

PIETISM, IN THE PAST, AND NOW

Pietism was a movement that affected Lutheran churches from about 1750. It had three basic errors. It separated piety from the Word and the Sacraments, and thus placed piety in a false relationship to faith and salvation. It misunderstood orthodoxy, and became indifferent to the doctrines of Holy Scripture. It taught wrongly about spirit and letter, and spirit and flesh, with a resulting contempt for the means of grace and the office of the ministry, a mixing of Law and Gospel, and legalism that set ceilings for personal religious feelings and style of life. Pietists' strength was an intense interest in missions, but there was often a false mysticism and a schismatic attitude.

Pietism grew in European Lutheranism in the dreadful period after the Thirty-Years War. A generation of people had become estranged from orderly church life. Some people thought that justification had been stressed in a one-sided way, at the expense of sanctification. They wanted to judge people's hearts by apparent fruits of faith, and were quick to criticise church members of dead formalism. Some of the chief men involved were Spener and Francke.

It was largely due to Pietism that Rationalism followed it, and the combined effects of Pietism and Rationalism in the early eighteenth centuries made it much easier for Lutherans to accept the Prussian Union and other union movements.

One of the chief works against Pietism was *Complete Timotheus Verinus*, by Valetin Loescher (1673-1749). At long last this work has been translated into English (Northwestern Publishing House). Loescher's own Christianity, which shines through his writings, is itself a refutation of the charge of "dead orthodoxy." Loescher is aptly described as "the voice of Lutheran Orthodoxy against Pietism."

For example, Loescher correctly observed that Pietism protected and defended people who publicly taught that the external water baptism is not the correct baptism." He pointed out that such people sometimes denied "that the Lord's Supper confers the forgiveness of sins", and that they reproached the Evangelical Lutheran worship service as completely corrupt. They called private confession and absolution unscriptural, and they subscribed to the Lutheran confessions, not because, but only "to the extent that" they agreed with Scripture. They had little use for church history or for the systematic study of theology.

What we ought to do is to ask ourselves to what extent influences of Pietism are still with us. Loescher's chief criticism of Pietists was their indifference to doctrine. They emphasised personal faith at the expense of "the faith" in the sense of the body of doctrine that Christians believe. The most obvious similarity today is the indifference to doctrinal substance that is seen throughout the Ecumenical Movement.

Sections of the Lutheran Church are still heavily influenced by Pietism. For example, in the Lutheran Church of Finland.

There was a parallel movement in England, which was apparent in Puritanism and Methodism. Spiritual exercises and a regimented way of life were regarded as more important than the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, through which God offers, conveys, and seals to the believer the saving benefits of Christ's redemption.

Another aspect of Pietism was its emphasis on a feeling of repentance and a feeling of grace. Unless a person had shed a given number of tears at the time of his conversion, which people were encouraged to pinpoint in time, they were told to doubt that they had really been converted. The fact is that feelings are unstable. They go high at one time and low at another. Faith in Jesus' redemption does not go up and down with feelings. The believer is in a state of grace. The right attitude ought to be, "I cling to what my Saviour taught, and trust it, whether felt or not."

One of the greatest carry-overs of Pietism is in the rapidly growing Pentecostal movement of these days. The accent on a second experience of holiness, which is seen in Methodism and the Holiness Bodies, in their conviction that a Christian at a certain stage goes on to a perfect life, was given a twist by the Pentecostal movement in its subsequent experience, speaking in tongues, which Pentecostals exalt above Baptism as "the Baptism of the Spirit." Their legalism and readiness to be judgmental of others who do not come up to their legalistic standards is also apparent. Pietists took away from the teaching of the Gospel the power to convert and to make holy, and in place of them substituted something mystical. The "happy-clappy" emotionalism in Pentecostalism has its roots in Pietism.

Chiliasm or Millenarianism has regularly been a feature of Pietism. Pietists generally say that without millennialism the Scriptures cannot be defended against unbelievers and mockers. We ought to remember that in some quarters the involvement in the Ecumenical Movement is driven by millenarian dreams. Loescher observed, "Wherever the zeal for piety has been misused and pushed without Christian discretion, millennialism

has always broken out.” Many of the early Lutherans in Australia were tinged with pietistic notions. The two Immanuel Synods in South Australia generally followed Pastor Kavel in his millenarian teachings. Such people look for a kingdom of peace and joy on this earth. The unfortunate thing is not only that such a literal millennium is unscriptural, but that it directs people’s focus away from the theology of the cross of Christ. They hope that the church that has to suffer and fight, and in which believers are tested in the crucible of suffering, will no longer have to suffer and fight when Christ returns for His supposed “thousand-year reign on earth.” Such views even carried over in the arrangement of the furniture in many Lutheran churches in Australia, where the pulpit was often superimposed over the altar. The preached word, with its appeal to the feelings, was more important than the Lord’s Supper!

A special feature of Pietism was the formation of “little churches” within the larger church. In their smaller gatherings Pietists exalted themselves as the true Christians in distinction from the other members of the congregations, to whom they referred in judgmental terms as “Sunday Christians” and even “hypocrites.” There need not in themselves be anything wrong with “Prayer groups” and “Friendship groups”, but they tend to attract only a proportion of the church’s membership, and in such circumstances legalistic tendencies have to be carefully avoided. Lutherans should also have learnt to be cautious about “personal testimonies”, because they easily give the impression that those who give them have reached a much higher level of sanctification. They tend to set- ceilings, and give the impression that only those who reach such ceilings deserve the name of true Christians.

So what should we learn from all this? We need to keep a proper balance between justification and sanctification. Pietists placed sanctification at the centre of theology. They regarded what they did as all-important, and so displaced Christ. We must continue to esteem Baptism and the Lord’s Supper highly, and respect the office of the ministry because of the doctrine of the Gospel that ministers proclaim and apply publicly in the name of the congregations that call them. We must avoid false division between doctrine and practice. Practice is simply doctrine in action, and the doctrine of the Gospel ought to result in evangelical worship. We should beware the suggestion that, as long as the right doctrine of the Gospel is present, style does not matter.

Loescher wrote, “From the beginning the Church of Christ has seen the fanatical confusion mixed together with the unjustly-pushed seeking of piety, or it has hidden behind piety. Therefore it is necessary to faithfully admonish those who earnestly strive after piety in others to guard themselves against such easily travelled wrong ways. They ought to consider well that a good appearance is not everything; rather, everything, even the best appearing ways, is to be tested before the Lord and according to His word, lest one by one they fall into the enthusiastic maze. This is otherwise called “Crypto-Enthusiasm”, a slow but very dangerous evil, which spreads like gangrene.”