

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Pietistic Extremes

Pietism, a major spiritual movement engendered by the Reformation and related to the subsequent movements of Puritanism and Precilianism, continues to have a great impact on spiritual experience of certain groups, and there is much to laud from the examples and teachings of many Pietists. Many individuals and groups labeled as Pietistic, such as the Wesleys and the Moravian Brethren, were an authentic continuation of the Lord's work of reformation, especially in their advancement in biblical understanding as well as Christian practice among such believers during the later sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. However, other individuals, leaders, and groups, either through misreading or misunderstanding Pietistic thinking, have tended toward certain spiritual extremes. These extreme Pietistic notions and practices serve as a warning to us as we rightly seek to gain Christ and know Him.

The Historical Emphasis of Pietism

To most modern minds, the term *Pietist* connotes a self-righteous, smugly pious, legalistic Christian. This is an unfortunate definition and does not accord well with the history of Pietism. Historically, the Pietist movement was less concerned with legalism than with spiritual revival of the individual in particular and of the church indirectly. This movement stressed the authority of the Scriptures—not only in issues of truth, as did the Reformers, but also as the absolute authority in the Christian's personal pursuit of the Lord. It sought a deeper consecration among believers, along with a subjective, experiential knowledge of Christ, and for this reason created and popularized many devotional aids, hymns, and practical sermons to address and assist believers in their spiritual growth. Not surprisingly, the Pietist movement was witness to an increased functioning of all believers, exemplified by an increase in such things as Bible clubs and other group meetings. By emphasizing heartfelt devotion to Christ, it also encouraged the expression of that affection in Christ-like care for societal needs. In sum, Pietism was a broad movement spanning many denominational boundaries. As such, it does not lend itself to a simple, precise, or concise definition.

Pietism initially appeared among Protestants living in continental Europe during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Two main sources can be identified as the Pietist fountainhead. One was the work of Johann Arndt, who presented his views in the book *True Christianity*. The other was a publication by Philipp Jakob Spener, which originally appeared simply as an introduction to a subsequent edition of Arndt's book. It was eventually published separately, as a monograph entitled *Pia Desideria (Pious Desires)*.

Pietists regarded themselves as an extension, a continuation, of the work that the Lord began during the Reformation. They cherished the truths of the Reformation but were dismayed to see the Reformed church awash in lifeless orthodoxy. They viewed many of the Reformed, Lutheran, and national churches as being dry and unduly preoccupied with theological disputes. They also perceived an overemphasis on ritualistic, sacramental worship being carried out among congregations that were morally and spiritually adrift. While embracing the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith, many Reformed groups were seen by the Pietists as overemphasizing doctrine to the neglect of the actual regeneration experience initiated by faith. In 1569, a

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Pietist named Edward Dering, alarmed at the vacuous condition of the national church, wrote to Queen Elizabeth I to alert her to its woeful state. He told her that the parson was at battle with the vicar, the vicar was against the parson, and the parish opposed them both, and "all for the belly" (*Christian History* 9). Dering's words captured the disillusion felt by many Pietist leaders. They viewed the church as being morally degraded, embroiled in secular politics, lifeless, overly polemical, and encumbered with a shallow and, at times, even unconverted clergy, producing only a superficial, ritualistic church life. Their appraisal of the spiritual condition of European Christendom in their day was both bold and accurate.

Incredibly, Pietist leaders and adherents could still be found within the confines of a multiplicity of denominations and

spiritual persuasions, inextricably rooted in the traditions of medieval mysticism, the Reformation, and Puritanism. Rarely did these believers break from their denominational traditions. Rather, they hoped for a renewal from within—a regenerated church within the visible church. While enjoying some limited success, these Christians ultimately were vigorously persecuted, and their efforts met defeat more often than success.

Advances

Pietistic teachers succeeded in affording the Lord an opportunity to recover a more experiential and practical Christian experience among His people. These teachers often stressed the personal necessity and right of every believer to participate in divinity by experiencing God directly, personally, and intimately. The Pietist movement championed the application of divine truth to daily life, encouraging all believers to develop individual devotional times that would result in a changed life. It also helped to nurture what Luther commonly called the priesthood of all believers by establishing group meetings in homes. These groups, often called choirs or conventicles, encouraged individual believers to participate in Bible study and fellowship whether or not the clergy was present.

Some Pietist teachers such as William Law had great insight concerning the indwelling Christ and the need for the believer to allow Christ to live through him. Andrew Murray's compilation of the early writings of Law, *Wholly for God*, is a representative example of Pietist teaching which stresses devout and holy behavior. Interestingly, Law progressed in his teachings toward a more accurate view of God's economy. His later work, *The Power of the Spirit*, more accurately reflects the Christ-centered view found in the apostles' New Testament teaching. The Pietist movement also placed a strong emphasis on the new birth, calling Christ "the new maker," and held that new-birth experiences should be strong and life-changing.

Accompanying Pietism's experiential focus was a renewed interest in biblical exposition. (Johann Bengel, whose word studies are still popular today, was himself a Pietist.) The Bible's supreme authority was appropriately embraced, not only in matters of doctrine but also in its application to the individual believer's life. Scripture was seen not merely as proof text for polemics but more as spiritual food for the hungry. By reducing the emphasis on debate over minor doctrinal points, a greater tolerance for receiving Christians with differing views on matters that were not vital to the Christian faith was also fostered. This, in turn, led to an increased emphasis on the importance of overcoming divisions within the church. The life of Count Zinzendorf and the marvelous oneness of the Moravian Brethren, along with their attempts to

unify other believers, afford a wonderful example of some Pietists' attempts to recover Christian unity. All of these advances deserve affirmation.

Deviations

In any movement so broadly based as this one and in many respects so positive, it is difficult to offer critique without unfairly, though unintentionally, encompassing many Pietists who did not espouse the practices or teachings in question. Nevertheless, many Christians unwittingly have misunderstood, misapplied, or stopped short of the truths promoted by the Pietists.

The Pietistic focus on personal spirituality led many believers to have a diminished appreciation of the need for a corporate commonality with other believers. The church's role and value dwindled among some Pietists, who took their individual spirituality to extremes and became in effect "one-man monasteries." Corresponding to this trend toward individualism was the tendency of some Pietists to become overly concerned with the emotional effects of conversion and worship. Typical of the expectations of many Pietists was August H. Francke's description of his own salvation experience. In his essay entitled "On Christian Perfection," he says,

All sadness and unrest of my heart was taken away at once, and I was immediately overwhelmed as with a stream of joy so that with full joy I praised and gave honor to God who had shown me such great grace. I arose a completely different person from the one who had knelt down. (105)

He describes repeated eruptions of joy throughout a sleepless night. While many believers share similar regeneration experiences, many other genuine children of God do not. Nevertheless, this emotional experience became a kind of litmus test for conversion experiences. Some Pietists insisted that genuine conversion must be preceded by deep sorrow, prompting non-Pietists to criticize them for overemphasizing emotion. This proscriptiveness also brought them into conflict with others, even other Pietists, who did not experience such dramatic emotional conversions. One notable example was Count Zinzendorf, who loved the Lord from childhood. Nevertheless, he could not recall ever experiencing either a season of deep sorrow and regret preceding his conversion or a moment of great joy at some identifiable date of regeneration. Though he certainly lived a joyful life in Christ, he did not fit into a prescribed formula for regeneration experiences. Some Pietists, therefore, openly doubted the genuineness of his conversion.

Pietists often placed an inordinate focus on behavior rather than on the increase of Christ within the believer.

In reaction to the moral decline of the population, some preachers advocated new, more stringent standards of Christian conduct and discipline. Manuals of spiritual exercises were published, unintentionally making these exercises an end in themselves. Peter Erb decries this emphasis on moral and spiritual rigor as inadvertently having “elevated experiential piety, personal assurance, and a high moral and devotional life, in practice if not in theory, to the rank of saving graces” (6). Christian growth was misunderstood to be the growth of good works, rather than the growth of God (Col. 2:19).

Related to an overemphasis on behavior was a shift in perspective concerning the Bible. Pietists rightly condemned the misuse of the Bible by those who were eager to use the Bible only for the purpose of doctrinal debate over minor issues. While some Pietists properly emphasized the function of the Bible to feed the believers with “guileless milk” (1 Pet. 2:2), others began to construe the Bible primarily as a manual whereby one could measure the success of his attempts at ethical living.

This, in turn, prompted a practice of constant self-examination or introspection. Many Pietists became quite skillful at this kind of introspection. They often tested the progress of their own spiritual life and that of others, measuring the degree of sacred affection displayed as well as good works demonstrated in social causes. Sermons often spent more time urging listeners to look within, to test and measure themselves, rather than bringing them to Christ Himself, the One who, as the indwelling Spirit, searches the hearts.

Some Pietists also deviated in elevating Christian practice and experience above truth. Christian teaching and the knowledge of the truth were relegated to secondary status, while emotion, experience, and devotional practices became preeminent. While many Reformed believers neglected experience and became obsessed with doctrinal issues of every kind, some Pietists veered to the opposite extreme of subjugating truth to feeling and practice. This inclination continues today, especially among those occupied with miraculous signs and wonders.

Another deviation that emerges on the Christian stage from time to time was the notion of Christian perfection in this age. While many Pietists were quick to point out the need to seek and advance in perfection (known as progressive sanctification), they also admitted the futility of expecting full perfection while in this earthly tabernacle. However, some teachers, perhaps due to a certain amount of success in their own spiritual pursuits, began to entertain the notion that a Christian could arrive at sinless perfection in this lifetime. Even those who admitted the futility of the notion of sinless perfection often seemed to express an inordinate confidence in the

advanced Christian’s ability to conquer sin. For example, August Francke felt that “a person can come to a human strength in Christianity so as to kill the old habits in himself and to conquer his flesh and blood” (115).

Christ Being All and in All

All deviations which proceed from misplaced notions of Pietism actually owe their origin to one primary error—a subtle shift in focus from Christ Himself to positive, seemingly innocuous spiritual matters. In Colossians 3:11 Paul declared that in the new man, “Christ is all and in all,” a truth both central and summative to believers. Those who love the Lord should be adamant in their refusal to deviate from Christ in His centrality and universality. Individualistic spirituality is but one example of Pietistic deviation from Christ. Whenever a believer truly declares to the Lord, as Peter did, “You are the *Christ*” (Matt. 16:16), the Lord unfailingly responds, “I will build My *church*” (v. 18, emphasis added). When Christ is all, He leads the believer into a corporate church life. When Christ is all, emotions and good behavior become secondary, mere by-products of an intimate communion with Him. When Christ is everything, the Bible is neither a proof text nor a manual of ethical behavior. Instead, it feeds and nourishes. When a person is Christ-centered, he is no longer self-centered and is thus delivered from introspection. When Christ is all, truth is treasured not for its own sake but because it reveals more of His dear person and plan. Practices and experiences also become vacuous if they fail to lead us to the Lord Jesus Himself, who is our goal. Finally, when Christ is all and in all, one spontaneously loses all confidence in the flesh’s attempts at perfection. Our confidence is in the Lord Himself because “every spiritual blessing” is in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Any shift, no matter how slight, from Christ as the center of God’s plan and as the goal of the believer’s pursuit, is a deviation, a falling away from His person and His intention.

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Works Cited

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