

# Roots of GRACE

The renewal movement of Pietism not only inspired the formation of the Covenant Church, it informs who we are today. MICHELLE CLIFTON-SODERSTROM

When people first encounter the Covenant Church, they often struggle to place us on the family tree of church history. What exactly does it mean to be Covenant? Here's one answer: We are Pietists joined together in Christ's mission.

President Gary Walter writes that the Evangelical Covenant Church is what you get when Pietists join together to do mission. We have a devotional approach to an orthodox faith. We are committed to new and ever-deepening life in Christ. We are a mission society whose membership is churches. We are a church of missional Pietists—viable, yet ever-renewing.

The late church historian Karl Olsson wrote of the origins of the Evangelical Covenant Church: "The Covenant was a life movement. Its roots went down into the springs of revival. Life and not doctrine dictated its unfoldment. But the church was wise enough to know that life needs a

viable structure" (*By One Spirit*, p. 356).

Just what this viable structure *is* and the cultivation of life *within it* is a crucial question with which the Covenant Church has always grappled. The tension of a "viable structure," on the one hand, and "springs of revival," on the other, are part of our ecclesial DNA. We have flourished. We have had our struggles. Yet some 125 years into our life together, we remain a denomination—viable, yet ever-renewing.

How do we continue to thrive when so many other denominations are struggling to stay together? What is this church that affirms *both* infant and believer's baptism as equally valid modes and remains a unified body? What is this church that claims to be non-creedal, yet holds to core theological truths passed down through generations of Christians? What church can get past organ versus drums, contemporary versus traditional, life versus doctrine, and authority versus freedom? I would argue the Evangelical



cal Covenant is that kind of church. We are a church that seeks unity in diversity in large part because we are a life movement inspired by the renewal efforts of Pietism.

So, what exactly is Pietism? Why does it continue to matter that we remember our heritage? What does it mean to say the Covenant is a church of Pietists joining together to do mission?

## Calling the Church to Renewal

Pietism was a renewal movement whose focus was on a faith that is experienced as much as on a faith that is articulated. The poem "What Is Pietism?" composed by Joachim Feller in 1689, makes an admirable attempt



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to describe Pietism as a religion experienced by the heart. First a derogatory term referring to overly spiritual and moralistic persons, “Pietism” took on more positive overtones when this poem was used at a funeral to characterize the deceased as a devout believer: “Pietists—the name is now well-known throughout the world. / What is a Pietist? / One who studies God’s word / And also leads a holy life according to it... / Piety must first of all nest in the heart.”

The flaming heart is a symbol for Pietism, and one of the few things clear to all who study Pietism is that God ignites faith in the heart and life of those who diligently study God’s word and who allow the Holy Spirit

to transform them in the hearing of it.

Pietism began in the late seventeenth century in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War, which was among the most violent in European history. Much of the war was fought on German soil, and Germany lost a significant portion of its population. It is not surprising that the Lutheran Church was demoralized in the wake of a war whose origins can be traced to religious conflicts. Such a climate resulted in a rise in clericalism, a decrease in lay participation, and a church that seemed to have lost its fervor. Rather than food for living faith, Luther’s central reforms—the authority and use of Scripture, the fortification of the spiritual priesthood, and the doc-

trine of justification—functioned as hardened doctrine and fuel for polemical debate. Pietism sought to renew the church’s hope by re-engaging basic practices of the Christian faith.

The Covenant celebrates the origins of Pietism in Lutheran pastor Philipp Jakob Spener and his book *Pia Desideria*, written in 1675. Reminding the church that it was indeed still the instrument of God’s mission in the world, *Pia Desideria* offered six simple proposals. This seminal text tapped into life-giving ways for the church to practice faith and in doing

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so, find renewed life in Christ.

Spener's first two proposals, the rigorous study of Scripture and a confidence in the ministry of the whole spiritual priesthood, are critical for understanding Pietism as it informs Covenant identity. The viability of the Pietist movement emerged in large part from those first two proposals. A third key emphasis was their reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit for a living faith. While Pietism had additional focuses, this article explores these three as they inform our Covenant identity as we continue to connect with the renewal efforts of our Pietist fathers and mothers.

### **Readers of the Word**

The most important way to revitalize faith is to read the word of God. Hearing the word through worship and preaching was not enough to nourish the faith of the people, according to Pietists. Believers needed to study Scripture outside of worship and read in groups—learning, testing, and discerning the word amidst the body of Christ. Hence, Pietism began to organize conventicles—small groups of laity and pastors who gathered regularly to study Scripture. They read the daily lection along with other texts not included in the lectionary. Reading together, they submitted their hearts and minds to be transformed by the Holy Spirit working through the word.

The conventicle gatherings were significant for a number of reasons. First, they inspired the laity to read and better know their Bibles. At the time, most of the Bible reading and interpretation of Scripture was the job of the priests. Spener wanted laypersons to know the word because to know Scripture is also to know God.

Second, conventicles held the pastor accountable. Spener believed that a more educated and edified laity would question and challenge their pastors toward the end of better preaching. In contrast to his orthodox Lutheran

colleagues, Spener was convinced that a well-read laity actually strengthened, not weakened, the office of ordination because pastors were held accountable for what they preached.

Third, conventicles became a place to practice a kind of baptismal equality based in their common identity as children of God. As conventicles grew, they included those persons who were not educated, and persons of different socioeconomic classes interacted around the word. In addition, women also began reading Scripture for themselves. Encouraged by Spener, Johanna Eleonora Petersen initiated the first women's conventicle. She was self-taught in Greek and Hebrew and offered substantial instruction to women and young girls alike. Such novelty evoked suspicion, yet the mission was not easily stifled and the boundaries of those who read their Bibles expanded greatly through the conventicle movement.

In general, the conventicle movement served as the foundation for inspiring the faith practices and spiritual disciplines that defined Pietism. Reading Paul's letter to the Galatians, for example, focused an articulation of Christ's mission in the world: All that matters is faith acting in love. Pietists believed that persons of faith who read God's word would be transformed to enact faith in love. It also grounded their commitment to catechism and teaching. Further, reading Scripture moved them to discern God's gifts and to recognize the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

### **Fortifiers of the Spiritual Priesthood**

Another foundation of Pietism was its beliefs about ministry. Pietists were convinced that the church could not fulfill its ministry without the help of the universal priesthood and the aid of word and sacrament, which serve as the bedrock fortifying all God's people to be coworkers with Christ in the world.

Luther himself had great hopes for the spiritual priesthood. Stemming from the conviction that not only ordained clergy but all Christians were in fact part of the spiritual estate, Luther's doctrine of the priesthood empowered believers to take an active role in the life of the church. The Pietists' renewed emphasis on the spiritual priesthood was an effort to go back to a vision of the priesthood that had not come to fruition.

In formulating this doctrine, Luther was reacting against relegating the spiritual life to priests and the temporal life to laypeople. He also was reacting against the idea that priests were of a higher status. Along with Luther, the Pietists affirmed that all Christians participated in the spiritual estate and had a role in the ministry of the church. While they noted differences in office and in work within the priesthood—for example preaching and presiding over sacraments belonged to the office of pastor—all Christians enjoyed equal status. In addition, all had roles to play, including prayer, thanksgiving, good works, almsgiving, industrious study of the word, teaching, exhortation, acts of mercy, and mutual edification.

An outcome of the renewed emphasis that Pietism placed on the spiritual priesthood was the careful discernment of spiritual gifts. Pietists believed that persons had particular gifts, and so the church needed the whole body and its array of gifts to do good ministry. Moreover, they began to look at gifts of women in particular.

Pietist women such as Petersen—with gifts for preaching and teaching—were allowed to take on what would normally be functions of the clergy. Some Pietists even began ordaining women. Finally, the whole church was accountable to and responsible for ministry—not just the pastor. If the spiritual priesthood constitutes those ministers to the world by the very fact that all Christians

have a role and work in the spiritual estate, then it is the spiritual priesthood who accomplishes Christ's mission in the world. To reiterate Spener, without the work of the spiritual priesthood and the shepherding of that priesthood by ordained clergy's ministering of word and sacrament, the ministry does not accomplish all that it ought!

### Devotees of the Holy Spirit

If, for Lutherans, the doctrine of justification is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, the Pietist equivalent is that the doctrine of regeneration is the doctrine by which the church lives or dies. Regeneration simply refers to new birth and new life in the individual believer and in the whole church. The heart of regeneration is conversion and an ongoing renewal of spirit. Both emphases—new birth and new life—result from the work of the Holy Spirit. The Pietists believed that the word of God “worked” because in the hearing of it, the Holy Spirit penetrated the heart of Christians. They believed that the spiritual priesthood accomplished ministry because believers were aided by the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament.

The flaming heart image of Pietism emerged from the conviction that the fire of the Holy Spirit ignited the hearts of those with a true, living faith. The health of the inner person, as most clearly evidenced by acts of love, was just as important as intellectual assent and other acts of obedience and worship. Moreover, testimonies of conversion, the practice of spiritual disciplines, and a personal relationship with God were those fruits that witnessed to the work of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is the wind of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, and Pietists were devoted to relying on this wind, recognizing that they may or may not live to see all of its fruits.

The story of August Hermann

Francke, another leading Pietist, weaves together the centrality of Scripture, the work of the spiritual priesthood, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Francke began an important chapter in his ministry when Spener appointed him to the dual posts of seminary professor in Halle, Germany, and pastor of St. George's church in the neighboring city of Glaucha. Heartbroken by the destitution that characterized most of Glaucha, Francke invited those who did not have enough to eat into his home on Thursday evenings. When those food gatherings began to bring in more people, he added Christian formation to the mix by reading Scripture and teaching Luther's catechism.

These weekly gatherings fed Francke's desires to educate in a more rigorous way the poor children of Glaucha, and he slowly began to get the help of other Christians through funding, prayer, teaching, and administration, among other things.

The result was an orphanage that grew to house not only poor children, but other persons on the margins of society including widows and beggars. The Halle educational institutions were of the best of their day, and they brought together persons from all sectors of society. Moreover, these social reforms led to some of the first Protestant missions abroad.

### Joined Together in Mission

When Gary Walter says that the Evangelical Covenant Church is a group of Pietists joining together to do missions, what he means is this: A regenerate body of Christ cannot help but enact Christ's mission in the world. Christians who diligently seek God through hearing the word, a communion who fortifies its priest-

hood by edification and formation, and a people who rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into the church are lights in the world, emissaries of our Savior, Pietists joined together in mission.

We remember our Pietist heritage for this reason—it provides the roots of grace in our denomination. These roots shape how we understand mission in light of God's grace and

human imperfections. What kind of church claims to be non-confessional, yet is firmly rooted in the apostolic witness of the church, joined with all Christians in the catholicity of God's whole mission, challenged by the theological commitments of the reformers, and inspired by the evangelistic work of the church

today? It is a church that has a viable structure in its historical identity and its practices of faith. It is a church that pursues springs of revival and desires ongoing new life. It is a church that reads God's word, engages in mission, and relies on the Holy Spirit. It is a church that prays like this:

“Lord, call us into the church.

Call us in often, and teach us the old words and old songs with their new meanings. Lord, give us new words for the words we wear out. Give us new songs for those that have lost their spirit. Give us new reasons for coming in and for going out, into our streets and to our homes. As the house of the Lord once moved like a tent through the wilderness, so keep our churches from becoming rigid. Make our congregation alive and free. Give us ideas we never had before, so that alleluia and gloria and amen are like the experiences we know in daily living. Alleluia! O Lord, be praised! In worship and in work, be praised! Amen” (*The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, #921). ■

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