

A Joyful People

Moving beyond the cranky characterization of pious Christians to reclaim the real identity of Pietists. KURT PETERSON

In the halcyon days of his youth during the years immediately following World War II, my father longed to go to the movies with his pals. But his Swedish immigrant Pietist parents forbade it. Good Christians didn't go to the movies, at least as a general rule. (That rule was applied somewhat selectively, as my grandfather often went to the theater on Saturday nights to watch Randolph Scott westerns.)

On Saturday afternoons, the Regent Theatre in Arlington, Massachusetts, would show a double feature, complete with cartoons and a newsreel, all for fifteen cents. One day, hoping against hope, my then ten-year-old dad asked his mom yet again if he could go to the movies. The answer, as usual, was no.

His school friends, not wanting him to miss out on the fun, rustled up enough change to get him into the movie, and off they went into the forbidden darkness. Things went swimmingly—until his mother squeezed the truth of his whereabouts out of his older sister.

So, the story goes, Nana marched the few blocks to the Regent Theatre, glared at the ticket taker behind the window, and announced, "My son is in there with the devil, and I'm going in there to get him out!" Her demure

personality and Swedish accent probably rendered her declaration more endearing than forceful; nonetheless, she stormed into the building and down the aisle, until she found my dad in the barely lit audience. She literally pulled him out of the theater by his ear.

When they got outside, instead of spanking him, Nana immediately walked my father to nearby Pierson's drugstore to buy him a treat. She invited him to go up to the chromed bar and order whatever he wanted from the paper-hatted soda jerk. An ice cream, lime rickey, vanilla coke—the choice was his.

Nana's actions that day serve as a better metaphor for the spirit of Pietism than any theological treatise could. Caricatures of Pietists tend to paint them as stern and joyless Christians, overly concerned with the dos and don'ts of their faith. In fact, while Nana disapproved of the potentially sinful influence of movies, she took my father out for ice cream that afternoon to affirm that life is for living. "We don't live in fear of doing something wrong," she might have said, "but we obey God in joyful thanksgiving for the gift of salvation."

My grandmother was less concerned with rules than she was with my father's faith. Had he given his

whole heart, his very life, to God? What did his disobedience and desire for worldly attractions say about the state of his soul? The emphasis was not on *what* he believed, but *how* he lived. She wanted her children to live joyfully—not begrudgingly following a series of rigid guidelines, but freely giving all of their life to God.

Early Pietists asked one another, "How is your walk with Jesus today?" For them, Jesus was a friend who walked closely with them, not a far-off deity. Pietism, then, is not a set of doctrines or theological convictions, but rather a "life movement" rooted in the power of conversion and the resulting call to live all of life captive to the word and will of God.

It all begins when one turns to God. Covenant historian Karl Olsson reminds us of the miraculous nature of conversion. Speaking of the early Pietists, he wrote that salvation for them was "like the coming of dawn or the coming of spring; it was like health after sickness; it was like peace after war; it was like love and acceptance after rejection and loneliness; it was resurrection from the dead." Once one was converted, however, he or she experienced the joy and challenge of living the Christian life—a task that needed tending and regular



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comfort of the relationships you have tended and treasured for a lifetime. Scripture is like family—part of the warp and woof of our everyday activities.

Scripture should permeate our personal devotion, our family meals, our communal worship, and our small groups. We should read often, both alone and together. We should read whole sections of Scripture, including the difficult or troublesome texts. We should study them together, benefiting from one another's insights. Throughout the process, we should be open to what the Holy Spirit might reveal to us through the pages of God's word.

Often we read Scripture simply pragmatically—for counsel in the midst of a career decision, for models of leadership, for instruction on how to act. Other times we read Scripture in order to extract from it arguments to use in theological dispute. Spener proposes an alternative approach: read, meditate, and discuss. Our goal should be to dwell in Scripture, that its teachings might transform us from the inside out.

When we read and discuss Scripture together, with an open spirit, we open the door to becoming an "altogether different people." The word of God is "the chief means of reforming something," and thus it is *the* place to begin if we hope to strengthen ourselves and our churches.

2) The establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood

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instruction from the Bible and the Christian community.

Pietists got their initial inspiration from Philipp Jakob Spener, a German Lutheran pastor and church reformer. In 1675 he wrote an introduction to a collection of sermons by Johann Arndt, a theologian who was a forerunner of Pietism. Later that same year Spener's introduction was published as a separate book entitled *Pia Desideria (Pious Wishes)*. In the concluding section of his essay, Spener put forth six proposals that he believed would "correct the conditions in the church." These proposals reveal Pietism's emphasis on "lived" Christianity and serve as a guide, all these centuries later, for today's Pietists.

Perhaps we might begin a new movement for reform based on these

six principles. What could our lives and our communities look like if we did? How would our individual and communal lives be transformed as we lived out Spener's dreams for the church? Let us examine these six principles and how they might apply to our context today.

In an effort to purify the church, Spener called for:

1) A more extensive use of the word of God among us

Spener began his proposals with the claim that "the more at home the word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits." Scriptural devotion should come first. Just how are we to make the word of God more "at home" among us? To be at home is to be among the familiar—to rest in the

Spener writes regarding his second proposal that “all spiritual functions are open to all Christians without exception.” When we confine all spiritual functions to the clergy, Christians become slothful by refusing the call to serve as Christ’s hands and feet in the church and the world.

Once when I was leading a faculty meeting, my colleague who was designated to open the meeting with prayer was absent due to illness. When I asked another faculty member to pray, she refused. “I’m not a member of the Bible department,” she explained. We still have a tendency to professionalize the formal tasks of the church and confine them to paid staff.

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The radical message of the Reformation is that the work of the church is the work of every Christian. We are not all called to the public exercise of all churchly functions, such as the administration of the sacraments. However, we *are* all called to serve, love, admonish, teach, encourage, read, share, give, sing, and exhort. We are all responsible for the work of the church.

Too often our crowded schedules reduce the church to simply another voluntary association to which we belong, complete with paid professional staff and formally designated volunteers. What would our churches look like if our faith communities became our most central commitment—the primary place where we exercised our gifts for the good of the church and the world?

3) A lived Christianity, recognizing that practice accompanies knowledge

“And how much I love you my actions will show.” Those words from a children’s hymn my mother used to sing to me are as true now as they were when I heard them as a child. “Love,” Spener wrote, “is the real mark of [Christ’s] disciples.” Often we define faith as a set of doctrines

or beliefs to which we give assent. In contrast, Spener invites us to make the concern for the salvation of all persons, and our love for others, the mark of true Christianity.

In order to live this out, Spener wrote, “it may be useful if those who have earnestly resolved to walk in the way of the Lord would enter into a confidential relationship with their confessor, or some other judicious and enlightened Christian and would regularly report to him [or her] how they live, what opportunities they have had to practice Christian love, and how they have employed or neglected them.” Christian living takes discipline, accountability, and atten-

tion. We are called to be serious about our Christian life, not out of obligation but in joyful thanksgiving for the gift of salvation. If we present to the world faith as right belief without evidence of a transformed life, we are missing the point.

4) A keen awareness of how we conduct ourselves in religious controversies

When we argue with each other, says Spener, being right or winning a theological argument should never be our primary aim. Instead, our utmost concern is always for the salvation and faith of the other. If we think someone is wrong, our love for that person should compel us to speak the truth—lovingly and compassionately. The early Pietists explained faith as being for God’s glory and neighbor’s good.

As he discusses how to handle disputes, Spener quotes Johann Arndt: “Purity of doctrine and of the word of God is maintained not only by disputation and writing many books, but also by true repentance and holiness of life.” Rigorous discussion is not enough. “The holy love of God is necessary.”

Whether we argue over doctrine,

budgets, building blueprints, pastoral performance, or worship styles, we must ask ourselves at every step, why am I arguing? Am I making the salvation and faith of my brother or sister in Christ my first priority? Is my desire to be right eclipsing my commitment to the general good of the church? Am I willing to submit to the wisdom of the whole community, removing my own personal stake from the controversy? Am I immersed in Scripture, open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and the direction of those in my family of faith?

Honest answers to those questions will keep us from sacrificing one another on the altar of being right.

5) A commitment to train ministers in our schools and universities

At first blush, this proposal seems like a no-brainer—of course our ministers should be trained. The issue is, what kind of instruction should ministers get, and what kind of persons should they become? First of all, Spener argued that pastors should receive training in more than theology, ancient languages, and biblical interpretation. Professors should speak to the lives, as well as the studies, of their students because being an effective pastor involves much more than just knowledge.

Put simply, knowledge is not enough. Ministers should distinguish themselves by their Christian character, which they have developed through the regular application of Christian practices. Spener, referencing the exclusively male clergy of his day, put it this way: “It is certain that a young man who fervently loves God, although adorned with limited gifts, will be more useful to the church of God with his meager talent and academic achievement than a vain and worldly fool with double doctor’s degrees who is very clever but has not been taught by God.”

Such priorities should be placed at the top of every church search committee’s agenda. Who do we want as

our pastors? Energetic entrepreneurs? Brilliant leaders? CEOs? Mesmerizing teachers? Gifted organizers? As Christian singer/songwriter Larry Norman wrote back in the 1970s, “Without love, you ain’t nothin!” We may want our pastors to be one or all of those things, but without humility and vibrant faith, it’s all a waste of talent.

6) Sermons that focus on producing faith and fruit in the hearers

Spener concludes his proposals with a conversation about the center of Protestant worship: the sermon, or the “word.” Consistent with his previous admonitions, he writes, “The pulpit is not the place for an ostentatious display of one’s skill. It is rather the place to preach the word of the Lord plainly but powerfully. Preaching should be the divine means to save the people, and so it is proper that everything be directed to this end.”

In Spener’s day as in ours, preachers made a name for themselves by revealing what they knew by quoting theologians and words in foreign languages, and by enticing the congregation with mellifluous oratory. Yet the only truly meaningful criterion for evaluating a sermon, according to Spener, is whether or not it produces fruit among those who listen to it.

Preaching should not be polite. Sermons should not always be easy to listen to. They should not always be beautiful or inspiring. Neither should they always be polished, illustrated, and slick. But, sermons should *always* produce fruit. Perhaps both preachers and listeners in the church need to change our criteria for what makes a good sermon. Sermons should push us to be better Christians. If they don’t, it may be the preacher’s fault, and the congregation’s.

Recently my wife was out of town at a conference, and I embraced the opportunity to watch an action film I knew she wouldn’t like. I knew what I was getting—lots of so-called justice accomplished by lots of killing. After all,

few Covenanters worry today that the devil is in the movie theater the way Nana did.

When it was over, I thought about my grandmother. Although I have often laughed at the image of Nana pulling Dad out of the Regent Theatre by his ear, I am deeply grateful for her intense desire to direct her children toward a life of joyous faith—a life held captive to the word and will of God. If I were formed as Spener encourages us to be, and as Nana would have wanted me to be, I perhaps would have chosen a different movie—one that could have been viewed for God’s glory and neighbors’ good.

As a fallen but committed Pietist, there’s hope for me yet. ■