op. cit.*, 62.

¹⁷ Aland, *op. cit.*, 246.

that audibly I praised and magnified God... Upon standing up I was minded entirely different from the way I had been when I knelt down. —That then is the time which I may really regard as my true conversion... From that time on it was easy to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live righteously and joyfully in this world.¹⁸

Francke's experience of *rebirth* became the foundation for his theology. Rebirth became the central doctrine in Pietistic thinking.

Francke was a gifted language student. Through Spener's influence he became a professor at the University of Halle in 1692. Under Francke's leadership Halle became the chief center of Pietism and a hotbed of religious activity. He founded schools, an orphanage, a society for the dissemination of the Bible and trained men who spread Pietism throughout eastern and southeastern Europe and to North America. He was instrumental in sending the first Lutheran missionaries to India in the famous Danish-Halle mission. Historians trace the eighteenth and nineteenth century interest in social missions, Jewish missions and foreign missions to Halle.¹⁹

In the decades that followed the spirit of Pietism ran in several different directions. A mild, churchly Pietism developed in Wuerttemberg under the leadership of men like Johann Albrecht Bengel ((1687-1752). Many of our Wisconsin Synod forbears hailed from this area of Germany and grew up under the influence of this mild Pietism. Pietism took a radical turn with Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714). His *Impartial History of the Church and Heresy* (1699-1700) was anything but impartial and placed mysticism in a rather favorable light. Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) rejected the austere legalism of Halle for a joy-filled Christianity but was willing to compromise many doctrines of the Bible so long as Christ was still being proclaimed. He and his followers formed the mission-minded Moravian Church.

We cannot criticize Pietism for lack of mission zeal or concern for those who were less fortunate. In these areas Pietism served to challenge Lutheran orthodoxy to greater efforts. Nor can we fault the Pietists for their desire to correct the abuses in the church of their day. But we can fault them for some of the ways they tried to correct those abuses. We cannot fault them for the religious questions they asked. We can and must, however, fault them for some of the answers they gave.

II. The Characteristics of Pietism

Pietism led to several doctrinal errors and false practices. These errors were caused by two basic characteristics: 1) Pietism emphasized sanctification instead of justification; 2) Pietism fostered subjectivism. The former involves a subtle misemphasis. The latter involves a spirit or orientation.

The Emphasis on Sanctification instead of Justification

The doctrine of justification (God has declared sinners not guilty for Jesus' sake) was for Luther the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. What Jesus has done *for* us is all-important. The very purpose of the Bible is to reveal what God has done to save us. The heart and core of the Scriptures is the truth that God loved this world of sinners so much that he sent his Son to be our Substitute, to live a perfect life and to suffer and die in our place.

Pietism, however, changed the emphasis from what Christ has done *for* us to what Christ does *in* us. The Pietists emphasized holy living rather than the forgiveness of sins. Their theology and practice centered on sanctification (the work of the Holy Ghost in leading us to do good works) rather than on justification.

This emphasis on good works led to a confounding of justification and sanctification. Spener himself fell into a subtle form of work righteousness. He wrote, "As the faith, which alone justifies us and makes holy, is inseparable from good works, *so no one will be justified other than those who are intent upon sanctification.*"²⁰

¹⁸ Quoted by Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century*, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1973) 11-12. See also Carter Lindberg, *The Third Reformation*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983) 151.

¹⁹ Brown, *op. cit.*, 34.

²⁰ Quoted in Brown, p. 97.

(emphasis mine) Notice how Spener confuses justification and sanctification. Instead of teaching that those who are justified are also sanctified, he makes our justification dependent on our sanctification. He inverts the relationship between faith and piety. The just not the sinner is justified in the theology of Pietism.²¹

We always need to remember that our good works have no part in our justification. They are the result of justification. They play no part in saving us, but rather demonstrate our thanks to God for providing salvation for us. As St. Paul writes, *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph 2:8-10). We are saved by grace, not by works. Yet Christians will do good works because we have been created anew for that very purpose. Unless we keep justification and sanctification in their proper relationship, salvation by grace alone will be destroyed. That is exactly what happened in Pietism.

The Pietists, in their efforts to promote morality and Christian living, became disappointed in the slowness of the gospel to produce the results they were looking for. They therefore resorted to legalism. They tried to use the law to produce what only the gospel can.

The main purpose of the law is to show us our sins. As the Scriptures declare, *Through the law we become conscious of sin* (Rm 3:20). And again, *I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "Do not covet"* (Rm 7:7). When the law reveals our sin it also demonstrates that we cannot save ourselves and it holds us accountable to God. *Now we know that whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God* (Rm 3:19).

In their preaching the Pietists, however, tended to rail against the sins of society rather than convict their hearers of the depths of their own sinfulness. "A clear presentation of God's law to awaken within the individual a deep, personal conviction of sin is conspicuously absent already with Spener."²²

When Pietism shifted the emphasis from the law as mirror (to show us our sins) to the third use of the law (as rule or guide), legalism resulted. Pietism saw the main purpose of the law as giving a set of legal requirements for Christian living.²³ The law then became the means for producing the kind of behavior or lifestyle the Pietists wanted. This is an improper use of the law and a characteristic of Reformed rather than Lutheran theology.

Speaking of the significance of the law for the regenerate, Calvin calls "the third use of the law the 'principal one'—and which is more nearly connected with the proper end of it." He compares the relation of the believer to the law to that of a "servant" to his "master." "By frequent meditation on the law the servant of God will be excited to obedience.... to the flesh the law serves as a whip, urging it, like a dull and tardy animal, forward to its work; and even to the spiritual man, who is not yet delivered from the burden of the flesh, it will be a perpetual spur, that will not permit him to loiter" (II, 7, 12). Commandment, law, duty, servant, obedience—these frequently recurring terms are expressive of the rigorous legalism which characterizes Calvin's conception of Christianity. Luther teaches that the regenerate is ever "ready and cheerful, without coercion, to do good to every one, and to suffer everything for love and praise to God."²⁴

Good works are the fruit of faith. The only way to promote good works is to promote faith. The Bible teaches that *love is the fulfillment of the law* (Rm 13:10). The law commands us to love, but it cannot produce the love it commands. The gospel, the message of God's forgiving love for sinners, produces the response of love in our hearts. *We love because he first loved us* (1 Jn 4:19). When the sinner realizes that in Jesus all of his sins are forgiven, his heart will automatically overflow with love and the desire to thank the God who has shown him so much mercy. As our Savior tells us, *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing* (Jn 15:5).

The Pietists wanted to foster sanctification. But by misusing the law and de-emphasizing justification, they

²¹ Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) vol II, p. 25.

²² Wendland, *op. cit.* 24.

²³ Brown, *op. cit.*, 101.

²⁴ E.H. Klotsche, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 238.

forsook the very way sanctification is fostered--properly distinguishing and applying the law and the gospel.

Pietism also went beyond God's law in establishing rules for proper Christian living, much as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They erred in the area of adiaphora.

There are many things in this life which God has neither commanded nor forbidden. We call these things *adiaphora*, or in German *Mitteldinge*. In determining how we are to act in matters of adiaphora we follow these principles: 1) Are we doing it to the glory of God? (1 Co 10:31); 2) Are we acting out of concern for our fellow man or causing offense? (Rm 14:1-23); 3) Are we calling something sinful which God has not (Col 2:20-23) or making legal requirements where God hasn't? (Ga 2:3, 5:1)

For the Pietists, however, nothing was an *adiaphoron*. Spener was more careful to distinguish between what is sinful and what simply is not wise than were later Pietists. Francke, for instance, taught that dancing is intrinsically sinful because it is not motivated by the Holy Spirit. Note his reasoning. In Rule 20 of *Rules for the Protection of Conscience and for good Order in Conversation or in Society* (1689) he writes:

Games and other pastimes such as dancing, jumping and so forth, arise from an improper and empty manner of life, and common and unchaste postures in speech are associated with them.... They provide an opportunity for you to become enmeshed in a disorderly way of life, or at least make it very difficult for you to preserve the peace of God in your soul.²⁵

Rule 24 commands:

Guard yourself from unnecessary laughter. All laughter is not forbidden. It is fitting that the most pious person rejoices inwardly not over earthly but rather over divine things.... How frivolous (laughter) is becomes clear when a person wishes to draw near to the ever-present God once again in deep humility.... Joking does not please God; why then should it please you? If it does not please you, why do you laugh over it? If you laugh, you have sinned as well.²⁶

Pietism also did not have a clear understanding of original sin or total depravity. Spener, for instance, excluded the unbaptized children of heathen from damnation.²⁷ Pietists denied baptismal regeneration. "Regeneration is not complete, they taught, until the baptized responds to the promise of God with repentance and faith."²⁸ They did not recognize that human beings are purely passive in conversion and regeneration.

Since Pietism failed to recognize the total depravity of human nature, the movement lost sight of the fact that a Christian is at the same time both a saint and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). There was therefore an unrealistic optimism for sanctification which bordered on perfectionism. Spener, for instance, "makes a distinction between 'having' sin and 'committing' sin, 'keeping' and 'fulfilling' the law. Though not able to 'fulfill' the law, a believer has the power to 'keep' the law; while still 'having' sin, he will not 'commit' sin...."²⁹

This type of thinking tends to see sin only in certain outward manifestations and not in the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. It also demonstrates a lack of appreciation for the struggle between the Old Adam and the new man in the Christian which Paul describes so graphically in his letter to the Romans. *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing* (Rm 7:18-19).

Because Christians still have an Old Adam, they will continue to fall into sin. As C.F.W. Walther notes, "Frequently Christians may act in a very unchristian manner."³⁰ Because we have both a sinful nature and a new

²⁵ August Herman Francke. "Rules for the Protection of Conscience and for Good Order in Conversation or in Society" (1689) in *Pietists: Selected Writings*. ed. by Peter C. Erb. (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) p. 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁷ Brown, *op. cit.*, 49.

²⁸ Heick, *op. cit.*, 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, reproduced from the German edition of 1897 by W.H.T. Dau,

man in us, we need to hear God's law and gospel every day to show us our sin and to show us our Savior who died to take all of our sins away.

Religious Subjectivism

Pietism shifted emphasis from the objective truths of God's Word to subjective experience, and from a theocentric (God-centered) system to an anthropocentric (man-centered) system. As was mentioned previously, Pietism was more concerned with what God does *in* us than with what God has done *for* us. Pietists made a false distinction between conversion and regeneration. They slipped into synergism (thinking that we can cooperate with God in conversion and salvation) by directing a person's attention inward to his own heart and actions, rather than pointing him to what God has promised and accomplished.

In the Lutheran church the *Pietists* directed the alarmed sinner not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that he might win his way into a state of grace. They also instructed the believer to base his assurance of grace not on the objective promise of the Gospel, but on the right quality of his contrition and faith and on his *feeling* of grace. In both cases they taught Reformed (enthusiastic) doctrine.³¹

Francke was afraid that the Lutheran insistence on grace alone and "the divine initiation of human salvation, which he accepted in principle, might be used as an excuse for not trying to take hold of God's gift."³² The Pietists objected to the general absolution in the worship service because they denied objective or universal justification (the truth that God declared the whole world forgiven when Jesus died and rose again). In their opinion, only those who met certain inner conditions could be told that they were forgiven. But how then can a person with a troubled conscience ever be sure that he has met the proper conditions to be forgiven? If God's forgiveness is meant only for some, how can I ever be sure that it is meant for me?

In spite of the emphasis Pietism placed on Bible Study, the objective truth of God's Word was not as important to them as subjective feelings. God's assurance of forgiveness was not as important as *feeling* forgiven. In reality the movement denied the efficacy of the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments.³³ Many Pietists embraced a new form of the ancient heresy of Donatism, making the efficacy of the means of grace dependent on the character of the person administering them. Spener and his followers tended to separate God's Word and the working of the Holy Spirit. In their way of thinking, an individual has to make himself receptive to the Spirit.

Spener reasoned that the Holy Spirit does not work automatically in the Scriptures but instead becomes effective only under certain conditions. Scripture is in itself true and powerful, but it only becomes so for the individual who lets the Spirit rule by beginning Biblical exegesis with prayer, meditating on God's truth, and attempting to lead a holy life.³⁴

Spener is really a forerunner of the modern existential theologian who says that the Bible isn't God's Word until it becomes God's Word for you. At the same time Pietism tended to view prayer as a means of grace rather than a fruit of faith. They sought the assurance of salvation through prayer rather than through the objective declaration of God in his word.³⁵

(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928) 308.

³¹ John T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934) 455-456. See also Walther, *op. cit.*, 253. C.F.W. Walther for a time during his university years was involved with a group of Pietists and their teaching led him almost to the point of despair.

³² Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century*, 14.

³³ Loescher, *op. cit.*, 63ff.

³⁴ Brown, *op. cit.*, 72.

³⁵ Mueller, *op. cit.*, 468.

Since the objective truth of God's Word played second fiddle to subjective experience, Pietism fostered a religious unionism based not on the teachings of Scripture, but on common religious experience. Spener has been called the first "union theologian"³⁶ because agreement on the essentials of Christianity was enough for him.

Spener wanted a practical Christianity and was not so interested in arguing about the fine points of theology. But determining which doctrines of the Bible are practical and which are not is extremely subjective. As Prof. Fredrich points out:

The theory of emphasizing those Bible teachings that are most practical sounds good but it just isn't practical. Who sorts out the doctrines? The doctrine one person says is not necessary, another may cherish deeply and apply daily. How does one avoid doctrinal indifference when it is assumed that certain doctrines in the Bible need not necessarily be the believer's concern?³⁷

Pietism ignore our Savior's command *to make disciples of all nationsteaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Mt 28:19-20). They forgot his warning, *If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples* (Jn 8:31). They didn't understand the scriptural injunction to *watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in you way which are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them* (Rm 16:17).

The subjectivism in Pietism led the movement to change the marks of the church from the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments to right living. In other words, the church isn't necessarily where the gospel is proclaimed, but where people are living correctly. Luther on the basis of Scripture testified that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there we know the church (believers) must be present. He declared, "And even if no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God's Word cannot be without God's people and God's people cannot be without God's Word."³⁸

In reality, the Pietists were trying to make the invisible church visible. The church is essentially invisible because it contains only believers. Since we cannot look into anyone's heart to see faith, we cannot see if anyone is truly a believer or not. We know the church is present whenever and wherever the gospel is proclaimed. But the Pietists wanted to determine who was a true believer and who was not by establishing a subjective standard of outward behavior. Francke divided the church into three groups: 1) the largest--those who had the form of godliness but lacked its substance; 2) those who made a beginning but were not yet fully committed (those who hadn't yet made a decision for Christ); 3) the smallest group--those who were fully committed to Francke's standards he considered the true church.³⁹

Spener, Francke, and their followers were really looking for the power that they felt was lacking in the Lutheran Church of their day. They were bothered by the slowness of the progress of the gospel. The promises of the Scriptures weren't enough for them. They found the visible proof or validation of God's Word they were looking for in the success that they believed God has promised to every rightful undertaking.⁴⁰ Others went farther than Spener. At times Pietism has "degenerated into a theology of personal success in which peace of mind, physical health and worldly success are promised as a result of an active faith."⁴¹ Today we would call that triumphalism or success theology.

Closely connected to this "success theology" is the millennialism which can be found in the movement. Spener believed in the complete overthrow of the papacy, the total conversion of the Jews, and a time of unprecedented prosperity and outward success for the church.⁴² Those who followed him were often infected with this same false teaching, including the great exegete, Bengel. Through his study of the Book of Revelation Bengel

³⁶ Heick, *op. cit.*, 23. However, George Callixtus and others preceded Spener in their desire for false fellowship & unionism.

³⁷ Edward C. Fredrich II, "After Three Centuries—The Legacy of Pietism," Southeastern Wisconsin District pastor-Teacher Conference, June 11, 1985, p. 6.

³⁸ Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 41, p. 150.

³⁹ Balge, *op. cit.*, 251.

⁴⁰ Brown, *op. cit.*, 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴² Spener, *op. cit.*, 76-86.

became convinced that the date of our Lord's return could be accurately determined. Following a rather elaborate chronological scheme he set 1836 as the date of Christ's Second Coming, the binding of Satan, and the beginning of the millennial reign.⁴³

III. Pietism in America

The spirit of Pietism came to America with the Pilgrims and the other Puritans who followed them to this country. The Puritans were intent on having a "pure" church. In order to become an official member of a Puritan congregation a person had to give a convincing testimonial describing his conversion experience in detail.⁴⁴ It is not an accident that Francke corresponded with the Puritan leader Cotton Mather (1663-1727). They had much in common.⁴⁵ The Great Awakening (1740-42) helped make the conversion experience a part of American culture.

The Moravians under Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf came to America during the colonial period. Zinzendorf (1700-60) was the god-child of Spener. The Moravians were extremely mission-minded, but unionistic. Doctrinal differences were not very important to them. The Halle Pietists tried to distance themselves from the more radical Pietist, Zinzendorf, and his followers. But the two groups were related in their approach to Christianity.

John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, was influenced by the Moravians both on a ship sailing to America and also later on in England and Saxony. Methodism with its subjective approach to Christianity and its overemphasis on sanctification took deep root in America.

Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) and the other leaders of the Second Awakening institutionalized revivalism with its methods of psychological manipulation to produce conversion experience and decisions for Christ. Out of the Second Awakening developed the Holiness Movement with its emphasis on Christian perfectionism. From the Holiness Movement came Pentecostalism with its emphasis on the charismatic gifts of the Spirit.

Prof. Wendland was not overstating when he wrote some fifty years ago:

The fact that modern Protestantism is saturated with a theology that is basically pietistic goes without saying. We refer to the emotional appeals of present day revivalists, the sentimentalism and unionism of Protestantism in general, the stress upon emotional experience in conversion and a standard of super-holiness which finds its goals in legalistic observances as demonstrated in the Pentecostal churches, and the wholesale relegation of the true Means of Grace to a secondary position--a religion, in sum and substance, which is the product of man's subjective experience.⁴⁶

Today we note the decision theology of a Billy Graham, the synergism of the Campus Crusade for Christ, the subjectivism and shallowness of much of Christian Contemporary Music, and the denial of the means of grace and of the total depravity of human beings in the theology of the Church Growth Movement. Many more examples could be added.

If there is a dominant conservative theological spirit in our country today, it is the spirit of American Evangelicalism. That spirit is really the spirit of Pietism.

Lutheran Pietism has also been evident in the history of this country. Francke's University of Halle sent

⁴³ See Bengel's comments on Revelation 12:6 in any edition of his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*. The English edition I consulted has abridged his remarks on chronology because it was translated after 1836 when it was obvious that Bengel's calculations were wrong. In spite of the abridgement one can still follow his calculations. For more detail see Bengel's *Erklaerte Offenbarung Johannis* (1740) or his *Ordo temporum* (1741) or *Cyclus sive de anno magno consideratio* (1745).

⁴⁴ *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, edited by Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, George Mardsen, David Wells & John Woodbridge. (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983) 124. Also cf. Edwin C. Gaustad, "Quest for Pure Christianity," *Christian History*, Vol XIII, #1, p.8-15.

⁴⁵ *Eerdmans Handbook*, 100.

⁴⁶ Wendland, *op. cit.*, 28.

several pastors to America and many of the Lutheran colonists in colonial America came from a background of Pietism.⁴⁷ Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), the “father” of Lutheranism in America, was sent to America by way of Halle and had many pietistic tendencies. His reports to Halle on his work in America include an account of his asking a prospect to relate to him the circumstances of his conversion.⁴⁸ Although he could criticize some of George Whitefield’s teachings and practices, he had no qualms about inviting that great Calvinistic revivalist to occupy his pulpit.⁴⁹

By the mid-nineteenth century Pietism and American Protestantism had influenced some Lutherans enough that they issued the *Definite Synodical Platform* and sent it to Lutherans throughout the United States. This document included a revision of the Augsburg Confession and eliminated everything which would separate Lutheranism from Reformed Protestantism. The authors believed that the only way for Lutheranism to survive in America was to adopt and adapt to American Protestantism with its revivalistic techniques and its rejection of liturgical worship and the means of grace. Not only confessional Lutherans (including our Wisconsin Synod), but nearly all Lutherans in America completely rejected the document.⁵⁰ But in many ways the theology of these “American” Lutherans eventually began to make inroads, particularly in some of the synods which are today part of the ELCA.

Most of the Scandinavian Lutherans who came to America were influenced by Pietism. The lay revival led by Hans Hauge (1771-1824) in Norway had a profound effect in Norway and Denmark and influenced the Norwegians and Danes who came to America. The exposition of Luther’s Small Catechism by the Pietist Erik Pontoppidan was widely used in the old country and in this country well into the twentieth century.⁵¹

The Charismatic Movement has also infiltrated Lutheranism in the last few decades. Some Lutheran laymen and pastors in the Missouri Synod and especially the ELCA have been taken captive by the claim of speaking in tongues and faith healing as evidence of the Spirit’s presence. A few WELS congregations have also had to deal with pockets of charismatics in their midst. Note the similarities to Pietism in this account of a charismatic experience by a Lutheran pastor.

Now, as I knelt before the communion rail, just to the right of the marble baptismal angel, I heard myself saying, “God, you and I are going to have to out this morning. Either you are going to be real, or I am going to quit.”.... Suddenly a voice, clear and distinct, said, “The Gift is already yours; just reach out and take it.” Obediently I stretched out my hands toward the altar, palms up. I opened my mouth, and strange babbling sounds rushed forth. Had *I* done It? Or was it the Spirit? Before I had time to wonder, all sorts of strange things began to happen. God came out of the shadows. “He is real!” I thought. “He is here! He loves me!” For the first time in my life I really *felt* loved by God.... Suddenly I wanted to run out on the street and tell everybody: “Stop the traffic! Stop the trains! Listen! God is alive! He’s really alive and real! He just told me back in the church!”.... For a few weeks I experienced a kind of euphoria that I had never known before.⁵²

Even our own Wisconsin Synod has roots which reach back into Pietism. The mission houses and societies which supplied so many of the early pastors for our synod were pietistic and unionistic. Several of our early leaders came from Wuerttemberg, including Friedrich Schmid and Christoph Eberhardt in Michigan, C.J. Albrecht in

⁴⁷ Theodore G. Tappert, “The Influence of Pietism in Colonial American Lutheranism,” in *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity*, edited by F. Ernest Stoeffler, 13-33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ *A History of Lutheranism in America, 1619-1930*. Edited by John Drickamer and C. George Fry, (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1979) 33.

⁵⁰ For further information confer David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁵¹ James B. Olson, “Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan and the American Influence of His Catechism,” *Lutheranism and Pietism*, Essays and Reports of the Lutheran Historical Conference, 1990. Edited by August R. Sueflow. 20-39.

⁵² Larry Christenson, *The Charismatic Renewal among Lutherans*, (Minneapolis: Lutheran Charismatic Renewal Services, 1976) 17-18.

Minnesota, and Johann Muehlhaeuser, John Weinmann and Gottlieb Reim in Wisconsin.⁵³ Wuerttemberg was a center of a “mild” form of Pietism which included a tradition of careful biblical exegesis begun by Johann Bengel (1687-1752).⁵⁴

IV. Remedies for Pietism

Is the spirit of Pietism a threat to our synod, congregations, pastors, and people today? The dominant conservative religious spirit in our country today has many of the characteristics of Pietism. Too often good Lutherans rush to buy the latest best-selling work from the pen of a Reformed or American Evangelical writer. Lutheran writers, with their emphasis on correct doctrine, law and gospel, sin and grace, don't seem to be practical enough.

Pastors, synodical leaders and congregational members are concerned because the moral decay in our country is creeping into our congregations. We hear of drug abuse, pornography, incest, abortion, child and spouse abuse, no fault divorce, more and more couples living together without the benefit of marriage, and on and on. Are we doing something wrong as a church?

There has been a loss of respect for the church and those in the public ministry, particularly pastors. Our synod does not seem to be growing. Church attendance and Bible class attendance are not breaking any records. Even though we live in a wealthy nation, our congregations and synod often do not seem to have enough money to do the work we would like to do. We set goals and don't reach them. We work hard, yet don't see the results we hoped for or the success we anticipated. In cases of discipline we don't always see the fruits of repentance we wanted. We hear a lot of grumbling and complaining. Doesn't the gospel work anymore?

People are tired of doctrinal controversy. They think that our fellowship principles are more than a little loveless and narrow-minded. Most aren't interested in delving deeply into scriptural truth. But they would like to feel better about themselves and they would like to be successful and regain the power that they think the early Christians possessed. People think that our liturgical services are boring. They don't feel anything when they go to the Lord's Supper. Can't we be a little more like the Evangelicals?

Our problems today really don't sound all that different from the problems in Germany in the seventeenth century. I hope that we can learn from the mistakes of the past. For frustration and impatience are what prompted the rise of Pietism three centuries ago. Impatience and frustration can lead to legalism and the attempts to force sanctification which were so much a part of Pietism.

But there are solutions. Those solutions start with us. They begin with daily contrition and repentance. When we recognize how much God has forgiven us, we are less likely to deal legalistically with others.

All of us are busy. But I hope that we never become so busy that we cannot take time out every day to study the Bible and gain an ever deeper appreciation of God's grace. The study of Scripture will help us keep our spiritual balance.

Pietism saw the study of doctrine, or at least some doctrines of the Bible, as impractical. They fell into doctrinal indifference and error as a result. We therefore will want to make the study of doctrine a priority. Read the Lutheran Confessions. Review your children's catechism lessons with them. Assign doctrinal papers at conferences and review the teachings of the Bible in a systematic way in Bible Class. Show people how the teachings of Scripture apply to their lives. The study of doctrine is practical. Sound doctrine builds the church. False doctrine and doctrinal indifference can't. As Walther warns:

What an awful delusion has taken hold upon so many men's minds who ridicule pure doctrine and say to us: “...Pure Doctrine! That can only land you in dead orthodoxism. Pay more attention to pure life, and you will raise a growth of genuine Christianity.” That is exactly like saying to a farmer, “Do not worry forever about good seed; worry about good fruits.” Is not the farmer properly concerned about good fruit when he is solicitous about getting good seed?

⁵³ Edward C. Fredrich, “Lutheran Pietism Comes to America,” *WLQ*, Vol 82, #4 (Fall 1985), 270-272.

⁵⁴ Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century*, 88-130.

Just so a concern about pure doctrine is the proper concern of genuine Christianity and a sincere Christian life. False doctrine is a noxious seed, sown by the enemy to produce a progeny of wickedness.⁵⁵

Use the law and gospel properly in your preaching and teaching and discipline. We need to warn about the sins of drug abuse, abortion and pornography lest our people and children fall into them. But if in our preaching and teaching we only rail against the gross sins of the world, we are likely to turn our hearers into self-righteous Pharisees who look down on everyone else and consider God rather lucky to have them as his people. Parents will want to be careful not to give their children the impression that so long as they stay away from certain gross sins, they are doing their Christian duty. Rather we will want to use the law to expose the sin that lies in every heart, the sins of greed and selfishness and lust. The purpose of the law is to expose sin and to hold us accountable to God. Unless we realize how much we need God's forgiveness, how can we ever appreciate all that our Savior has done for us?

Proclaiming the gospel means more than just mentioning the word gospel or using technical words like justification. It means proclaiming the historical facts in our Savior's life and explaining the saving significance of those events. It means portraying our Savior's love and mercy in clear and sincere expressions born of deep conviction, not in tired cliches. Preaching the gospel means proclaiming God's unconditional forgiveness so that everyone will know that God has forgiven all of his sins, no matter how horrible they might be. Preaching about faith will not create faith. Declaring that God has forgiven the world because he condemned Jesus in our place can.

Don't proclaim a conditional gospel as if people have to do something or meet a certain condition before they can be forgiven. When a person confesses his sin, announce God's forgiveness immediately. We cannot look into a person's heart. We take them at their word. Don't fall into the trap of saying, If you are *truly* sorry, Jesus will forgive you. How can a person know if he is sorry enough to be forgiven? God's forgiveness does not depend on the level of our contrition. Don't fall into the trap of saying, If you *truly* believe, God will forgive you. Rather declare, God has forgiven you. Believe it!

Apply the law and gospel to the problems, the temptations and opportunities your children or students or parishioners meet every day of their lives. Set a good example for them. Parents, let your children see how important your home devotions are to you. Teachers, prepare your devotions, Bible history and catechism lessons with care and present them in a way that demonstrates how precious those truths of Scripture are to you. Pastors, read the liturgy and Scripture lessons with life and pronounce the absolution with sincerity and conviction. Don't merely go through the motions of preaching and teaching. No, we aren't encouraging you to fall into the trap of thinking that if only you do things in the right way with the right attitude, success will follow. That simply is not true. But don't let your sinful nature make excuses for laziness or half-hearted efforts. The ministry demands the best that we can offer.

We don't want our preaching and teaching to be dry and aimed only at the head. There is an emotional aspect to religion. Human beings have emotions. Even the most manly of us has had a tear come to his eye during the singing of an Easter hymn. But we don't make that religious feeling or experience the *basis* of our faith or the proof of our forgiveness. Christianity based on experience and demonstrations of power brings joy to the devil. For when the power vanishes and the feelings of being loved by God cease because of a troubled conscience, the individual has nothing left. As Christians we know that God loves us even when we don't feel loved by him. We know because he tells us so in his word and he cannot lie.

Emphasize the meaning and importance of the sacraments in your preaching and teaching. The Protestant spirit in our country cares little about the sacraments. It is easy for our people to pick up that same spirit. Explain the liturgy so that our people understand what they are doing and can worship intelligently. The way a church body worships reflects its theology. That can be seen in the silence of a Quaker meeting or the centrality of the mass in Roman Catholic worship. Revival meetings communicate a particular understanding of how one becomes a Christian. Our Lutheran worship centers on the importance of word and sacraments.⁵⁶ Let's not be too quick to

⁵⁵ Walther, *op. cit.*, 20-21.

⁵⁶ Gustafson, *op. cit.*, 7. For a fuller discussion see James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, (Louisville:

discard the kind of worship we have inherited from our fathers for the sake of relevance. We could be discarding more than we think.

We will also want to practice church discipline. Nothing is more loveless than letting someone continue in a sin as if sin is of no consequence. Nothing is more loving than in humility calling someone to repentance. No one enjoys disciplining. But when we remember that each person is a precious soul for whom Jesus died and that our goal is to keep that person from eternal harm, it becomes much easier. The congregation or church body that fails to exercise discipline will soon lose the gospel. For who needs forgiveness if it doesn't make any difference what you teach or how you live?

But be realistic. Remember that everyone has an old Adam and so will fall into sin. Be careful not to set up classifications of Christians based on outward behavior. Don't expect children or adults to mature spiritually overnight. It takes time and patience. When people fall into sin, we try to lead them to repentance. But we will want to be careful not to set up artificial standards or demand specific fruits of faith. When St. Peter realized that he had denied his Savior, he shed bitter tears. But that doesn't mean that everyone will or has to. Everyone is different. The gospel will produce different fruit in their lives. We look for fruits of repentance, but we don't specify apples or oranges. Be careful not to make sins where God hasn't.

Finally let's learn to be patient and let God do things according to his timetable and plan. The American Evangelical and the Pietist really don't believe in the efficacy of the sacraments or the Scriptures. They always want to help God's Word along. Nothing could be more foolish. God's Word has the power to accomplish what he wants in our lives and the lives of our people. As he declares, *As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is the word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it* (Isa 55:10-11).