

The Problem of Pietism

“My church is too preoccupied with doctrine. It’s dying. It’s not spiritual. It needs more life and feeling. It needs more love and good works. It needs to focus more on the practical, spiritual needs of the people.” Have you heard this before?

Obviously, Christians should be concerned about both doctrine and practice. Therefore, it behooves each pastor and congregation to submit to self-examination, to make sure that their practice reflects their doctrine. However, one must also be careful: The statement in quotes above is not an attempt to renew Lutheran theology. It is an entirely different system of teaching called Pietism.

Pietism emerges from the belief that the Church has grown too occupied with doctrine, and therefore lacks good works. It often springs up after a time of theological turmoil in the Church, and understandably so: After doctrinal struggle, people want peace. Unfortunately, people too often identify doctrine—both true and false—as the cause of trouble, and thus turn away from all doctrine. If a church jettisons doctrine as its basis, all it has left is practice.

Bengt Hägglund¹ notes the following general characteristics of Pietism, which comes in a fair number of varieties:

1. Experience is the ground of certainty in spiritual matters.² In other words, you know God’s Word is true because it proves true in what you experience.
2. There is such a thing as “dead faith,”³ a faith which receives the true doctrine of God but, because it lacks “living power” [expressed in outward action], it cannot justify. Thus, for instance, believing in Jesus as Savior isn’t enough; one must accept [sic] Jesus as both “Savior” *and* “Lord.”
3. New birth or regeneration (what modern evangelicals call being “born again”) does not mean forgiveness, but “an inner transformation which in turn is the source of the new life that characterizes the Christian man.”⁴ In other words, one is not born again by Baptism and the forgiveness of sins, but by the transformation of his life.
4. The testimony of true faith is a sanctified life.⁵ In other words, one’s faith is measured not by his confession of what he believes, but how he lives.
5. The New Testament is more highly regarded than the Old Testament, and *personal experience serves as the basis for interpretation*.⁶
6. Bible study should serve practical and inspirational goals. At the Halle university, a center of Pietism, “Dogmatic studies were reduced to insignificance.”⁷
7. “Every detail of life is to be directed by the Holy Spirit, or by the new affections of faith.”⁸ This results in a couple of emphases. For one thing, Pietism directs people to look for the Holy Spirit in

¹ Hägglund, Bengt. *History of Theology*. St. Louis: CPH, 1968. Pages 325-334, *passim*.

² “According to [Philipp Jakob] Spener, experience is the ground of all certainty, both on the natural level and on the level of revelation” (Hägglund, 327).

³ Hägglund, 327

⁴ Hägglund, 328

⁵ Hägglund, 328

⁶ “Pietism, on the other hand, proceeded on the basis of experience; it looked upon the experience of the individual as being fundamental to religious knowledge or insight.” (Hägglund, 329)

⁷ Hägglund, 330

experience, not in Word and Sacrament. Furthermore, Pietism directs the Christian to try to determine what Jesus would have them do in each event of daily life, no matter how mundane. This creates a huge preoccupation with how God is using each minute detail of life for good; and such preoccupation always distracts from the means of grace.

8. Pietism sometimes includes an emphasis on chiliasm,⁹ as popularized in the “Left Behind” series.

9. Distinctions between various communions are not essential,¹⁰ because good works are seen as the measure of Christianity—not one’s confession of faith. Therefore, Pietism will never be comfortable with the Lutheran doctrine and practice of altar and pulpit fellowship.

10. Pietism often claims the cross as the center of its theology; however, the cross saves through subjective experience, not objective justification. In other words, one comes into fellowship with Christ not because of His objective death and resurrection, but because one contemplates the cross and identifies with the Lord’s sufferings.¹¹ Being close to Jesus is about feeling His pain. (This is a primary reason by Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of Christ” was so popular among American evangelicals, despite its heavily sacramental symbolism.)

Given those characteristics, Pietism will differ from Lutheran doctrine in all sorts of vital doctrines. (Please see the table on page 4.) Because the foundation of Pietism is ostensibly Christian love, it first appears as a renewal of orthodox Christianity. However, because it sets aside the objective Word for experience and feeling, it is an entirely different system of theology. And because it exalts experience and emotion over Scripture, there is a Pietist in all of us.

Addressing Pietism is a frustrating task. Lutherans will seek resolution on the basis of the objective Word of God. However, Pietism eschews doctrine and dogmatic studies; therefore, Pietists will normally not respond with a cogent Scriptural argument. In fact, Pietists will often declare that they do not disagree with Lutheran doctrine, but simply want to add some “life” and “spirituality” that is missing. (Thus comes the logical disconnect of Pietism: It’s important to believe the Bible, as long as you don’t stipulate what it exactly says.) For instance, when Pietists object to hymnody, they will often say that the text is not wrong, but that the words and tune fail to inspire.¹² Thus, the argument is taken from objective truth to subjective feeling. Indeed, Pietism will always want to argue from a subjective basis, because there it can always establish an upper hand. Why? Because anyone who opposes Pietism causes a negative emotional experience; therefore, the opponent is wrong, no matter what the Scriptures say.

However, one doctrine that Pietism will vehemently oppose is the doctrine of Closed Communion. Closed Communion is an objective doctrine of God which declares that dogma matters and maintains that Christian love requires that people be turned away from the Sacrament. Because

⁸ Hägglund, 331

⁹ Hägglund, 331

¹⁰ Hägglund, 332

¹¹ Hägglund, 332

¹² The texts of Pietist hymnody will focus on experience and emotion. The words may not be wrong, but they will probably not make a strong confession, either. Compare, for instance, these two songs about our Lord’s Passion:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The royal banners forward go;
The cross shines forth in mystic glow
Where He in flesh, our flesh who made,
Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.

this so clearly contradicts Pietism, such a doctrine and practice cannot be tolerated. However, one cannot condemn Closed Communion and still take seriously the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Communion; therefore, in the end, it is Jesus who is the stone that makes the Pietist stumble.

Upon a stumble, Pietism has another disturbing trait. Because it is based upon subjective feeling and outcome, it will rationalize sin in order to meet its goal. For example, Pietists may claim to support the doctrine of the divine call, then seek to remove a pastor because they find him doctrinally-sound, but unappealing. (A Pietist pastor has a shelf-life in a congregation determined by how long he can be emotionally inspirational.)

When Pietism condemns people for a lack of good works, there is always the temptation to take the bait and prove them wrong. Do not attempt to out-pietize the Pietist; in other words, people ought not suppose that they can do enough good works—by Pietism’s definitions—in order to win Pietists over. As long as people insist on the importance of pure doctrine, they will never exhibit enough “Christian love” and “spirituality” for Pietism to be satisfied; and indeed, in focusing on doing such Pietistical good works, they run the real danger losing their focus on the Gospel.

Pietism may appear at first to be the same as liberalism. They are different: While both downplay the importance of specific doctrine, Pietism still claims the Bible to be authoritative while liberalism does not. Both give too little attention to the Gospel, though for different reasons: Pietism emphasizes works and experience over Christ’s death and resurrection, while liberalism sees no benefit in Christ’s death or truth in His resurrection. Pietism and liberalism will eventually part ways when it comes to the Law: While liberals are usually permissive, Pietists believe that the Law is the basis for Christian life, and therefore must be followed carefully, if selectively.

However, apart from the Gospel enough, 21st-century Pietism faces the added danger of merging into syncretism. If experience, emotion and good works are all that matter, and if doctrine is to be eschewed in principle, then there really is nothing in the system of Pietism to keep it from embracing all religions that promote good works.

However, Pietism inevitably wanes because it is based upon the Law. To continue, it depends upon the continued commitment and zeal of fallen sinners. Subscribers to Pietism may find that they simply cannot sustain the level of living that they require of themselves; or, they may find no comfort in their attempts at holy living when confronted with tragedy or death. It is left to the Church, then, faithfully to preach the Lord’s objective Law and Gospel, warn of the dangers of Pietism, and trust that the Lord is faithful. The Church shall never perish, says the Lord; Pietism receives no such promise.

In these last days of sore distress
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
That pure we keep, till life is spent,
Thy holy Word and Sacrament. Amen (TLH 292:2)

--Pastor Tim Pauls

	Pietism	Lutheran
The cross	Object of reflection and meditation, in order to experience Jesus	The means by which Christ objectively won salvation for all the world
Foundation for Doctrine and Practice	“Christian love,” or how we treat one another.	Scripture
“Born again”	The transformation of one’s life which takes place after being saved.	Holy Baptism (John 3:3-5), which gives forgiveness, life and salvation.
Revelation	Revelation is confirmed by experience. Therefore, one’s interpretation of Scripture will be determined by events in life.	Revelation is given in God’s Word, and Scripture interprets Scripture. The Scriptural interpretation is to be believed, no matter what one experiences.
Emotions	Emotional experience is part of revelation.	God’s Word is sure, no matter what one’s emotions.
Worship	Worship is to be a time of emotional and inspirational uplift. People are involved when they have a part in leading the service.	Worship is Divine Service, where the Lord objectively gives forgiveness by His means of grace. People are involved by receiving the forgiveness of sins.
Hymns	Measured by emotional and experiential appeal	Measured by content of proclamation
Sermon	Must be practical, telling Christians how to live their lives and motivating them to do it. (Emphasis on Law)	A proclamation of Law and Gospel, for the forgiveness of sins. (Emphasis on Gospel)
Doctrinal Content	Doctrine does not matter. All you have to do is believe in Jesus.	Pure doctrine is to be preserved. However, those who lack pure doctrine may still be saved.
Closed Communion	Closed Communion is an offense because it divides Christians and implies superiority. Because doctrine is not important, Closed Communion is an error.	Closed Communion is necessary because it is Scriptural. Despite the emotional reactions of some, it is truly a practice of Christian love for one’s neighbor.
Bible Study	Must be practical, telling Christians how to live their lives and motivating them to do it. (Emphasis on life)	A study of doctrine, to bestow knowledge and strengthen faith. (Emphasis on faith)
Holy Spirit	Seen at work in experience and feeling. Thus something is “spiritual” when it is emotionally gratifying; in other words, the Holy Spirit is measure subjectively.	Works through Word and Sacrament to give forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is found in objective means.
Ministry	Everyone is a minister to serve as they feel called.	The office of pastor is divinely instituted by God, to publicly preach and administer the sacraments. Pastors do not <i>feel</i> called; they are objectively called by God through a congregation. All Christians share their faith and serve in their vocations.
Missions	Any sort of outreach by Christians.	The proclamation of the Gospel by Word and Sacrament.