

Pietism: Past and Present

By John M. Brenner

[Essay delivered at WELS Michigan District Southeastern Conference Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference on January 23, 1989 and WELS Michigan District Northern Pastoral Conference on April 3, 1989]

The year 1975 marked the 300th anniversary of the publication of a book by a Lutheran pastor, Philipp Jacob Spener, entitled, *Pia Desideria* (pious wishes). Few books (particularly written by Lutheran pastors) have exerted a greater influence on subsequent church history. The publication of *Pia Desideria* is generally considered the beginning of the movement known as Pietism. Perhaps because of the anniversary of the publication of this book, the subject of Pietism has received increased attention in recent years. Many books on the movement have been published in the last few decades. And our Synod's own *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* contained several articles on the subject in 1985.

But what is Pietism? We use the term a lot, often without understanding what it really means. It is rather difficult to define because historically the movement has had many different faces depending on the time and the place and the individuals involved. There was some good in the movement and much that was bad.

Yet it is important for us to attempt to understand Pietism and its characteristics because some of the roots of our Wisconsin Synod reach into a background that was mildly pietistic. It is also true that each of us has an Old Adam that is pietistic (in the worst sense of the term). And the spirit of Pietism still remains a danger to orthodox Lutheranism today.

This paper will therefore explore the subject of Pietism by looking at: 1) Pietism's roots; 2) Pietism's characteristics; 3) Pietism's modern manifestations; 4) Some remedies for Pietism.

PIETISM'S ROOTS

Although there is such a thing as "Reformed Pietism," the term generally refers to the "movement in behalf of practical Christianity within the Lutheran Church of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,"¹ or "the endeavor for increased piety that in Lutheran circles was engendered by the 1675 writing of Spener, *Pia Desideria*."² Pietism was a reaction to what was perceived as a dead orthodoxism and lack of piety in the Lutheran Church of the seventeenth century. The Lutheran Church in Germany in the seventeenth century had some problems. The Thirty Years War had had a horrible effect on Germany and on German morality. We in modern America often have trouble understanding what problems war causes a nation because our country has not served as a battlefield since the Civil War and the Indian uprisings in the last century. The portrait painted by historians of the Thirty Years War and its aftermath is not a pretty one.

The country being at the mercy of the Europe's soldiery, the destruction was such that whole villages and towns simply disappeared. Houses and barns were burned, available food stocks were wasted or destroyed. For fear of being horribly mistreated the people fled, and the farms stood idle. Under the circumstances hordes of homeless refugees moved from place to place begging, robbing, and destroying anything that might stand in their way...all social order broke down and self-preservation became the only law which had meaning. Famine and disease swept across the country... Perhaps even more important that the material loss was the effect of the war upon the moral fiber of the people. "Old and young," complained pastor Heinlin of Wuerttemberg, "can no longer tell what is of God or of the devil, poor widows and orphans are counted for dung, like dogs they are pushed into the street, there to perish of cold and hunger." The cruelty generated was notorious... In some sections the rapacity of the nobility knew no bounds, so that the defenseless peasantry was depressed to the level of beasts of burden... During the aftermath of the war the model for German court life became France. The sons of nobility no

longer visited the universities. They now became soldiers and prided themselves with a ruthless, uninhibited kind of “Herrenmoral” which further corrupted the nation. Emulating their superiors the peasants reveled in drunkenness and vice.³

The Lutheran Church in Germany was also afflicted by caesaropapism. In other words, the church was controlled by the state. 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. Church discipline became difficult and the morality of some of the clergy and laity left much to be desired. In the minds of some, Lutheranism had degenerated into the thought that you can live any way you want and it doesn't make any difference as long as you believe what is right. In some academic circles there was an over-intellectualization of religion with little concern for practical application to the lives of the common people. Confessional Lutheranism always needs to be on guard against those dangers. As Prof. Balge of our Seminary warns,

There is always the danger that knowledge of right teaching will be confused with faith and 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.⁴

Yet the early leaders of Pietism never blamed Lutheran orthodoxy for these problems,⁵ but considered themselves to be orthodox Lutherans. No one who has ever sung the devotional hymns of Paul Gerhardt (d. 1676) or read the works of the great dogmatists Johann Gerhard (d. 1637) and Johann Quenstedt (d. 1688) or the writings of the great opponent of Pietism, Valentin Ernst Loescher (d. 1749), can make the sweeping generalization that this was an era of dead orthodoxy or lack of concern for personal piety.⁶ But there were some abuses. And over the years many voices had called for correction of these abuses.

But the voice that brought everything to a head was that of the Lutheran pastor, Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). Spener came from a very devout family. As a boy he read devotional works from English Puritanism and German Lutheranism. He had a very strong conscience. Once when he was asked whether he had ever been bad, he replied:

“Indeed I was bad,” and substantiated his answer by relating how at the age of twelve he was induced to join a dance and was so overtaken by fear that he ran away never to dance again.⁷

After he received his education, he spent two years traveling in Switzerland, France and Germany. In Geneva, Switzerland, he often went to listen to the French Reformed preacher Jean de Labadie. His travels also made him better acquainted with Reformed church life.⁸ His pastoral heart and concern for practical Christianity led him to challenge some of the abuses he saw in the church of his day. When asked to write a preface for an edition of John Arndt's (1555-1621) sermons on the gospels, he responded with the work, which was to launch the movement we know as Pietism. This preface became so popular that it was published separately under the title, *Pia Desideria*. In it he not only pointed out abuses which needed to be corrected, but also offered a six-point program for improving the church. This work was highly praised by as eminent an orthodox theologian as Abraham Calov (1612-1686),⁹ and Spener's program for improving the church has a modern ring.

- 1) Thought should be given to 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.¹⁰

Spener's proposals were at first received very favorably by most people. His *Pia Desideria* was highly acclaimed and sold many copies. But when orthodox Lutherans began to see what he really meant by what he said and what course of action he would take to implement his proposals for reform, opposition developed. One of his more controversial methods was the introduction of the so-called *collegia pietatis* (gathering of the pious). The *collegia pietatis* were private gatherings of the "better" members of his congregation for the purpose of Bible study and mutual edification. Spener had advocated and introduced these conventicles even before the writing of his *Pia Desideria*. He hoped that these gatherings around God's Word would create pockets of God-fearing people in the state church congregations who would then work as a leaven for improving conditions in the church. But instead, these little churches within the church caused all kinds of problems. Pharisaism developed. For the members of these groups began to consider themselves to be better than the other members of the congregation who weren't participating in the conventicles. Instead of working as a leaven to promote ethics and morality they became disruptive, splitting churches as they separated themselves from those they considered to be unconverted or second-class Christians. Later on, pietists actually attempted to classify people according to their growth in sanctification. Because of the emphasis on the universal priesthood the public ministry was disparaged. So many problems developed because of the *collegia pietatis* 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."¹¹ Spener's successor as the leader of Pietism was August Hermann Francke (1663-1727). He was a gifted language student. Through Spener's influence he became a Professor at the University of Halle and helped to shape the course of the movement in some positive and negative ways. One day as he was working on a sermon he had what he considered a profound conversion experience.

Required to preach on John 20:31 he wished to present the distinction between a true living faith and an imagined faith built on authority and custom. His reflections on this drove him to examine his own inner condition, the truth of God and the reliability of the Bible. In the midst of the deep existential crisis and imploring prayers consequential to this reflection, he felt himself reborn. He had personally experienced the central point of all Pietistic thinking and aspiration—rebirth. He fell to his knees and thanked God as he had never before in his whole life. "Everything was decided; now for the first time he began to be a real, convinced, resolute, selfless and clear sighted Christian."¹²

Francke's rebirth experience had an important effect on the later development of Pietism.

After his arrival as a professor in Halle Francke began to assume the leadership of the movement. He was a gifted leader and teacher and was known for his pastoral heart and concern for others. Under his leadership Halle became the chief center of Pietism and a hotbed of religious activity. He founded schools, an orphanage, and was instrumental in sending the first Lutheran missionaries to India in the famous Danish-Halle mission. Because of Francke's efforts

Halle is often heralded as the point of origination for inner missions (ministry to social needs), foreign missions, and Jewish missions, for dissemination of the Bible and other literature, and for the spread of

Pietism by young men who followed German soldiers and settlements to eastern and southeastern Europe, North America (especially Pennsylvania and Georgia), and many other parts of the world.¹³

You cannot fault Pietism for a lack of mission zeal or concern for those who are less fortunate. The efforts of the Halle pietists in these areas were praiseworthy. You cannot fault them for their desire to correct the abuses that they saw in the Lutheran Church of their day. But you can fault them for the way they tried to correct the abuses. You cannot fault them for the questions they asked. But you can and must fault them for many of the answers they gave. We will examine some of the answers they gave to the problems of the church as we consider the characteristics of Pietism.

PIETISM'S CHARACTERISTICS

The leaders of Pietism saw a lack of piety in the state church and they wanted to correct it. They saw a lack of concern for the poor, the underprivileged, the pagan and the Jew, and they wanted to help their people develop genuine concern. They wanted to duplicate the conditions and successes of the early Christian Church. But they came up with the wrong answers to accomplish their purpose.

Pietism departed from Lutheran orthodoxy in a number of areas. But we can group most of them under one or the other of the following two characteristics: 1) Pietism emphasized sanctification instead of justification; and 2) Pietism fostered subjectivism.

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 central teaching of the Scriptures is 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. But Pietism began to change the emphasis from what Christ has done *for* us to what Christ does *in* us. They 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.

Because of this switch in emphasis to sanctification and good works, they fell into legalism and began to confound sanctification and justification, law and gospel. They fell into a subtle form of work-righteousness. As Spener 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*."¹⁴ (emphasis mine) Notice that justification and sanctification are confused. Instead of saying that those who are justified are also sanctified, Spener made justification dependent on one's desire for sanctification. He inverted the relationship between faith and piety. The just not the sinner is justified in the theology of Pietism.¹⁵

Good works have no part in our justification. They are the result of our justification. They have no part in saving us. But good works show our thanks for all that God has done 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). Good works have no part in saving us, yet Christians will do good works because that is what we were created for. Unless we keep justification and sanctification in their proper relationship, salvation by grace alone is destroyed. That is exactly what happened with Pietism.

In their efforts to promote morality and Christian living, the pietists fell into another trap. They were disappointed with the slowness of the Gospel in producing Christian living so they turned to legalism. They began to use the law for a purpose God never intended.

The main purpose of the law is to show us our sins. As the Bible tells us, "Through the law we become conscious of sin" (Ro 3:20). And again, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I

would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “Do not covet” (Ro 7:7). The main purpose of the law is to demonstrate that we cannot save ourselves and to hold 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” (Ro 3:19).

But Pietism tended to use the law not so much to convict their hearers of the depths of their sinfulness, but more to rail against the gross sins of society. Such preaching tends to turn people into Pharisees rather than crushed sinners.

Let us remember that their purpose was to stir the hearts of their hearers out of their spiritual lethargy. We notice in their sermonizing an improper presentation of Law and Gospel, of Justification and Sanctification. In preaching the Law, however, they contented themselves more with sweeping condemnation of worldly mindedness. A clear presentation of God’s Law to awaken within the individual hearer a deep, personal conviction of sin is conspicuously absent already with Spener.¹⁶

When Pietism shifted the emphasis from the law as mirror (to show us our sins) to the third use of the law (as a rule or guide), legalism resulted. For the pietists the main purpose of the law was to give a set of legal requirements for Christian living.¹⁷ They tried to use the law to motivate Christian living. 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.”¹⁸

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” (Ro 13:10). The law commands us to love, but it cannot produce love in our lives. The gospel, the message of God’s forgiving love for sinners, can. For “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.

Jesus Himself gives us a good illustration of that. When a sinful woman anointed Jesus’ feet, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus into his home became rather critical. Jesus answered him in this way:

“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”(Lk 7:41-47)

The woman’s heart overflowed with love because she knew how much she had been forgiven. The Pharisee showed Jesus no love because he didn’t recognize that he needed forgiveness.

The pietists wanted to foster sanctification. But by misusing the law and de-emphasizing justification, they took away the very thing which can foster sanctification—the law and the gospel properly distinguished and applied.

In their efforts to promote Christian living they also erred in the area of adiaphora. There are many things in this life that God has neither commanded nor forbidden. We call these things adiaphora or in German, *Mitteldinge*. In dealing with adiaphora we always need to be careful not to call something sinful which God has not, and we will always want to guard our Christian freedom so that others don't make legal requirements where God hasn't (Ga 2:3, 5:1). We will also want to make sure that even in adiaphora we do everything to the glory of God (1Co 10:31) and out of concern for our fellow man (Ro 14:1-23). For the pietists, however, nothing was an adiaphoron.

It has been said in defense of both Spener and Francke that they were reacting in a legitimate way against extremes in dress and entertainment, against license and drunkenness, against a general misuse of time and treasure. Spener did not oppose pleasure, play, dancing and the theater as sinful in themselves. But he assumed that they cannot be engaged in to the glory of God and are therefore not suitable activities for the truly regenerate. He regarded the reading of classics as a waste of time.

Francke held that dancing is intrinsically sinful since it is not motivated by the Holy Spirit. He opposed the reading of fiction as a waste of time and also because it is not true. Children in his institutions were forbidden to play. Enjoyment militates against self-denial and the flesh can be crucified only by abstinence from what is enjoyed. In Rule 20 of *Rules for the Protection of Conscience and for Good Order in Conversation or in Society* (1689). He wrote: "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." 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."¹⁹

Pietism also minimized original sin. That can be seen already in Spener.

One of Spener's most radical departures was his exclusion not only of unbaptized Christian children, but also of Jewish and Turkish children from the damnation of original sin because, he maintained, the article on original sin declares only the consequences of original sin and does not explain what God's mercy can effect outside the general ordinance.²⁰

Pietism failed to recognize the total depravity of human nature and lost sight of the fact that a Christian is at the same time both a saint and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). They therefore had an unrealistic optimism for sanctification that bordered on perfectionism. Spener

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...²¹

Pietism really had no appreciation for the struggle between the Old Adam and the New Man in the Christian that St. Paul describes in Romans 7. "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” (Ro 7:18-19). Because Christians still have an Old Adam they will fall into sin. As C.F.W. Walther notes, “Frequently Christians may act in a very unchristian manner.”²² That’s why as Christians we need to hear God’s law and Gospel every day, to show us our sins and, more importantly, to show us our Savior who died to take all of our sins away. That gives us the strength to persevere in our daily battles with our sinful nature.

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 mentioned previously, they were more concerned with what God does in us than with what God has done for us. In reality, they denied objective or universal justification (the fact that God declared the whole world innocent when Jesus died on the cross), and conditioned God’s forgiveness on man’s behavior or reception of grace. Conversion or regeneration (rebirth) was more important for them than justification, and their doctrine of regeneration was synergistic. That is, they believed that man had a part in his own conversion, even if only a small part.

In the Lutheran Church the Pietists directed the alarmed sinner not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to his 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.²³

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. For the pietist the important thing was not that God had announced his unconditional forgiveness to you, but that you feel forgiven.

In *A Letter to a Friend Concerning the Most Useful Way of Preaching* (1725) Francke advised his friend “to lay down in his sermons the distinguishing marks and characters both of the converted and of the unconverted...so that every one of (his) hearers may be able to judge his own state, and may know to which of these two classes he belongs.” He warns against an unskilled confusing of the two classes but offers reassurance that “a prudent minister, who has experienced a work of grace upon his own heart, will have no difficulty in describing it to others, so as to guard sufficiently against the mistakes on both sides.” Again, personal experience is made the touchstone and the objective truth of law and gospel is not sufficient means. It is no wonder that Pietism was not satisfied with the general absolution: the Word of forgiveness must be protected against those who have not yet attained to the Pietists’ standard of readiness to hear it. Or, as they saw it, such people must be protected from hearing it.²⁴

They objected to the general absolution in the worship service because they denied objective or universal justification. Only those who met certain inner conditions could be told 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 we ever be sure that it is meant for us?

Prayer became a means of grace for Pietism instead of the fruit of faith it is. At the same time they denied the efficacy of the Holy Scriptures. For 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.²⁵

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. 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"²⁶ because for him agreement on the essentials of Christianity was enough. He wanted a practical Christianity and was not so interested in arguing about the fine points of doctrine. 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?²⁷

Pietism ignored our Savior's command "to make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you." (Mt 28:19-20) And they forgot His warning, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." (Jn 8:31) And they weren't concerned about Scriptures' injunction to "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way which are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Ro 16:17).

In so doing the pietists fell into two errors. First of all, they changed 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 God's Word testified that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there we know that the Church (believers) will be present. "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 conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word."²⁸

The second error was trying to make the invisible Church visible. The Church is invisible because it contains only believers and we cannot look into anyone's heart to see if he truly is a believer or not. We cannot see the Church, but know that it 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.

There was a shift in thinking of the church as the communion of those who are righteous by faith to those who are ethically righteous, who have a "living Christianity"... Francke operated with the concept of a three-way division of the congregation. The largest group...was constituted of those who had the form of godliness but lacked its substance. It is difficult to avoid the impression that he was denying the faith of those who did not meet his standard of how the Christian lives... The second group...consisted of those who had made a beginning but were not yet fully committed. In modern parlance they had not yet made a "decision for Christ," a phrase which Francke would not have found offensive. The smallest group, fully committed to Francke's norms, constituted the "true" church... Whether he realized it or not, he was trying to make the invisible Church visible.²⁹

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 slow progress of the gospel. God's promises weren't enough. They needed visible proof. And so they developed what might be called the forerunner of today's

success theology. They found that visible proof or validation of God's Word in the success that they believed God has promised to every rightful undertaking.

Francke regarded faith as a living principle which enabled him to undertake with a full assurance of success any enterprise which promised to do good.³⁰

Pietism has likewise often 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.³¹

Closely connected to this "success theology" is the sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, millennialism of the Pietistic 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.³² Those who followed him remained infected with this false teaching, including the great exegete Bengel.

PIETISM'S MODERN MANIFESTATIONS

Nearly forty years ago Prof. Wendland wrote, "The fact that modern Protestantism today is saturated with a theology that is basically pietistic goes without saying."³³ His words are still true today. For the errors of Pietism are basically errors of Reformed theology, both Calvinistic and Arminian. Since most of evangelical Christianity comes out of one or the other of these Reformed camps, the theology, which is most often heard on radio and television or read in religious books and magazines, has a pietistic spirit. That can be seen in a number of areas. As Prof. Wendland continues:

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 superholiness 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.³⁴

Today we might add to Prof. Wendland's list: decision theology, success theology, the charismatic movement, and certain aspects of Christian Contemporary Music and the Church Growth Movement.

Much of evangelical Protestantism today has been infected with the Arminian denial of the total depravity of man. They therefore see man as having an important part to play in his own conversion and consequently, his own salvation. When Billy Graham asks people to decide for Christ, he is implying that an *unconverted* person has the power invite Jesus into his life or accept the forgiveness that Jesus has won. The Bible, however, teaches just the opposite. It tells us that by nature we were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1-5). It says that by nature our minds are hostile to God (Ro 8:6-8) and that before conversion we were slaves to sin (Ro 6:20). Although we have free will to pick up a Bible and read it or to decide to go to church or not, people who are spiritually dead have no power (or free will) to invite Jesus into their lives or to decide for Christ or to accept God's gracious offer of salvation. Like Pietism of old, decision theology errs in giving man a part to play in his own conversion and salvation and so destroys the Reformation principle that salvation is by grace alone.

If you have ever watched any of the religious talk shows hosted by some of the famous (or infamous) TV evangelists, you will have noted how often their guests give testimonials about how their life has improved since they gave themselves over to God. The Reformed, born-again Christian bases his certainty that he is one of God's children on the success that God gives him in his life, not on the objective promises of God's Word. Television preacher and author Robert Schuller writes, "As Christians we believe in success. Why? Because the alternative is disaster. God is not honored in our poverty or sickness. He is glorified in our accomplishments."³⁵

But God doesn't always grant the kind of success that sinful human beings want. The prophets Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah by most human standards were anything but successful. Elijah even asked God to take his life (1Ki 19:4) because he thought all of his efforts for the Lord had been in vain. It seemed to him as if he were the only believer left in Israel. St. Paul begged God to take away his "thorn in the flesh" because he felt that it was hindering him in his work and he could accomplish so much more without it. God answered him in this way, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Our confidence comes not from visible proofs of success or subjective feelings. It comes rather from the objective truths of God's Word and God's gracious promises that are sure even when to us they seem impossible.

The modern Charismatic movement has developed and prospered because of what many perceive as a lack of power in their churches and a lifeless Christianity. But instead of looking to the Holy Scriptures, the Sacraments and the objective truths of God's Word, they look for power and for visible proof of Christianity in faith healing and speaking in tongues and the subjective experience of the so-called baptism of the Holy Spirit. A leading Lutheran Charismatic records this experience:

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 it 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.³⁶

But 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 God. We know that because he tells us so in His Word. Even when the devil accuses us and our conscience plagues us we can be certain that God has forgiven all of our sins no matter how horrible they might be because the Bible tells us that "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin"(1Jn 1:7). And God cannot lie.

The Charismatic movement crosses denominational lines because charismatics make the experience of baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues the basis for church fellowship, not agreement in doctrine and practice.³⁷ The Charismatic movement is a modern manifestation of Pietism.

In recent years pastors, teachers, parents and many others have become increasingly concerned about the music their children are listening to. Songs advocating sexual perversion, aggression and rebellion, satanic worship and suicide can be found in the record (or cassette or CD) collections of many, if not most, of our young people.

Christian Contemporary Music seems to many be a welcome alternative for our young people. For it contains the rock music that our young people enjoy without the objectionable lyrics and message. Yet a word of caution is in order. Since most of this music comes from Reformed sources, its theology tends to be more pietistic than Scriptural and Lutheran. As pointed out in a recent issue of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*,³⁸ these songs generally present sin as a weakness in the individual rather than a total spiritual depravity. Therefore they encourage their listeners to invite Jesus into their hearts (decision theology) and make the Gospel of forgiveness conditional. (God will forgive you if you believe, rather than God has forgiven you, believe it.) But if we place any conditions of the Gospel or on forgiveness, our forgiveness becomes uncertain because we can never be sure that we have done enough or have met the right standards or qualification.

In Christian Contemporary Music there is often the emphasis on subjective experience rather than the objective truths of God's Word. Christianity is reduced to a religion of feeling and doing. As in historic Pietism Christians are separated into classes.

Since these errors are often subtle and sound good to our Old Adam, Lutheran pastors, teachers and parents will therefore want to monitor what contemporary Christian music their young people are listening to as well as that of the more objectionable hard rock variety.

The Church Growth Movement is one of the most important recent developments in evangelical Christianity. It is viewed by many as providing important tools for the work of evangelism and missions at home and abroad. But since the movement comes from the Reformed camp of Christianity, it contains a spirit of Pietism. Some cautions are therefore in order.

Church Growth experts have developed what they call the Resistance-Receptivity Axis by which they try to determine which communities or groups of people are going to be most receptive to the gospel.³⁹ Theologically, since all men are born with original sin, all are born unreceptive to the gospel. The only way resistance to the gospel can be broken down is by the proclamation of law and gospel. The law makes sinners despair of trying to save themselves. The gospel, God's power for salvation, shows them their Savior who died to take all of their sins away. That message has the power to dissolve the unbelieving heart into a heart of faith. It is no greater miracle for the Holy Ghost to convert a Moslem, Hindu or Jew than it was for him to convert any of us. None is more receptive than another.

Church growth theology also makes an unbiblical distinction between ordinary believers and disciples.⁴⁰ Since the Reformed have a faulty understanding of the means of grace and the efficacy of Scripture, Church Growth materials give the impression "that mission methods have been substituted for the means of grace and have themselves become the instruments through which God builds His Church."⁴¹ We would also want to guard against the notion that if we only do things in the right way, numerical success is guaranteed. Numerical success does not necessarily mean that everything is all right nor does lack of numerical success necessarily mean that the church has failed. Our Savior Himself during His public ministry did not always fare so well. As we read in John's Gospel: "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?' ... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him"(Jn 6:60,66).

SOME REMEDIES FOR PIETISM

We live in society that seems to be growing increasingly immoral. The news is filled with reports in graphic detail—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. There has been a loss of respect for the church and the public ministry.

As pastors, teachers and lay leaders we recognize the privilege God has given us in placing us into positions leadership among his people. But we are not free from the problems of frustration and irritation caused by the sins that so easily beset our people or the lack of visible results in our work or the lack of fruits of faith among our people. We set goals and don't reach them. We work hard yet often don't see the results we wanted or the success we anticipated. In dealing with cases of discipline we don't always see the fruits for which we hoped.

As a Synod we have recognized these problems and called for a Synod-wide spiritual renewal. But I hope that we can learn from the mistakes of the past. For frustration and impatience and irritation can easily lead to the legalism and attempts to force sanctification which was evident in Pietism of old.

But there are solutions. It starts with us. It begins 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. Their followers fell into doctrinal indifference and error as a result. We will therefore 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 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? 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.⁴²

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're 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 need to be careful not give their children the impression that if they stay away from certain gross sins, they're 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 terms like justification. It means proclaiming the historical facts of 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 clichés. Although we cannot make the Gospel more effective, we can hinder it when we proclaim it in an apathetic or insincere way. 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. But proclaiming God's love and mercy and forgiveness will.

Apply the law and the gospel to the problems, the temptations and opportunities that your children or students or parishioners meet every day of their lives. Set a good example. 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.

We will also want to be careful to practice 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. As St. Paul encourages us, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted"(Ga 6:1). 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 restore them to Him, 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 they fall into sin, we are to try to lead them to repentance. But we need 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. Don't make sins where God hasn't. Pietism fell into some problems when the distinction between the public ministry and the universal priesthood was blurred. Both have been established by God. Every Christian is a part of the universal priesthood with the privilege of going directly to the throne of God in prayer and the honor of telling others about their Savior and the duty of speaking to their brother who has fallen into sin. But not every Christian is qualified for or called into the public ministry. As Prof. Fredrich warns:

We have many tasks and problems. Thanks to Pietism, one of the greatest of them is keeping a balance between the twin doctrines of universal priesthood and public ministry. So many today want to do their own thing no matter what guidance God provides for them through the public ministry. So many today want to ignore the privileges of the universal priesthood God has established for their own good and the good of their fellow believer. God give us the happy medium that was not achieved three centuries ago.⁴³

Finally, let's learn to be patient and let God do things according to His timetable and plan. The Reformed and the Pietist really don't believe in the efficacy of 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 bread to the sower and seed to 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. (Is 55:10-11)

END NOTES

1. Samuel M. Jackson & Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), Vol IX, p. S3.
2. E.C. Fredrich, "After Three Centuries—The Legacy of Pietism," Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference, June 11, 1985, p. 2.
3. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), p. 181-182.
4. Richard D. Balge, "Pietism's Teaching on Church and Ministry." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 82, #2, Fall 1985, p. 248.
5. Ibid., p. 248.
6. E.H. Wendland, "Present Day Pietism," *Theologische Quartalachrift*, Vol 49, #1, January 1952, p. 22-23. This article is mistakenly ascribed to E.W. Wendland.
7. Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, (Grand Rapids: Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978) p. 31.
8. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, Introduction and translation by Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 11.
9. Martin O. Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 82, #1, Winter 1985, p. 7.
10. Condensed from Spener, op. cit., p. 87-118.
11. Brown, op. cit., p. 62.
12. Carter Lindberg, *The Third Reformation?* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983), p. 151.
13. Brown, op. cit., p. 34
14. Quoted in Brown, op. cit., p. 97.

15. Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), Vol II, p. 25.
16. Wendland, op. cit., p. 24.
17. Brown, op. cit., p. 101.
18. E.H. Klotsche, *The History of Christian Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Raker Book House, 1979), p. 238
19. Balge, op. cit., p. 257-258
20. Brown, op. cit., p. 49.
21. Heick, op. cit., p. 24
22. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 308.
23. John T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 455-456.
24. Balge, op. cit., p. 261
25. Brown, op. cit., p. 72
26. Heick, op. cit., p. 23
27. Fredrich, op. cit. p. 6
28. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol 41, p. 150.
29. Balge, op. cit., p. 251
30. Brown, op. cit., p. 113.
31. Ibid., p. 147.
32. Spener, op. cit., p. 76-86.
33. Wendland, op. cit., p. 28.
34. Ibid., p. 28
35. Robert H. Schuller, *Living Powerfully One Day at a Time*, (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1982), p. 202.
36. Larry Christenson, *The Charismatic Renewal Among Lutherans*, Minneapolis: Lutheran Charismatic Renewal Services, 1976), p. 17-18
37. Ibid., p. 9-10.
38. Klemet Preuss, "Contemporary Christian Music: An Evaluation," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, January 1987, p. 1-16.
39. Please confer: *Evangelism and Church Growth—With Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. September 1987. p. 38.
40. Ibid., p. 40.
41. Ibid., p. 41.
42. Walther, op. cit., p. 20-21.
43. Fredrich, op. cit., p. 14.