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Pietism

Myths and Realities

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ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL THEOLOGIAN AND PIETISM SCHOLAR F. ERNEST STOEFFLER, Pietism is “one of the least understood movements in the history of Christianity.”¹ One might add that it is also one of the most wrongly maligned movements in Christian history. Even renowned church historians such as Justo Gonzalez have repeated false stereotypes of Pietism. It is difficult to find an objective, to say nothing of sympathetic, treatment of it in the major works of church history and historical theology. This unfair treatment of Pietism is one of the reasons I wrote *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*; I wanted to tell the true stories of Pietism and other neglected and misrepresented movements such as Arminianism and Anabaptism.

I don’t remember hearing anything bad about Pietism until my doctoral work in historical theology at Rice University in Houston, Texas. I attended a Pentecostal Bible college and a German Pietist Baptist seminary where Pietism was treated as a continuation and correction, if not completion, of the Reformation. At Rice, however, my revered *Doktorvater* and chairman of the Religious Studies Department frequently took swipes at Pietism; his favorite term for First Methodist Church of Houston, then pastored by famous author Charles Allen, was “the warm-hearted crowd down on Main Street.” You see, Allen was to my *Doktorvater* what another Houstonian—Joel Osteen—is to many today: the symbol of the Pietist impulse in American Christianity.

Then I studied for a year with German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg who frequently declared “There is one thing I am not and that is a Pietist.” One can find his reasons in his book *Christian Spirituality*² where he accuses Pietism of being individualistic and undermining any healthy ecclesiology.

By all this I was driven to a deeper study of Pietism so I read books by and about Philip Spener, August Francke, Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, and other leading lights of early Pietist history. I read historical theologian Carter Lindberg’s book *A Third Reformation?* in which he identifies Pietism as the “second Reformation.” I came to believe that much of what was said about Pietism by my mentors after seminary was simply rubbish; they

1. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. Brill, 1971) 1.

2. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Louisville: Westminster, 1981) 31–32.

were talking about what I call “Pietism gone to seed” rather than true, historical Pietism. Now I felt better armed to defend the movement as I kept encountering distortions of it especially among my evangelical peers.

One would think that evangelicals especially would favor and promote Pietism, but that would be a mistaken assumption. Many evangelical scholars continue to malign it. The July/August 2002 issue of *Modern Reformation* magazine, published by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, contained an article by Wheaton College professor Mark R. Talbot entitled “What’s wrong with Pietism?” that accuses Pietism of “experientialism” that undermines confidence in salvation by grace alone, individualism that encourages followers to approach the Scriptures in naïve, undisciplined and even dangerous ways, and perfectionism that tempts people to substitute legalism and moralism for the “biblically-authorized . . . means of grace.”³

A later article in *Modern Reformation* by its editor Michael Horton laid most of the current alleged ills in evangelicalism at the doorstep of Pietism. According to Horton “Much of contemporary evangelicalism has its roots in . . . pietism which for all of its benefits nevertheless already began to shift the weight of Christian witness from the triune God and his saving work in Christ to the self and its inner experience.”⁴ Horton goes on to quote Old Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield: “Pietists and Rationalists have ever hunted in couples and dragged down their quarry together. They may differ as to why they deem theology mere lumber, and would not have the prospective minister waste his time in acquiring it. The one loves God so much, the other loves him so little, that he does not care to know him.”⁵

Unfair criticism of Pietism is nothing new; it goes all the way back to the Lutheran critics of Spener in Germany immediately after the publication of his groundbreaking book *Pia Desideria* in 1675. The book was meant to be a commentary on Johann Arndt’s *True Christianity*, but, of course, it grew into a programmatic essay for Spener’s movement of “heart Christians.” In 1698 the theological faculty of Wittenberg University—where Luther once taught—published a syllabus of 264 doctrinal errors of Spener and his followers. Almost every heresy, real or imaginary, was among them.

Nineteenth century liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl wrote a three volume history of Pietism in which he traced its true roots back to medieval mysticism and monasticism and ironically accused it of neglecting doctrine—something Ritschl himself is often accused of. Ritschl’s liberal contemporary Ernst Troeltsch decried Pietism as essentially otherworldly and sectarian. By the beginning of the twentieth century the term “Pietism” had become primarily pejorative in both liberal and Reformed evangelical contexts. For the latter, the fact that Friedrich Schleiermacher, the “father of liberal theology,” called himself a “Pietist of a higher order” (literally a “Herrnhutter”—that is, Moravian of a higher order) did not help Pietism’s reputation.

3. Mark R. Talbot, “What’s Wrong with Pietism?” *Modern Reformation* (July/August, 2002). Online: www.modernreformation.org/mr02/julaug/mr0207wrongpietism.html.

4. Michael Horton, “To Be or Not to Be: The Uneasy Relationship between Reformed Christianity and American Evangelicalism,” *Modern Reformation* (November/December 2008) 19.

5. Ibid.

During the twentieth century Karl Barth attacked Pietism for being allegedly individualistic, sectarian, emotional, anti-intellectual and otherworldly. He is reported to have said it would be “better [to be] with the Church in hell than with the pietists, of higher or lower type—in a heaven which does not exist.”⁶ Later, Lutheran church historian Martin Marty judged that “for all its glories, Pietism was one of the major strides of Christian retreat from responsibility as it has been viewed in the past.”⁷ So, the situation for Pietism’s reputation at the dawn of the twenty-first century was not much better than a hundred years earlier.

That is not to say, however, that Pietism has not had its defenders. A defender of Pietism has been mediating theologian Donald G. Bloesch who proudly identifies himself with it and has attempted to shine its tarnished reputation. Brethren theologian Dale Brown wrote *Understanding Pietism* in 1978 which went far toward rehabilitating the movement for both mainline and evangelical audiences. No one has done more to clear up misconceptions about Pietism than North American church historian Stoeffler who has written two major scholarly books about Pietism. Others who have joined in the recent renaissance of English language Pietism scholarship include German church historian Hartmut Lehmann, editor and key contributor to the multi-volume *Geschichte des Pietismus*,⁸ American Pentecostal scholar Frank Macchia, Moravian theologian Gary Sattler and George Washington University historian and theologian Harry Yeide who concludes in *Studies in Classical Pietism: The Flowering of the Ecclesiola* that Pietism is “anything but individualistic, introverted, and emotional.”⁹

So what exactly is Pietism? Defining the movement has become a cottage industry among church historians during the last thirty-five to fifty years. Church historian Jonathan Strom surveyed the vast range of approaches to defining Pietism in “Problems and Promises of Pietism Research.”¹⁰ The scholarly definitions range from extremely broad to extremely narrow. Some scholars such as Stoeffler view Pietism as a large tent encompassing almost everything that can be counted as “experiential religion” while at the same time wanting to keep this blooming, buzzing confusion of Pietist manifestations somehow connected to its historical roots in seventeenth century Germany. Thus, today, Pietism has no socially perceptible form and is more of a “spirit.”¹¹ However, for the first few decades of its existence in Europe it was a movement reacting to the dead orthodoxy and “forencism” of the state churches and their teachings. Its ethos, Stoeffler argues, has always grown out of its “cornerstone doctrine of rebirth.” I have labeled that ethos “conversional piety.”

According to Stoeffler, Pietism has three “key characteristics.”¹² First, for it “The essence of Christianity is to be found in the personally meaningful relationship of the individual

6. Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 10.

7. Ibid.

8. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993–2004).

9. Harry Yeide Jr., *Studies in Classical Pietism: The Flowering of the Ecclesiola* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) xi.

10. *Church History* 71:3 (September 2002) 536–54.

11. Stoeffler, *Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 12–13.

12. Ibid., 13–19.

to God” and that grows out of the initiating encounter with God through Jesus Christ in conversion and regeneration. Second is “religious idealism” by which is meant that while Christian perfection may not be attainable in this life one should not despair of and should expect genuine growth in holiness throughout the Christian life. And, as Spener himself never tired of saying, there is real hope for “better times” for the church. Third is “biblical emphasis” by which Stoeffler means a special kind of biblicism that promotes love for the Bible and places its authority over that of creeds and formal confessional statements.

Brown locates the essence of Pietism in its focus on regeneration—the new birth experience that differentiates the true Christian from the merely formal or nominal Christian.¹³ Sattler finds the center of Pietism in the concept of the “inner man” or “inner person” introduced especially by Spener in *Pia Desideria*.¹⁴ Yeide defines Pietism as “an ecclesiola movement in which a great premium is placed on divinely initiated experiential religion as the foundation for renewal actions.”¹⁵

My own opinion is that no definition of Pietism is more helpful than that provided by Stoeffler commenting on Zinzendorf: “For Zinzendorf, therefore, meaningful religious faith was trust in God as revealed in Christ, based upon the testimony of Scripture, authenticated in personal religious experience, and productive of an affective identification with Christ which is clearly felt.”¹⁶ Stoeffler is right to make clear that for Zinzendorf and all original Pietists religious feelings were not the “final criterion of religious truth.”¹⁷ That was reserved for the Bible which was regarded by Zinzendorf as the “Rock of Gibraltar” whose content is “fixed and immovable” when understood through the suffering and death of Christ.¹⁸

I am a stickler for defining movements by their origins and not by their often deviant derivations. Ironically, so are most conservative evangelical critics of Pietism who would shudder to hear someone describe Reformed theology by the likes of Karl Barth or Hendrikus Berkhof—the Dutch revisionist Reformed theologian who has influenced this generation of mainline Reformed thinkers more than anyone else since Barth. Or think of their reaction if someone defined Reformed theology by Robert Schuller, an ordained minister of the Reformed Church of America! Every movement has its center and its margins and its deviant derivations. It is simply wrong to define Pietism in terms of popular American folk religion as manifested, for example, in the therapeutic “feel good” message of television evangelists.

With Stoeffler, I argue that real Pietism is no longer a movement but an ethos or spirit that has filtered into especially American religious life. Its purest manifestations remain in those denominations and churches that consciously root their beliefs and practices

13. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 28.

14. Gary R. Sattler, *Nobler than the Angels, Lower than a Worm: The Pietist View of the Individual in the Writings of Heinrich Müller and August Hermann Francke* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1989) 41–43.

15. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 144.

16. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 145.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

in the reforming movements founded and led by Spener, Francke and Zinzendorf: the Evangelical Covenant Church of America, the Moravian Church, the various Brethren churches and the Baptist General Conference among others. The heart of paleo-Pietism was conversional piety—the belief that authentic Christian life begins with what Francke called the *Busskampf*—“struggle of repentance” even if it is not as emotional a conversion as Francke’s was. It continues through the devotional life marked by a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ” that includes striving for the holiness of Christ-like character. It revolves around prayer, devotional reading of Scripture, a focus on the cross as the symbol of the lifestyle of self-sacrifice for the cause of Christ and his kingdom, and evangelism. It is antithetical to baptismal regeneration and sacramental spirituality, creedalism and compulsory confessionalism, liturgical worship drained of feeling and emotion and the reduction of evangelism to social work.

Although there is today no visible Pietist movement, I consider whatever looks like that within a basically orthodox Protestant framework to be Pietism’s legacy and therefore in some sense contemporary Pietism. But there are manifestations of Pietism that remain closer to the center and others than have moved too far from the center beyond the periphery to be considered Pietism. The latter are usually more influenced by New Thought with its mind-over-matter therapeutic mentality than by authentic Pietism which necessarily clings to the cross and shuns self-actualization for its own sake and prosperity for personal wish-fulfillment.

Here I will defend authentic Pietism against six major criticisms leveled at it by its opponents past and present. They are that Pietism is so heavenly-minded it is no earthly good, that Pietism fosters emotional subjectivism so that it is antagonistic to the life of the mind, that Pietism encourages neglect of doctrine and leads to latitudinarianism and liberal theology, that Pietism is individualistic and tends to ignore the Christian community, that Pietism is legalistic and moralistic so that it effectively denies justification by grace through faith alone, and that Pietism is perfectionistic and thus promotes self-righteousness or despair. Anyone who has studied Pietism knows that these are the main lines of criticism against it and that they are all dangers lurking around Pietism but not essential elements of it. Insofar as they are stated as facts about Pietism itself and not cautions about possible dangers Pietists are prone to they are myths to be exploded.

First, critics claim that Pietism is so heavenly-minded it is no earthly good. In other words, it is claimed, Pietism promotes an otherworldly mentality and lifestyle that causes its followers to ignore the problems of the world around them. In other words, Pietism is the same as Quietism. In fact, I have often heard “Pietism” used when what is meant is “Quietism.” They have become virtually synonymous in many quarters. Quietism was the spiritual movement sparked by Madame Guyon and Guy Fenelon, two seventeenth century Catholic mystics who called Christians to contemplation to the exclusion of all cares or concerns about the outer world and its affairs. Paleo-Pietism was not that even if some Pietists have fallen into Quietism. They have done so against the founders’ intentions. Later Pietism in Germany, especially so-called Württemberg Pietism, eschewed Quietism and explicitly called for Christian involvement in world transformation.

Ernst Troeltsch, among others, promoted the myth that Pietism did not seek world transformation. Following him, church historians John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, in their widely read and influential book *Protestant Christianity*, asserted that “Spener and Francke organized small groups but had no hope that the world as such would be changed.”¹⁹ Contrary to this claim, Sattler demonstrates in his book about Francke that “Despite their zealous intolerance of ‘worldly desires’ and ‘course sins,’ it was the Pietists who fed, clothed, and educated poorer neighbors.”²⁰

In his biography of Spener, K. James Stein explodes the otherworldliness myth. For Spener, Stein argues, “formation of the world” as world transformation was the aim of the Christian life. For Spener, piety did not revolve around the self. Anyone who claims that it did cannot have read *Pia Desideria*, let alone Spener’s numerous sermons. Stein rightly avers that “Spener taught that the Christian life is devoted to world-formation, that is, to contribution to the well-being of society.”²¹ For example, Spener, the court preacher at Dresden, was a social progressive who believed in more than “soup, soap and salvation.” Anticipating later socialism he argued that it is government’s responsibility to provide work for all able-bodied people.²² For this and other progressive social views he has been considered “a pioneer in public relief and in care for the poor” by scholars who know his work well.²³ Spener was a public figure in German life in the late seventeenth century and used his position as court preacher as a bully pulpit to denounce corruption and power-mongering in government. He opposed most wars as unjust stopping just short of pacifism. He condemned witch trials and other injustices against women. Spener spoke often and warmly of “hope for better times for the church” in which he included hope for a better society. According to Stein and other Spener scholars “Spener’s ‘hope for better times for the church’ sought to pull the eschatological future into the present.”²⁴

The myth that Pietism was otherworldly is completely exploded by Spener’s pupil and practical organizer of Pietism Francke who founded the so-called “Halle Institutions” in the German city of Halle where he lived and taught. Sattler argues that Francke’s sermons and talks on education show that he believed “The earth itself would ultimately be transformed” through devout Christian social work. He preached a sermon on “The Rich’s Duty toward the Poor” in which he argued for a redistribution of wealth and condemned miserly hoarding of money in a context of poverty. But he did much more than talk about such things; he spent much of his adult life founding free schools for the poor, a missions society, orphanages, soup kitchens, a publishing house, and other institutions for the betterment of society. According to Yeide, Francke did not merely found such institutions; he also called for the salvation of all human institutions in a way that anticipated the later Social Gospel associated with Walter Rauschenbusch. For Francke, “Converted men

19. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 39.

20. Sattler, *God’s Glory, Neighbors Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Herman Francke* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1982) 49.

21. K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant, 1986) 238.

22. *Ibid.*, 240.

23. *Ibid.*, 241.

24. *Ibid.*, 252.

and women were called to convert all human institutions, bending them toward the better times which Spener had prophesied.”²⁵ Pietism scholar Carl Hinrichs concluded that “Francke wanted nothing less than the restructuring of the world” and worked for a “reformation of the world.”²⁶ Heinrich Bornkamm calls Francke’s work in Halle “Kingdom of God capitalism” because Francke promoted the founding of small businesses by the poor who saw him rightly as their champion.²⁷

Two scholars of Pietism in particular have recovered the lost or forgotten history of Pietist concern for world transformation: Harry Yeide and Frank Macchia. Both point to so-called Württemberg Pietism to demonstrate that authentic Pietism even long after Spener and Francke involved concern for the world. In his forward to Macchia’s *Spirituality and Social Liberation* Czech theologian Jan Milic Lochman says that “Wuerttemberg Pietism of the 19th century offered European . . . theology the fruitful possibility of a connection between a deeply personal piety that is faithful to the Scriptures and an alert attention to the burning social questions of industrialized society.”²⁸

The theologians especially associated with Württemberg Pietism were Johann Albrecht Bengel, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, Johann Jakob Moser, Ludwig Hofacker, and Johann and Christoph Blumhardt. Speaking of these men and others like them, Yeide says “the stimuli they provided in education, biblical study, mission work, social service, ecumenical relations and a number of other areas are felt still today.”²⁹ Also, “All felt that renewal of the church would lead to transformation of the world, not as a mere by-product but as an expression of Christian obedience.”³⁰ Macchia concludes his study of Württemberg Pietism by declaring that for them “the goal of serving the poor and lowly was paramount.”³¹

Best known as a biblical scholar, Bengel pioneered in educational theory and practice. He believed that true Christian piety removes the inner barriers to the educational process. But Bengel’s most enduring influence was his founding of the whole spirit of Württemberg Pietism which became the spirit of the national church of that state of Germany for centuries. It was and remains a progressive spirit both religiously and socially.

The real prince of Württemberg Pietism was Oetinger who carried on Bengel’s “biblical realism” in a vision of the transformation of all reality. Far from being super-spiritual or otherworldly, Oetinger argued that “Corporeality is the end of the ways of God.”³² For him, as for all Württemberg Pietists, the renewal of the church was for the sake of the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. This necessarily meant Christian involvement in the political life of the nation for the common good.

25. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 57.

26. *Ibid.*, 39.

27. *Ibid.*, 41.

28. Frank D. Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation: The Message of the Blumhardts in the Light of Wuerttemberg Pietism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993) xv.

29. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 141.

30. *Ibid.*, 142.

31. Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation*, 41.

32. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 116.

Yeide dubs Moser the “Pietist politician” because even as a well-known Pietist he became “the father of positive European international law.”³³ Yeide comments on Moser’s philosophy of public life and politics thus: “It seemed self-evident to him that the true Christian whose action producing faith is inextricable from love of neighbor is oriented to contributing to the common welfare as no other would or can be.”³⁴

The full flowering of Württemberg Pietism came with the father and son Blumhardt team. Johann, the father, was a revivalist who publicly condemned war, nationalism and prejudice and rejected any dualism between church and world. According to Macchia, “the direction of [Johann] Blumhardt’s spirituality is never toward self but toward God”³⁵ and that direction led him to protect the poor and oppressed for God’s sake. The elder Blumhardt was surpassed by his son in terms of social activism, but he functioned as a prophet denouncing all oppression of persons and especially of the poor, women and children. He preached that the rich have an obligation to the poor and the church to the world.

Christoph Blumhardt followed in his father’s footsteps as a passionate revivalist preacher, spiritual retreat leader and faith healer. But he went much further politically along the path set out by his father. Christoph moved beyond urging charity to preaching justice for the poor and oppressed. He condemned capitalism as inherently unjust and went so far as to join the Socialist party. For a time he even served as an elected representative in the state’s legislature. Macchia concludes that “Blumhardt directed Pietism more toward a prophetic stance, a direction truly consistent with the universalist and missionary impulses of Pietism.”³⁶ Ironically, Christoph Blumhardt had a profound impact on Karl Barth who failed to recognize his indebtedness thereby to Pietism.

These examples demonstrate the utter foolishness of criticizing Pietism in general for being other worldly and quietistic in spirit. In fact, especially Württemberg Pietism was and is anti-quietist.

What about the claim that Pietism fosters emotional subjectivism and an antagonistic attitude toward the life of the mind? This is the accusation, repeated by church historian Gonzalez³⁷ and others that Pietism is at heart anti-intellectual. Without any doubt it is true that some Pietists have become anti-intellectual and have reveled in emotional subjectivism in religion to the exclusion of critical thinking and constructive theology. But that is not any part of genuine, historic, classical Pietism. Stoeffler rightly reminds us that “Pietists like Spener constantly warned their followers against the dangers of subjectivism.”³⁸ According to him, “The leading Pietists were sober men who were considerably more concerned about cross bearing and the moral reformation of the person than about pleasurable feeling states. . . . What they endeavored to do was to correct the then

33. Ibid., 131.

34. Ibid., 138.

35. Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation*, 83.

36. Ibid., 133.

37. Justo Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) 304.

38. Stoeffler, *Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 10.

current dry-as-dust orthodoxy in favor of the Christianity of the reformers which was a living, vital, and hence affectively satisfying faith.”³⁹

German Pietism scholar Markus Matthias, writing in volume 4 of the *Geschichte des Pietismus*, argues that real Pietism did not trade theology for emotion but simply tried to connect them. For the Pietists, he writes, “As doctrine and biblical exegesis, theology is a publicly responsible affair and demands alongside faith and prayer a public vocation and scientific [*wissenschaftliche*] education.”⁴⁰ The early Pietists were far from rejecting scholarly theology. Rather, they opposed what they called “odium theologicum” which was the standard method of theological disputation among the Protestant scholastics that involved viciously attacking theological opponents with accusations of heresy for the least little perceived flaws of doctrine. But they most certainly did not elevate private, subjective experience to a source or norm for theology or any other scholarly endeavors. Nor did they think they could replace them. In *Pia Desideria* Spener did not advocate sacrifice of the intellect or discarding rigorous education; he merely advocated adding spiritual criteria to academic ones for promotion and graduation of ministerial students. Francke’s fervent promotion of education in his Halle Institutions demonstrates the value early Pietists placed on academic studies.

Francke, widely considered the most emotional of all the Pietists (with the possible exception of Zinzendorf) because of his insistence on the “struggle of repentance” as the essence of Christian conversion rejected emotion as any criterion of true Christianity. He wrote to his Pietist followers “You may possibly suppose, that love to God consists in a good emotion or desire, which you may sometimes feel, especially when you pray, and that after this you may sin again. But this, dear children, is not Love. Love is constant and unchanging, and is to be discovered by your obedience to God, and your patience under trials, rather than by your feelings.”⁴¹ Brown argues that Pietism’s emphasis fell not on emotion as feeling but on obedience. And with regard to revelation and truth “Pietism’s theology makes experience more a receptive medium than a productive source of revelation.”⁴² In other words, the early Pietists absolutely rejected any replacement of objectively given revelation or moral obedience to the Word of God with emotion or feeling.

Of all the early Pietists the only one who might rightly be accused of anti-intellectualism was Zinzendorf who belittled systematic theology by saying “as soon as truth becomes a system, one does not possess it.”⁴³ Zinzendorf reveled in mystical contemplation of the blessed wounds of Jesus and promoted intense states of religious emotion among his followers. And he was highly suspicious of overly intellectualized faith. He rejected rationalistic apologetics in favor of an almost fideistic reception of truth. Nevertheless, as Stoeffler points out, even Zinzendorf held fast to the Bible as the objective basis of

39. Ibid., 10–11.

40. “Bekehrung und Wiedergeburt,” in *Geschichte des Pietismus*, vol. 4, edited by Hartmut Lehmann; translated by Doug Hankins (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004) 66.

41. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 114–15.

42. Ibid., 118–19.

43. F. Ernest Stoeffler, *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 143.

religious authority⁴⁴ and eschewed mindless acceptance of new revelations. And he was a student of theology who read widely and deeply in Christian history and theology.

Sattler is right, then, that “Contrary to some popular opinion, even among the well-educated, the Pietists did not criticize reason without qualification. Reason has its proper place in the scheme of things.”⁴⁵ Also, “Information per se is not bad. Rather, information which cannot (or will not) be applied to the Christian life—inner or outer—is a waste and thus is wicked.”⁴⁶ While it is true that Pietism has always been more interested in transformation than information, it is not essentially hostile to education or the intellect except insofar as these take one away from devotion which they do not necessarily do.

Our third myth is that Pietism encourages neglect of doctrine and leads to latitudinarianism and liberal theology. Latitudinarianism is the “leveling” of doctrine to a position of unimportance especially as compared with morality. This accusation has been hurled at Pietism by almost all of its critics most notably Ritschl which is highly ironic as he is generally thought to have been the father of the “moralizing of dogma.” That is, with the philosopher Immanuel Kant, he pitted “facts” against “values” and placed religion squarely in the latter category. For him, in other words, affirmation of Jesus as God is merely a way of saying that for Christians Jesus has the value of God. For him to accuse Pietism of being anti-doctrinal is an example of a person who lives in a glass house throwing stones.

In any case, the charge is unfounded and unfair. True Pietism has never devalued doctrine; it has simply attempted to put doctrine in its rightful place which is not magisterial but ministerial. And it has reacted against the hair splitting and hostile *odium theologicum* that was the standard practice of the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics. Beginning with Spener Pietists called for a more irenic approach to theological debates without rejecting doctrine and theology entirely.

Spener embraced sound doctrine. Stoeffler notes that “Pietism did not materially alter the doctrinal content inherited from the Scholastics or Orthodoxists of the seventeenth century.”⁴⁷ Of Spener Brown says that “few could find fault with the basic Lutheranism of his catechism.”⁴⁸ However, Spener and later Pietists did distinguish between primary and secondary matters of dogma and he advocated strong defense only of the former. Thus, according to Brown, for Spener “there were important things about which one could not remain neutral. A greater spirit of freedom, tolerance and private opinion was permissible only in matters of secondary importance. Spener and Francke vigorously denied the accusations of dogmatic indifference. They merely regarded the detailed edifice woven by the subtleties and sophistry of Protestant Scholasticism as unimportant and even damaging. In contradistinction to this maze, they repeatedly spoke of ‘*alte Simplizitat*’ (apostolic simplicity), with which they could present the entire contents of the Christian faith in less than an hour. Luther, they felt, had it; Spener wanted to bring it back.”⁴⁹

44. Ibid., 145.

45. Sattler, *Nobler than the Angels*, 67.

46. Ibid., 70–71.

47. Stoeffler, *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity*, 22.

48. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 40.

49. Ibid., 41.

Spener believed that heresy-hunting and harsh polemics over doctrines was unnecessary. Perhaps somewhat idealistically he believed that a true personal experience of Jesus Christ will inevitably enlighten people concerning true doctrine.⁵⁰ But he respected the classical creeds such as the Nicene Creed and the standard confessional statements such as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. Never did he or any other later true Pietist reject doctrine or attempt to introduce heresies. Their critics mistook and mistake their irenic approach to theology for doctrinal indifference.

Hear now an example of the fundamental unfairness of some criticisms of Pietism. Brown noted that “Spener, Francke, and their colleagues desired to walk the middle ground between dogmatic inflexibility and dogmatic indifference.”⁵¹ Critic Talbot, writing in *Modern Reformation*, argues that “it . . . suggests why pietism often goes wrong. For New Testament Christianity does not attempt to find some *via media* between doctrinal accuracy and emotional warmth—it trusts that God will send his Spirit to warm the hearts of those he has chosen as his Word is faithfully and fully proclaimed.”⁵² Note that Brown did not say that Pietism sought to walk the middle ground between “doctrinal accuracy” and “emotional warmth.” Rather, Brown wrote that it attempted to walk a middle ground between “dogmatic inflexibility” and “dogmatic indifference.” Talbot translates it to “doctrinal accuracy.” There’s a world of difference, one hopes, between “dogmatic inflexibility” and “doctrinal accuracy.” It seems to me that many of Pietism’s critics jump on terms in Pietist writings and give them the worst possible interpretation and then built their condemnations on those. They are then slashing away at a straw man.

Perhaps what really riles up the critics is Pietism’s insistence on putting Scripture—not personal experience or emotion—above dogmatic and confessional writings. This is certainly true. Brown notes that Spener and Francke both valued doctrinal correctness while subjecting all beliefs to continual examination in the light of Scripture.⁵³

The claim that Pietism ignores doctrine and theology today is completely falsified by the example of American Pietism’s leading evangelical theologian—Donald Bloesch whose seven volume not-so-systematic theological treatment of doctrine entitled *Christian Foundations* (IVP) stands as proof that true Pietism can be and at least sometimes is theologically fertile.

Time and space require a more cursory treatment of the remaining three myths. So what about the claim by critics that Pietism is individualistic and tends to ignore Christian community? Again, it was Troeltsch who especially promoted this myth about Pietism and later Pannenberg repeated it in his book *Christian Spirituality*. It rests on a stereotype of Pietism drawn from the movement’s emphasis on inward experience of God and its criticisms of the established churches with their nominal Christianity based entirely on participation in the sacraments and confession of correct doctrines.

Franklin Littell is widely acknowledged as one of the most astute scholars of church history and especially of the free-church and believers church traditions. His statement

50. Ibid., 42.

51. Ibid., 43.

52. Talbot, “What’s Wrong with Pietism?”

53. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 75.

about this myth in the book *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* edited by Stoeffler is worth quoting at length: "Today we often encounter this teaching [of a deeply personal, vitally significant experience of the living God] in an individualistic form, removed from the setting of the church and hostile to the organized life of the Christian community. In classical Pietism this was almost never the case, for profound religious experience was not then primarily a teaching; it was a reality of life. And even those preachers and teachers most critical of the religious establishments were devoted to a vision of the true church as the inspired community of God's people. The religious life expressed itself not in anarchy, and not in dogmatic assertions, but in a life of love for God and man. Predatory disregard for the rights of others had no place in the life style of those to whom the devout life was experienced, and not merely asserted as a religious dogma. The priesthood of all believers was not the freedom of each to be saved in his own way, let alone the right of each 'to go to hell in his own way': it was rather the unlimited obligation which each had to seek the eternal well-being of all in God's inbreaking Kingdom."⁵⁴

Yeide argues that Spener himself was not individualistic in spite of that widespread stereotype of Pietism. Rather "Reform or renewal of the Church is Spener's integrating concept in his effort to present the new movement, a concept that suggests corporate activity."⁵⁵ Some may argue that Pietism lost this early concern for the church in the growth of emphasis on individual, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But that's simply not so. Macchia deals mainly with Württemberg Pietism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and demonstrates conclusively that these later Pietists including Bengel and the Blumhardts emphasized love for God and fellow human beings in their social settings and the necessity of corporate worship for a holistic spiritual life.⁵⁶ I suspect this notion that Pietism is essentially individualistic at the cost of the community arises from bitterness over Pietism's prophetic denunciations of dead formalism and dead orthodoxy in the mainline churches and its occasional justified break with denominations that reject spiritual renewal.

The fifth myth is that Pietism is legalistic and moralistic to the effective denial of justification by grace through faith alone. Among others Wheaton professor Talbot repeats this myth in his *Modern Reformation* article. There he accuses Pietism of tempting "sinful human beings, who are already too prone to try to earn God's favor, to substitute legalism and moralism for the true righteousness of God that must be imputed to us as a gift."⁵⁷ One who knows the true history of Pietism can only shudder at such an unfair charge. While it may be true that some pious individuals fall into legalism and moralism, it is not true of the founders of the movement or the movement as a whole. Is Talbot ignorant of the work of Bloesch who fervently defends justification as forensic imputation of Christ's righteousness apart from works while at the same time calling for a profound spiritual experience that creates inward holiness as a gift of the Holy Spirit? What would Talbot say if someone accused his own Reformed tradition of tempting sinful human beings

54. Stoeffler, *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity*, 164–65.

55. Yeide, *Studies in Classical Pietism*, 6.

56. Macchia, *Spirituality and Social Liberation*, 11, 38.

57. Talbot, "What's Wrong with Pietism?"

who are already prone to excuse their sins to sin more that irresistible grace based on unconditional election may abound? He knows very well the history of accusations that Calvinism lends itself to antinomianism and he would bristle at the charge and point to Calvin and his faithful followers to show the charge a myth. Why, then, does he and why do so many others focus on popular folk religious derivations of and deviations from true Pietism and blame the whole movement for their departures from its founders' intentions and its truest impulses?

Stein demonstrates Spener's full agreement with Luther's doctrine of justification as imputed righteousness while noting that he also stressed the change of human nature called regeneration that inevitably and invariably accompanies justification. Brown notes how Spener kept justification and sanctification clearly distinguished while at the same time arguing that they always go together. One is God's work for us and the other is God's work in us. In both cases, however, the person being converted is wholly passive and the work is all God's.⁵⁸ Stoeffler argues that the original Pietists did not substitute conversion and sanctification for forensic justification even though they did claim that salvation must be more than merely forensic. But the "more" was not a necessary human achievement of merit but "a divinely wrought miracle of conversion and divinely initiated and supported striving for sanctification."⁵⁹ Sattler proves that Francke believed in the Lutheran doctrine of imputed righteousness⁶⁰ while Stoeffler proves that for Francke conversion and amendment of life, both necessary for true Christian existence, is wholly a work of God in the person being saved.⁶¹ Francke wrote that "True faith is a divine work in us, which transforms us and bestows upon us the new birth from God, which kills the old Adam, and fashions us into a man who is entirely different in heart, soul, mind, and in all his powers."⁶² The point is, salvation is entirely God's work including the gift of faith itself. Zinzendorf never tired of affirming that it is easy to be saved and later Pietists such as the Otterbeins and Tersteegen preached against meritorious works as means of salvation.⁶³ One need only point to Bloesch to show that contemporary evangelical Pietism at its best is far from legalistic or moralistic. Anyone familiar with his evangelical theology cannot begin to imagine that he fell into either of those errors; he whole heartedly agreed with the magisterial Reformers about justification by grace through faith alone while with the classical Pietists insisting that true faith is never alone but always accompanied by good works—something that Luther himself proclaimed.

Finally, the sixth myth about Pietism is that it is perfectionistic and thus promotes self-righteousness or despair. Classical Pietists have always argued that there is no perfection in this life while at the same time holding forth the ideal of a growth in holiness toward perfection as a work of God in us. Spener viewed "limited perfection" as the true

58. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 99.

59. Stoeffler, *Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 17.

60. Sattler, *God's Glory and Neighbor's Good*, 234.

61. Stoeffler, *German Pietism during the Eighteenth Century*, 8.

62. *Ibid.*

63. J. Steven O'Malley, *Early German-American Evangelicalism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1995) 147–48 and 206.

goal of the Christian life while defining it as “pure love and desire for everything that is right and good.”⁶⁴ He denied “immediate perfection,” however, and urged that the new birth is a state or condition needing to be renewed from time to time.⁶⁵ Francke denied that there can be any perfection in this life while paradoxically arguing that real perfection lies in being justified by faith. He preached a sermon “On Christian Perfection” in which he said that “Perfection is nothing other than faith”⁶⁶ and that Christians are at best always perfect and not yet perfect: “We are perfect, and we are not perfect. Namely, we are perfect through Christ and in Christ through our justification and according to the righteousness of Jesus Christ ascribed to us. However, we are not and will not be completely perfect in the sense that we will nevermore be able to grow, to set aside evil and to take on good toward sanctification.”⁶⁷ Every good Pietist since Spener and Francke has agreed entirely with this paradox which is wholly in the same spirit as Luther in his essay on “Two Kinds of Righteousness.” I defy anyone to show any material disagreement between them. The accusation of perfectionism leading to self-righteousness or despair is wholly unfounded and nothing more than a myth when aimed at true, classical Pietism.

Is Pietism perfect? Nobody claims that it is. It is nothing more than an addition to the Reformation with an emphasis on inwardness which can be found in Luther and Calvin although not highlighted by them. And it is a correction to the post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism and hyper-orthodoxy that prevailed in Europe in the seventeenth century. Like all theological and spiritual traditions it is man-made and therefore partial and imperfect. But it does not deserve the vicious calumnies so often hurled against it by its uninformed critics who need to either drink deeply at the wells of knowledge or drink not at all and be silent about that about which they are ignorant.

64. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 165, 193.

65. *Ibid.*, 197.

66. Peter C. Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 114.

67. *Ibid.*, 115–16.