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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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## REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## INFORMATION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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### REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

<i>Editor's Introduction</i>	7
John H. Armstrong	
<i>Growing in Christ</i>	19
Tom Schwanda	
<i>The Puritan Use of Imagination</i>	47
Eifion Evans	
<i>The Spiritual Resources of Faithful Witnesses</i>	85
T. M. Moore	
<i>Children and Congregational Worship</i>	105
David W. Hegg	
<i>Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety</i>	125
Joel R. Beeke	
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	157
<i>Review Articles</i>	167
<i>Book Reviews</i>	217
<i>Book Notices</i>	229

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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*John H. Armstrong*

Among students of Reformation theology no subject seems to create more controversial dialogue than that of the role and development of Pietism. If you want to "throw the proverbial cat among the pigeons" then take a strong side in this debate and stand back. There will be a lot of heat. Sometimes a ray of light even breaks through in the discussion. But why this conflict?

Some are strongly convinced that Pietism caused, or at least allowed, the rise of German rationalism. They argue that the bitter fruit of liberal theology arose from the pietistic garden. Still others are convinced that Pietism was essentially a revival of medieval monastic and mystical piety. This connection, it is often argued, came about because of the influence of Puritanism, not only in England but also in Holland and eventually in America. It is often argued that this bad fruit came as a result of revivals, with their very direct emphasis upon the new birth and personal experience.

Historically, at least in Lutheran countries, Pietism represented a significant revival of desire for an experiential theology, a theology that allowed for a deeper experience of Christ's love and for the felt presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It is argued, by opponents, that this emphasis detached doctrine from life. This, it is explained, became the emphasis on what we now call "heart knowledge, not head knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

But what exactly is Pietism? Sometimes even the definitions are controversial. They certainly are widely debated. One historian defines Pietism as:

A movement among Protestants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which emphasized the necessity for

good works and a holy life. It began in Germany shortly after the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) when the churches had become entangled in *confessional rigidity*, and the time is often called the Age of Orthodoxy or the period of Protestant Scholasticism. The ideas of the Reformers had become so *systematized* and *schematized* that there was little comfort to be found in them (italics mine).<sup>2</sup>

Modern historian David Bebbington is correct to note that:

Pietism has been one of the least understood movements in the history of Christianity. The word comes from *pietas* (piety, devotion, religiousness), the Latin rendition of the Greek *eusebeia* and the Hebrew *hasid* (kind, benevolent, pious, good). Appearing over a dozen times in the New Testament, *eusebeia* has been translated as "godliness," "piety," or "religion." The English word "piety" etc., has a positive meaning but may also denote vain and hypocritical characteristics, as in "a pious hope." Such was true of *Pietismus*, the German nickname given to the Reform movement within Lutheranism by its enemies.<sup>3</sup>

Another reputable modern historical source reminds us that the answer to our question is not as easy to state concisely as one would like:

As a descriptive term, "Pietism" has had *various* meanings according to its *various uses*. It was first applied to a movement within German Lutheranism led by Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727). Here it was largely a manifestation of *reaction against orthodox formalism*, against a Protestant Scholasticism influenced by the rationalism of the age, wherein the Christian life centered upon the *passive acceptance* of closely defined dogmas,

the reception of the sacraments, and participation in the ordinances of the church (italics mine).<sup>4</sup>

The above answers cannot be seriously doubted. The term Pietism, properly used, referred to a movement *within* the Lutheran Church of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This movement was established at Halle by Phillip Jacob Spener. But the term has had a much wider use over the centuries. Used improperly, as Bebbington notes, it became a virtual "nickname" for almost any type of personal piety and devotion that went beyond the accepted Scholastic Lutheran models of the time. It is in this sense that some modern reformers use the term today, often with a great deal of disdain.

The first Pietism developed not only in Halle, but also in Württemberg and Herrnhut. It had reform in the Lutheran Church as its passionate goal. The prevailing Lutheranism of the time was intensely focused upon the intellect. The emphasis of Pietism was on "living faith" made active in love and outward moral conduct. The sacramental theology of Luther had hardened into a religion of categories and arguments. Many devoted lay Christians, and some ministers, longed for a revival of true spiritual life and personal devotion.

#### PHILLIP JACOB SPENER

Spener, the founder of Pietism, received a devout early education. He was particularly exposed to spiritual writers such as Johann Arndt, Lewis Bayly and Richard Baxter. In 1651 he began university studies at Strasbourg. During this period he devoted much time to theological reading, serious reflection and hymn singing. He did further study at Basel, Geneva, and Tübingen. In 1663 he became the assistant minister in Strasbourg, a position which allowed further academic pursuit resulting in his receiving a doctorate

in theology in 1664. His goal was to live a quiet scholar's life and to devote himself to theological education. By 1666, however, the plan changed. He was called to pastor the famous Paulskirche in Frankfurt. Here his Lutheran orthodoxy was called into question when he reacted against the polemical and sterile orthodoxy of the time. It should be recalled that this was the period following the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a time in which both social and spiritual conditions were very bad. Spener was immediately accused, as strange as it sounds to many of us today, of Calvinistic tendencies. Under obvious pressure he preached a sermon (1667) against the Reformed faith, speaking of "necessary caution against false prophets." He almost immediately regarded this sermon as a mistake and sought to stop the circulation of the message. By July of 1669 he preached on the "vain righteousness of the Pharisees." In this particular sermon he spoke of a superficial spiritual security that was content with external subscription to the creeds of Lutheranism. He spoke eloquently against what he saw as intellectual attachment to pure doctrine, outward participation in divine service and the sacramental life of the church. He strongly suggested that abstinence from the grosser sins and vices the church condemned was not enough. The response was striking. Some felt he demanded too much while others were startled into a condition of spiritual alarm and came to serious repentance.

Many, now moved by this stirring of the Spirit of God, began to listen to Spener's personal appeals. In effect, he advocated four things, as Bebbington notes.

- (1) more intensive Bible study, individually and in *collegia pietatis* (conventicles);
- (2) The exercise of the universal priesthood of believers through increased lay activity;
- (3) The practice of Christianity in daily life and works of unselfish love;
- (4) Dealing with unbelievers and heretics with sincere

prayers, good example, persuasive dialogue and the spirit of love instead of compulsion. These proposals quickly became the focus of a growing controversy.<sup>5</sup>

In the *collegia pietatis*, or the private devotional meetings conducted twice a week in Spener's home, a kind of Methodism arose long before the time of George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. But there was more. Much like Richard Baxter in sleepy Kidderminster, Spener began to preach experimentally and to practice church discipline. He also reformed the catechizing of each Lord's Day. Several sermons from this work were published (1677).

#### *PIA DESIDERIA*

It is a well-known fact that Spener carefully read both the English Puritans and the Dutch *precisianists*.<sup>6</sup> He was profoundly influenced by their concern for a living faith that showed itself in love. As a result of this emphasis he published the now famous work *Pia Desideria* in 1675. This classic was an open attack upon the Lutheran state church system. It strongly urged reformation in both the ministry and the seminaries. It called lay people to gather for prayer and Bible study. This little book caused Pietism to spread rapidly across Germany.

But many were not happy about this reformation. Virulent opposition arose from Saxon clergy, especially from the universities in Wittenberg and Leipzig. (The ironies of this should not be missed!) One of Spener's spiritual disciples, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), sought to reform Leipzig University itself. He began small group meetings (1689) for the purpose of deeper and more personal exegetical study of Scripture. These *collegium philobiblicum* soon attracted students and local residents. The authorities eventually dissolved this society because of its enthusiasm. David Bebbington correctly notes that, "A fac-

ulty opponent stated publicly, 'Our mission is to make students more learned and not more pious.'<sup>7</sup> Another faculty member supported the movement with a poem that positively praised pietists and Pietism.

#### AUGUST HERMANN FRANCKE

As both a pastor and professor August Hermann Francke advanced the work of early Pietism in Germany rapidly. He did this by founding *Stiftungen*, philanthropic and educational institutions related to the newly established University in Halle, where he went to teach in 1698. He also established an orphanage, a Bible society, and a home for widows. He very quickly became the organizational giant of the movement. His emphasis led to the rise of the modern mission movement when in 1705 Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau were sent to India. From their activities Francke established a society for missions that he directed until his death. From the University of Halle, Pietism was eventually spread, via literature and teachers, into Russia, Scandanavia, Switzerland, Holland, Great Britain and even the new American settlements. For this reason, David Bebbington concludes:

Because this widespread influence continued through subsequent expressions in many denominations and religious awakenings, some historians employ the term "pietism" to encompass a wide spectrum which includes Dutch Pietism, Puritanism, the Wesleyan revivals and the Great Awakening. Others delimit the name more narrowly to the reform movement stemming from the activities of Spener, Francke, Bengel, Count von Zinzendorf (1700-60) and others. A growing consensus acknowledges the many legacies and influences of pietism on British and American Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Both Spener and Francke were deeply committed to

reformation of the churches, not to separation. Though they stressed personal piety and individual study of the Scriptures they were not individualists, at least *not* as we know this practice in the American evangelicalism of our time. They labored to overcome the ecclesial barriers erected between German Lutheranism and the Reformed church. They believed and practiced a type of evangelical ecumenism long before the modern ecumenical movement.

Sadly, the Pietist movement attracted chiliastic, enthusiastic and ecstatic expressions by the last decade of the seventeenth century. Opponents used these excesses against Spener and his friends. Spener was even accused of being a Jesuit! A number of polemical attacks and responses ensued but "The orthodox Lutheran attacks on Pietism neither distracted the Pietists from their cause nor checked its wider development."<sup>9</sup>

#### NICHOLAS LUDWIG VON ZINZENDORF AND THE MORAVIANS

Not surprisingly, after the death of Francke, Pietism began to wane in Germany. As with all reform movements, the leaders die, the movement eventually changes, and the real fruit remains. The most obvious offshoot of Pietism was the revival of Moravianism under Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), who was Spener's godson and Francke's student. He eventually formed a community of missionary-minded believers at his estate who expressed a passionate mysticism in language that was quite sentimental.

The Moravians were the Protestant descendants of John Huss and the fifteenth-century Hussite movement. There is a sense, as historians have noted, that they were really the descendants of the *first* Protestants. They led the modern missionary movement and took early steps toward visible



expressions of church unity that are astounding when carefully considered.

The beliefs of the early Moravians were very simple. They had a strong emphasis upon Scripture, a modified emphasis upon politics and a preference for pacifism.<sup>10</sup> They experienced persecution from some ecclesiastical authorities thus their influence began, eventually, to wane. By the eighteenth century their movement had virtually come to an end. Through contact with Pietism in general, and Count von Zinzendorf in particular, the Moravians experienced a revival of life and growth.

### CONCLUSION

Historian David Bebbington summarizes well the proper historical and theological approach to Pietism and how we should relate its contribution to personal piety:

Although pietism is viewed as having roots in mysticism, Anabaptism and Reformed groups in Holland, and was followed by more radical and separatist manifestations, pietist motifs are probably more fairly defined through examining the thought of the early leaders. The mystical and spiritualist themes of Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) and others should more properly be called radical pietism. Early and contemporary critics accuse pietists of a subjectivism which exalts self above God and derives religious norms from the experience and needs of persons. The resultant individualism is often said to undermine sound doctrine. The pietists insisted, however, that the necessary reformation of doctrine by Luther must lead to a *reformation of life*. They believed they were entirely Lutheran in insisting that faith must become active in love. Their insistence that credal formulations must be tested by biblical theology, together with their more democratic proposals, tended to undermine the authority of the church. But the pietists desired *reformation* of and not *separation from* the church. The

pietist emphasis on careful study of the texts in the original languages combined with the devotional use of the Bible was no doubt vulnerable to the perils of private interpretation. But in general this served to revive the Reformation emphasis on biblical authority. From the beginning pietism faced a legalistic temptation. Nevertheless, Spener and Francke remained Lutheran in insisting that regeneration be an integral part of an experience of justification. Contrary to the meritorious works of medieval Catholicism, pietism stressed the gift of sanctifying grace. The theology of pietism led in some cases the early leaders to an excessive emotionalism. However, for the early leaders the experience of the Spirit was seen as an appropriation of, rather than a substitution for, revelation.<sup>11</sup>

Pietism, like so many other movements in the history of the Christian church, made a deep impression for a season and then, for all intents and purposes, passed away. It was originally a revival movement, depending upon your perspective, of biblical piety and personal devotion. It most surely was not anti-intellectual, as some modern writers claim.<sup>12</sup> It arose in a context where official religious faith dominated the day and very few took personal interest in developing the kind of faith and practical holiness that led to obedience to the law of Christ. Simply put, the strongly Scholastic Lutheran dogma of the time, which separated justification too radically from sanctification, had produced a "dead orthodoxy." To varying degrees the same has occurred in our time. Witness the Lordship controversy. Consider the numerous calls for modern reformation that oppose anything like Spirit-given revival. Ponder the continual emphasis upon Word and sacrament that speaks so little of the Spirit's role in illuminating and making alive by the direct work of his power. Reflect upon the continual refrain that Pietism necessarily opposes complete trust in the final authority of Scripture.

Like all movements of revival, Pietism was mixed. In opposing the Lutheran emphasis upon possession of right doctrine, a proper administration of the sacraments and a national church with its massive hierarchy, Pietism was on good ground. One historian notes that "The sole requirements laid upon church-members [in the time prior to the rise of Pietism] . . . were recognition of the doctrine of the church as an authoritative presentation of divine revelation, reception of the proffered Word and sacraments, and obedience to the several ordinances affecting church life."<sup>13</sup> This being the case, how can any serious evangelical Christian question the need for a movement of God's Spirit to challenge the national church in its lethargy and formality and to refresh the people of God with power from on high? Given the fruit of Pietism, seen in both its love for Christ and its renewal of obedience to Christ, should those interested in modern reformation and true revival continue to use the term as one of opprobrium?

Pietism, not bounded by strict adherence to Lutheran creedalism, sought to recover the early Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*. Appeal to the exegesis of the text of Scripture is not the same thing as an appeal to private, devotional insight gained through the foolish misuse of Scripture. To say that Pietism was exclusively the latter is to miss the clear evidence of the former. The danger of coming to the Bible, without regard for the church and its historic expression of faith, is a real danger. At the same time, adopting a particular creed and treating it as the final word on the Bible is likewise a dangerous position for evangelical Protestants. There can be little room for new reformation, biblically understood, in such a perspective.

Robert G. Clouse concludes: "Whatever view one takes [given the numerous historical debates about Pietism and its benefits or problems], Pietism has fostered a desire for holy living, biblical scholarship, and missions without

which Protestantism would be much poorer."<sup>14</sup>

I concur with this evaluation. We certainly need to be aware of the dangers of historic Pietism. Restoring the Bible to everyone has its own inherent problems, but we should not fear a movement of personal Bible reading and prayer that calls upon *all* believers to trust and obey. American evangelicalism is proof that subjectivism is a very real problem. It is a problem that makes many think that the safest answer is to reject all positive references to Pietism. This attitude even spills over into how some reformers respond to true piety. In reacting against fundamentalist "rules and regulations" we often create an altogether unhealthy corrective. The hope in treating this theme of "Pietism and Piety" is to offer some material that presents a better way—the way of *both* Word and Spirit, or the way of piety *and* confession.

#### Author

Dr. John H. Armstrong has been the president of Reformation & Revival Ministries since 1991. He served as a pastor for twenty years and is now editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*, and *Viewpoint: A Look at Reformation & Revival in Our Time*. A conference speaker, he is the author/editor of eight books and a contributor to three others. He is married, the father of two children and the grandfather of one.

#### Notes

1. Jerry Kistler, "Piety vs. Pietism" in *Modern Reformation*, March 1991, 9.
2. Clouse, Robert G., "Pietism" in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Edited by J. D. Douglas. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 780.
3. David W. Bebbington, "Pietism" in *New Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright and James I. Packer. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1988), 515-16.
4. Jerald C. Brauer, gen. ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 659.
5. *New Dictionary*, 516.
6. The term *precisianist* was generally used to refer to one who was

adamant and scrupulous in observing external forms. It was originally applied to English Puritans but came to be used in particular of Dutch Puritanism.

7. *New Dictionary*, 516.
8. *New Dictionary*, 516.
9. Carl Mirbt, "Pietism" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 15 volumes. Edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 reprint), 9:56.
10. *Westminster Dictionary*, 572.
11. *New Dictionary*, 516-17.
12. "Piety vs. Pietism" in *Modern Reformation*. The author generalizes *excessively* and makes the typical claims that Pietism was *primarily* about "experience" and "became known for detaching life from doctrine." Also stated is the claim that:

Devotional reading of the Bible, as important as that is, sometimes took the place of sound exegesis. "What does this verse mean to me?" all too often replaced, "What does it mean, period?" Instead of reading the Bible to understand revealed truths, in Pietism Bible reading frequently becomes another one of those exercises which measures spirituality. The subjective reading of Scripture (reaching for the Bible for an experience) leads to the dangerous practice of Scripture-twisting. As long as one's personal interpretation is helpful in experiencing inner transformation, the context, genre, and other objective textual details need not get in the way. Of course, the Reformers affirmed the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture, but this was not to imply that every believer could get the Bible to say whatever he or she wanted for the moment. . . . for the Pietist, the effectiveness of prayer and the genuineness of worship are frequently judged by the feelings generated in such activities. To the nineteenth century theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was heavily influenced by Pietism, feeling was the very essence of religion. Schleiermacher, of course, is known to us as the "father of liberalism" (90).

This statement is partially true but reflects a rather typical understanding of the real facts. Early German Pietists, as we have noted, as well as Puritans in both Holland and England, stressed the marriage of warm devout feeling to serious intellectual thought and rigorous biblical exegetical work. The stereotypes of Pietism, still made by Reformed and Lutheran theologians in our time, are often defective and misleading. The reader might think this is a proverbial "tempest in an [academic] teapot." I would argue otherwise, since experiential theology should be the goal of all Christians and faithful ministers of the gospel of grace. Anything less will produce an arid and unfruitful Christianity of the mind that lacks the necessary passion to obey Christ "in all that he has commanded" (Matthew 28:18-20).

13. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, 9:60.
14. *The New International Dictionary*, 780.