

A Plea for Pietism

Stanislav Pietak

SUMMARY

This article argues that Pietism is the best form of evangelical spirituality. The biblical and historical roots of Pie-

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tism are discussed and some well-known Pietists (Spener, Francke) are introduced as well as some Czech representatives.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur soutient que le piétisme est la meilleure forme de spiritualité évangélique. Il traite des racines bibliques

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et historiques du piétisme, considère des figures bien connues du piétisme (Spener, Francke), ainsi que quelques représentants tchèques de ce mouvement.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel argumentiert, dass der Pietismus die beste Form evangelikaler Spiritualität ist. Die biblischen und

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historischen Wurzeln des Pietismus werden diskutiert und einige bekannte Pietisten (Spener, Francke) sowie einige tschechischen Repräsentanten werden vorgestellt.

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Today's evangelical movement flows out of the Reformation and several later revival movements. We find the roots of evangelical spirituality in Scripture, and every age of the church has left us precious legacies. If we take Britain as an example, we can first of all learn from the Celtic mission and the current revival of its theology and spirituality.¹ Later, writes Patrick Johnstone,

Britain has had such century after century – through Wycliffe in the fifteenth century, the Reformation in the sixteenth, the Puritans in the seventeenth, the Wesley-Whitefield revival in the eighteenth and the Evangelical Revival of the mid-nineteenth.

And it is still going on:

The effects of the Welsh and Pentecostal Revivals at the beginning of the last century continue to reverberate around the world to this day.²

Similar movements can be observed in many other countries – Scandinavia, Germany, the USA. During the last hundred years there have been many significant revivals.

My thesis is that Pietism represents one of the most important roots of the evangelical movement. Pietism has many shapes and the present article can only provide a brief introduction. When we emphasize the suffix *-ism* in the word Pietism, we can see both the strengths and the weaknesses of this movement. However, when we stress its core interest, *pietas*, a Latin word meaning piety, devotion (to God), then we find that it has to be a key feature of all Christian life.

From the history of Pietism

Let us take notice of some points in the history of Pietism. The Reformation in the sixteenth century put special emphasis on the Holy Scripture and made *sola scriptura*, the Scriptures alone, a key principle. Yet the great spiritual movement initiated by the Reformation comprised both teaching based on the Bible and pious spirituality. Martin Luther reminded his students and pastors of the principle that a theologian only becomes a theologian by practicing *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (devotion

led by God's Word and Holy Spirit) and *tentatio* (temptation, examination on faith). Luther himself prayed three or more hours a day.³

Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius, 1592-1670), the last bishop of the old Brethren Church (Moravian Church or Unitas Fratrum) in Moravia (now the Czech Republik) wrote a wonderful book on the *praxis pietatis* in which he gives guidance on how to live with God. This was still before the beginning of Pietism proper. However, later in the seventeenth century the Reformation movement got stuck in doctrinal disputes while the life of faith of the believers was under attack for many reasons, one of which was the Thirty Years War 1618-1648 which nearly annihilated the Moravian Church.⁴

At that time Jakob Phillip Spener grew up.⁵ He was born in 1635 in Rappoltswiler (Elsas) and died in 1705. In his youth he was strongly influenced by Johann Arndt,⁶ the author of *Paradiesgärtlein aller christlichen Tugenden* (Garden of Paradise, 1612). Spener visited Johann Buxtorf the Younger (1599-1664)⁷ in Basel in 1659, to improve his knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic literature. Buxtorf was convinced of the verbal inspiration of the Bible and Spener accepted this teaching too. In this way he and his followers, the Pietists, had great respect for the Bible as the Word of God.

Spener's ideas

Spener was a gifted theologian and pastor who became senior pastor in Frankfurt am Main (1666), then preacher at the royal court in Dresden (1686) and later propst (vice-bishop) in Berlin. Orthodox critics regarded as questionable his teaching about new birth, justification, holiness and eschatology.

As a young pastor in Frankfurt am Main, Spener encouraged people to deepen their spiritual lives. He set up small groups, the so-called *collegia pietatis*, in which believers prayed and studied the Bible together. His enemies used to say that these *collegia pietatis* were *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, unwanted factions within the Church, but these groups were in reality living cells of the growing church.

In the year 1675, Spener published *Pia Desideria* (Pious Wishes). This small book became a programme of the pietistic movement. It comprises six particular principles:

1. Use the Word of God in order to deepen your personal devotional life.
2. Encourage all believers to truly become the

common priesthood, the priesthood of all believers as mentioned in 1 Peter 2:5 and Revelation 1:6; 5:10.

3. Cultivate the love of the brethren, not only their intellectual knowledge of the Christian faith.
4. Lead religious disputes only in order that you might win the heart of somebody, but never hurt them with arguments.
5. Educate every pastor both in theological knowledge and in devotional life.
6. Make every effort in your preaching to instruct Christians on the subject of faith and its fruit.

Among his most important followers are August Hermann Francke (1663-1727), who established the training and mission centre in Halle,⁸ and Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760),⁹ who provided refuge for Moravian Brethren in Herrnhut. Francke particularly joined spirituality and practical activity. He prepared many projects for the royal court, for example the resurgence of business and the building of channels and harbours. He established orphanages, a pedagogical publishing house, a drugstore and other institutions. His Collegium Orientale (1702) and later Biblical Institute led to missionary contacts with North America, China, Russia and other countries. In the years 1704-1705, some 3000 students from all over Europe studied at the University of Halle thanks to Francke's attractiveness.

In the second part of this paper I will draw on the thinking of these great Pietists, Spener and Francke, for the church today.

Pietas in Scripture

The apostle Paul often uses the expressions *in Christ* and *in Christ Jesus* to describe the Christian life; for example:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ), because through Christ Jesus (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2, NIV)

But the life *in Christ* is not just a private affair, it includes both holiness and service and it lasts for ever, as we can see in other NT authors as well:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)

This life is a gift of the God's grace which also produces the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). The life in Christ is a continuous process which begins with the new birth (1 Peter 1:3-4). Jesus says that the most important aspect of the spiritual life are the fruits, not words:

Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, 'We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles.' But I will tell them, 'I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!' (Matthew 7:21-23, CEV)

And following parable about two builders is equally practical:

Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. (Matthew 7:24)

Pietas in life of the Church

Francis Schaeffer argues that in order to maintain the power of orthodox evangelicalism it is necessary to keep three rules:

1. It is necessary clearly to maintain the teaching of the traditional Christianity.
2. Always have an honest answer on every honest question.
3. Every single person and the church as a whole must show that the Lord exists.¹⁰

At the same time it is necessary for the church to proclaim the truth plainly, to assume a definite attitude against untruth and to demonstrate love. These things cannot always be held together easily!

The key doctrine of traditional Christianity is its teaching about the crucified, resurrected and glorified Christ. The cross of Christ is the strongest motivation for all servants to be devoted in ministry. John Stott illustrates how a Christian community can be comprehensively stimulated by the cross and uses an example of the Moravian Brethren:

The Moravians' stress was on Christianity as a religion of the cross and of the heart... Fruits of their life under the cross of Christ were visible. First, they were certainly a community of celeb-

ration. They were great singers, and the focus of their worship at Herrnhut was Christ crucified... Their emphasis on the cross brought them to genuine humility and penitence.

The cross of Christ stimulates followers of Jesus in mission as well. Stott continues:

But the Moravians are best known as a missionary movement. While still a schoolboy, Zinzendorf founded "the Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed", and he never lost his missionary zeal. Again, it was the cross which stimulated him and his followers to this expression of self-giving love. Between 1732 and 1736 Moravian missions were founded in the Caribbean, Greenland, Kapland, North and South America, and South Africa, while later they brought missionary work in Labrador, among Australian aboriginals and on the Tibetan border.¹¹

Evangelical Churches and movements significantly stress mission and evangelisation as a direct consequence of their theology. The church is well-founded if it fulfils the Great Commission, for the Lord is God of mission. Writing about the imperative of mission, Pavel Černý summarizes his argument as follows:

Unfortunately, unclear theological understanding of Christology moved the ecumenical movement back and the demise of evangelism has deepened.... Christ's work of salvation is the real foundation and imperative of mission.¹²

An example from former Czechoslovakia

After the Second World War, pastor Vladislav Santarius (1915-1989) formulated principles of The Inner Mission in Czechoslovakia. In his booklet *Several simple essays on problems in the Church of Christ in the New Testament* (*Parę skromnych uwag do problematyki Kościoła Chrystusowego w Nowym Testamencie*)¹³ he develops twelve key principles:

Three general principles of the church:

1. We believe in the triune, eternal, personal Lord God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the Lord God is Creator and Lord of humanity and of every creature; therefore honour and glory belong only to Him.
3. We believe that God created humankind from the dust. Because God breathed an immortal spirit into him, man is God's unique creation on the earth, responsible to God and called to

eternal life.

Three principles of the Reformation:

4. We believe that salvation does not depend on human merits. It is a gift of God's mercy in Jesus Christ through his blood sacrifice on Golgotha. Humanity receives the gift of justification and salvation by faith.
5. We believe that the Holy Spirit called Christ's church into life, not as a human organization but as the living organism of Christ's body. Therefore it is the Holy Spirit who makes decisions about her activities, not people.
6. We believe that the Scripture of Old and New Testament is fundamental and the only norm of activity in Christ's church. Every human decision must be in agreement with the Scripture.

Another six principles from the New Testament, which are nowadays often neglected in traditional churches:

7. We believe that Jesus Christ is 100% needed today as well as 100% sufficient for the salvation of every person. There is nothing to add.
8. We believe that Jesus Christ changes humans into a new creation of God through the Holy Spirit. This is the miracle of being born again. The primary mission of Christ's church is evangelization, to lead every person to Jesus Christ. This is the biblical way of salvation.
9. We believe that the lives of people who are born again in Christ are filled with love that is manifested by action, not by empty, pious words. Diaconal service to the needy is the second important mission of Christ's church. This is the biblical way of life.
10. We believe that Holy Spirit carries out the programme of Jesus Christ on earth. The Holy Spirit is not a toy. He leads humans toward Jesus, He changes them through new birth in Jesus and He equips them to serve and glorify Jesus. Christ's church was established by the Holy Spirit and lives by his power.
11. We believe that the priesthood of all believers is the only form for activity in Christ's church. This is connected to the practical activities of every regenerate person and all God's people. Division into laity and clergy causes great dysfunction...
12. We believe that the most beautiful perspective of Christ's church was and is the second

coming of Jesus Christ as the main point of biblical eschatology. This joyous hope must penetrate the life and work of Christ's church!

The teaching based on these principles called out a significant movement which influenced evangelical churches in former Czechoslovakia and Poland during the Communist rule. The emphasis on the common priesthood helped many congregations to survive the hard times of the communist oppression.

The contribution of Pietism

I sum up the contribution of Pietism to evangelical Christianity. It is its emphasis on a personal relationship with the Lord which begins with conversion (new birth) and is followed by discipleship of Jesus Christ and bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Pietism accepts faith both as teaching and as a style of life. With the Reformation, it emphasizes God's initiative of grace, the tragedy of sin and the necessity of salvation in Christ. It endorses the mottos of the Reformation: *solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia, sola redemptione Christi, and sola Scriptura*. Hence it follows that there is stress on the following things:

1. Following Jesus Christ in the daily life which begins with the new birth by the Holy Spirit and carries on with discipleship in Christ.
2. The Holy Scripture as the rule of faith and the norm of life, its regular study in private life and in small cells of spiritual growth, and an active life of prayer.
3. The common priesthood of believers, that means an active faith demonstrated in witness by words and deeds in family life, in the *koinonia* of the church, in society by charity (*diakonia*) and in mission.

Pietism is a strong call to build the personal relation to Jesus Christ. Thomas Wang, International Director of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, wrote just before Lausanne II:

We are all busy preaching, speaking, teaching, researching, writing, publishing, broadcasting and telecasting. But are we listening? Has our frantic way of life made our relation to God a one-way street?... Perhaps we should all come before the Lord like young prophet Samuel did and say to God, 'Speak Lord, for thy servant is listening'.¹⁴

Dr. Stanislav Pietak (1946) studied in Bratislava and Warsaw and taught in Ostrava (Cz). From 2007 he is bishop of the Silesian Evangelical Church in the Czech Republic.

Notes

- 1 See e.g. Elizabeth Culling, *What is Celtic Christianity?* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1993); Esther De Waal, *A world made whole: the rediscovery of the Celtic tradition* (London: Fount, 1991); Thomas O'Loughlin, *Journeys on the edges: the Celtic tradition* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000).
- 2 Patrick Johnstone, "The Church is bigger than you think", in Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. A reader* (Third ed., Pasadena: William Carey Library / Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999) 215.
- 3 On Luther see Thomas Kaufmann, *Martin Luther* (München: Beck, 2006).
- 4 See further Vladimír J. Dvůrák & Jan B. Lásek (eds.), *Comenius als Theologe* (Prag: Nadace Comenius, 1998) and Klaus Gossmann (ed.), *Jan Amos Comenius 1592- 1992: theologische und pädagogische Deutungen* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1992).
- 5 For a modern assessment see Martin Brecht & Friedrich de Boor (Hrsg.), Philipp Jakob Spener (Pietismus und Neuzeit Band 12; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Wolfgang Bromme u. a., *Nicht nur fromme Wünsche. Philipp Jakob Spener neu entdeckt* (Frankfurt, Spener Verlag, 2000).
- 6 See Hans Schneider (Hrsg.), *Der fremde Arndt. Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung Johann Arndts (1555-1621)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), reviewed by Klaus vom Orde in *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 21 (2007) 400-404; Jürg Buchegger-Müller, "Johann Arndts 'Wahres Christentum' und die Erneuerung des Menschen", *Jahrbuch für evangelikale Theologie* 20 (2006) 59-81. [Ed.: See also the review of Arndt's *Vier Bücher vom wahren Christentum* later in this issue.]
- 7 Stephen G. Burnett, *From Christian Hebraism to Jewish studies: Johannes Buxtorf (1564-1629) and Hebrew learning in the seventeenth century* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).
- 8 Helmut Obst, August Hermann Francke und die Franckeschen Stiftungen in Halle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).
- 9 Arthur J. Freeman, *An ecumenical theology of the heart: the theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf* (Bethlehem PA: Moravian Church in America, 1998).
- 10 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Těn, který je skutečností* [translation by A. Koželuhová of *The God Who Is There*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968] (Praha: EELAC, 1994) 158.
- 11 John R.R. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986) 294.
- 12 Pavel Cerný, *Kristovo dílo spasy jako základ a imperativ misie: Aktivita Svetové rady církvi [Christ's Work of Salvation as a Foundation and Imperative for Mission Activities of the World Council of Churches]* (Brno: L. Marek, 2006) 253, 254; this book has a summary in English.
- 13 Originally Polish: Vladislav Santarius, *Parę skromnych uwag do problematyki Kościoła Chrystusowego w Nowym Testamencie* (Samizdat, 1980). Summarised by Stanislav Pietak as, "Theological emphases in the booklet, 'Several simple essays on problems in the Church of Christ in The New Testament'" in Karel Říman, *Lord, You have called... Vladislav Santarius – God's Work Through His Life and Ministry* (transl. by Marek Říčan from the Czech orig. *Pane, Ty jsi povolal... Vladislav Santarius – Boží dílo skrze jeho život a službu*; Český Těšín: Slezská církev evangelická a. v., 2004) 126-127.
- 14 Thomas Wang, "By the year 2000: Is God trying to tell us something?" in *idem*, *Countdown to AD 2000. The official compendium of the global consultation on world evangelization by AD 2000 and beyond*, Singapore, January 5-8, 1989 (Pasadena: AD 2000 Movement, 1989) xx.