

**PIETISM AND THE WISCONSIN SYNOD:  
an ongoing love-hate relationship**

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of H-454  
Western Christian Life and Thought

Dr. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt

Mark Braun  
August 19, 1992

Volume 82 of the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, the theological journal of the Wisconsin Synod's seminary faculty, featured four articles on Pietism. In the foreword to that volume, Prof. Edward C. Fredrich, the Quarterly's editor, wrote:

There are good reasons for the Quarterly and its readers to review periodically "The Legacy of Pietism."

The legacy is long. It reaches across the centuries into our own time. It involves such basic and enduring theological issues as the proper relation of sanctification and justification and of law and gospel. It touches on such relevant issues as lay involvement, Bible study and theological education.<sup>1</sup>

He might also have mentioned, as I will discuss in this paper, that the impetus which moved the founding father of the Wisconsin Synod to come to America to do missionary work was rooted in Pietism, and the Synod's early years were distinguished by both commendable and deplorable features of that movement.

But it is just that fact which makes Pietism a "love-hate" sort of thing with many Wisconsin Synod pastors. Prof. Fredrich also touched on that issue:

There is a danger that the average Wisconsin Synod pastor will give the whole subject the quick and easy brush-off here and elsewhere. If there is one characteristic Wisconsin Synod pastors have in common, it is a profound and congenital distaste for pietism. The easiest way to win a debate on our conference floors is to charge the opponent with being a Pietist. On the enemies' list of most of us Pietism stands high in third place, just behind Satan and Antichrist. A church body heartily committed to the truth of objective justification cannot help being turned off by the worst vagaries of Pietism.<sup>2</sup>

I can only concur. In fact, in student days and beyond, some boisterous and outright

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, "Foreword to Volume 82: The Legacy of Pietism," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 82:1 (Winter 1985), pp. 3,4.

<sup>2</sup> Fredrich, "Foreword to Volume 82: The Legacy of Pietism," p. 4.

sinful behavior has been excused, or at least explained, on the grounds that "We don't want to be Pietists!" I claim neither more nor less guilt than my ministerial brothers.

And so, for most Wisconsin Synod pastors, Pietism is seen as an unfortunate but undeniable skeleton in our family closet, like the odd uncle who sullied the family name, or the ugly birthmark we'd like to have cosmetically removed. Yet elements of Pietism have remained in our worship and in our attitudes toward congregational and family life, in spite of ourselves. We maintain a "love-hate" relationship with Pietism. It is my thesis that if we do not come to grips with and learn to re-employ some of the admirable features of Pietism in the life of the Wisconsin Synod, there will be unhappy consequences.

As I discuss the love-hate relationship between the WELS and Pietism, information will of necessity be drawn primarily from Wisconsin Synod sources. In this paper I will discuss four features of Pietism as it relates to the WELS: (I) its European roots and development; (II) its role in the founding and early history of the Wisconsin Synod; (III) its attempted repudiation within the Wisconsin Synod; and (IV) its continued presence in Wisconsin Synod spiritual renewal efforts.

Evangelical Pietism, according to Clyde L. Manschreck, arose as "a reaction to a complex of social forces that marked a transition in Western civilization from religion to

secularism."<sup>3</sup> For a more specification description of the religious roots of the movement, the following definition is as good as any:

Pietism was a reaction to the spiritual indifference, worldliness, and general lack of true piety which had infected the Lutheran Church of Germany in the 17th century. . . . Three leading causes may be mentioned [as the greatest contributing factors]: the Thirty Years' War, state religion, and orthodoxism.<sup>4</sup>

Most significant for this paper is the third contributing factor, orthodoxism:

Many pastors and parishioners often mistook a mere intellectual knowledge of carefully systematized doctrine for faith. A personal conviction of sin was lacking, as also a faith which rested on the assurance of forgiveness and had as a natural result a consecrated life of sanctification. A religious intellectualism began to control many Lutheran classrooms and pulpits, which consumed practically all of its energy in providing the validity of an orthodox position by means of every possible dialectical definition and distinction.<sup>5</sup>

According to Jaroslav Pelikan, the "humbler duties" of preaching the gospel and serving people's spiritual needs often took second place to "the more glamorous field of theological debate." The man in the pew had grown weary of "the endless and useless theological disputes in which their pastors and professors engaged." Lutheran churches of the time, says Pelikan, "found time, opportunity, and funds for extensive theological

---

<sup>3</sup> Clyde L. Manschreck, A History of Christianity: Readings in the History of the Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964, reprint 1981), Vol. 2: The Church from the Reformation to the Present, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 49:1 (January 1952), pp. 19-35. Reprinted in Our Great Heritage, Lyle W. Lange and G. Jerome Albrecht, eds. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1991), Vol. 3, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 171.

debate and publication, but none for missions."<sup>6</sup>

One cannot deny that such excesses of orthodoxy existed within 17th century Lutheranism. But it is incorrect to conclude that these excesses are always the inevitable and inescapable outgrowth of doctrinal orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is an aberration of doctrinal orthodoxy just as Pietism is an aberration of godly piety. Much good still existed in this age: Johann Gerhard wrote scholarly doctrinal volumes, and Johann Arndt penned devotional classics. Valerius Herberger, Johann Heerman, Martin Rinckhart, Paul Gerhardt and George Neumark composed hymns that gave heartfelt expression to Lutheran certainties. These men and others were well aware of the spiritual lethargy of their day and raised their voices against it."<sup>7</sup>

Johann Gerhard (1582-1637), certainly orthodox in his theology, nonetheless complained in his personal correspondence about the need for reform and encouraged in his Sacred Meditations a mystical religion borrowed from the late Middle Ages. Balthasar Meisner (1587-1626), an unrelenting contender against Calvinism, lectured about the shortcomings of the clergy and civil rulers in the society of his day and proposed improvements. John Valentine Andraea (1586-1643) criticized the contentiousness of theologians and deplored the religious illiteracy of the people. Theophilus Grossgebaur (1626-1661) bemoaned how constructive pastoral work was

---

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard. Cited by E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 172.

neglected in favor of theological polemics.<sup>8</sup>

All authorities recognize Philip Jacob Spener as the founder of German Lutheran Pietism. Born in 1635, thirteen years before the cessation of the Thirty Years' War, he understood the demoralizing effects of that long war and longed for a reformation of faith and morals.<sup>9</sup> He was raised in a home more pious than average and throughout his life reflected the godly influence especially of his mother. Growing up he lived a rather ascetic life, spending time only with a few like-minded friends.<sup>10</sup> Theodore G. Tappert describes him as "an omnivorous reader from his youth":

Spener's early years were . . . shaped by books which he found in his father's library. Next to the Bible his favorite was John Arndt's True Christianity. . . . Arndt . . . had asserted that orthodox doctrine was not enough to produce Christian life and advocated mysticism which he borrowed largely from the late Middle Ages. . . . Spener also read several . . . devotional books by English Puritans . . . critical of conventional Christianity. They advocated self-examination, an earnest quest for holiness, and other worldly standards of morality which would set the true Christian apart from his neighbor. They shared with John Arndt an emphasis on rigorous religious and moral life as over against a dogmatic intellectualism, but they were less mystical.<sup>11</sup>

He diligently shunned typical student pastimes such as drinking, dancing and fencing.

He had little contact with the opposite sex until he married a young lady his mother

---

<sup>8</sup> Philip Jacob Spener, Pia Desideria, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), introduction, pp. 6,7.

<sup>9</sup> Manschreck, A History of Christianity, Vol. 2, p. 268.

<sup>10</sup> Martin O. Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 82:1 (Winter 1985), pp. 5,6.

<sup>11</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, introduction, pp. 8,9.

selected for him.<sup>12</sup> One day a week he did not eat dinner, until he was compelled for health reasons to abandon this practice of fasting.<sup>13</sup>

There is little need to dwell on the peculiarities of Spener's formative years except to say that a student in a Wisconsin Synod college or seminary who lived as Spener lived would certainly have received the pejorative label "Pietist" and undoubtedly would have been considered weird and even dangerous by most of his classmates.

At age 34, serving as a pastor and a supervisor of other pastors in Frankfurt-on-Main, Spener first suggested that something more was needed beyond Sunday worship services to help people grow in Christian faith and living. In a 1669 sermon, Spener declared:

How much good it would do if good friends would come together on a Sunday and instead of getting out glasses, cards or dice would take up a book and read from it for the edification of all or would review something from sermons that were heard! If they would speak with one another about the divine mysteries, and the one who received most from God would try to instruct his weaker brethren! If, should they be not quite able to find their way through, they would ask a preacher to clarify the matter! If this should happen, how much evil would be held in abeyance, and how the blessed Sunday would be sanctified for the great edification and marked benefit of all! It is certain, in any case, that we preachers cannot instruct the people from our pulpits as much as is needful unless other persons in the congregation, who by God's grace have a superior knowledge of Christianity, take the pains, by virtue of their universal Christian priesthood, to work with and under us to correct and reform as much in their neighbors as they are able according to the measure of their gifts and their simplicity.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, introduction, pp. 10,11.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Jacob Spener, Erbauliche Evangelisch- und Epistolische Sonntags-Andachten (Frankfurt, 1716), p. 638; quoted by Paul Gruenberg, Philipp Jakob Spener (3 vols., Goettingen, 1893-1906), I, 165. Quoted in Pia Desideria, introduction, p. 13.

The following year small groups of lay people -- collegia pietatis -- began meeting in private homes on Sundays and Wednesdays. These small lay groups, "one of the distinguishing features of Pietists and their work,"<sup>15</sup> met to discuss the previous Sunday's sermon, to study particular passages of Scripture or to read passages from devotional books.

The collegia pietatis were private gatherings of the "better" members of his congregation for the purpose of Bible-study and mutual edification. . . . [Spener] hoped that these gatherings around God's Word would create pockets of God-fearing people in the state church congregations who would then work as a leaven for improving conditions in the church.

But instead these little churches within the church caused all kinds of problems. Pharisaism developed. For the members of these groups began to consider themselves to be better than the other members of the congregation who weren't participating in the conventicles. Instead of working as a leaven to promote ethics and morality they became disruptive, splitting churches as they separated themselves from those they considered to be unconverted or second-class Christians. Later on, pietists actually attempted to classify people according to their growth in sanctification.<sup>16</sup>

A Frankfurt publisher, planning a new release of John Arndt's popular Gospel

---

<sup>15</sup> Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> John M. Brenner, "Pietism, Past and Present," Southeastern Michigan Pastor-Teacher-Delegate Conference, January 23, 1989, and Northern Michigan Pastoral Conference, April 3, 1989, p. 5. Richard D. Balge, "Pietism's Teaching on Church and Ministry: as evidenced in its pastoral practice," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 82:4 (Fall 1985), p. 250, offers a similar analysis of Spener's small groups:

The potential for both blessing and mischief lay in these collegia pietatis. Mutual edification, instruction of weaker brethren, discussion of difficult passages with the pastor, relieving the pastor of some of his work and the exercise of the universal priesthood. These were and are worthy aims to pursue. But the depreciation of other forms of social relaxation and the suggestion that lay members purpose to correct and reform their neighbors suggest that some of the less evangelical aspects of Pietism were present from the beginning.



Postils, asked Spener to write a new preface of the edition. Spener used this opportunity to announce his concerns and remedies for the Lutheran church. With the approval of his fellow pastors in Frankfurt, Spener's preface was published under the imposing title, Pia Desideria, or Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform of the True Evangelical Church, Together with Several Simple Christian Proposals Looking Toward This End.

The first part of Pia Desideria presented "an overview of the corrupt conditions of the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church." Two of its six chapters are of interest for this paper: defects in the clergy and failings of the common people.

"Distressing as conditions in the political state are," Spener wrote, "we preachers in the ecclesiastical estate cannot deny that our estate is also thoroughly corrupt."

We must confess not only that men are to be found here and there in our estate who are guilty of open scandals but also that there are fewer than may first appear who do not understand and practice true Christianity. . . . Although, according to the common estimate of men and as seen through eyes captivated by the fashion of the world, they may seem to be blameless, yet their lives reflect (subtly, to be sure, but nonetheless plainly) a worldly spirit, marked by carnal pleasure, lust of the eye, and arrogant behavior, and so it is evident that they have never taken even the first practical principle of Christianity seriously, namely, denial of self.<sup>17</sup>

I am alarmed and ashamed whenever I think of the fact that the teaching of an earnest, inner godliness is so unfamiliar and strange to some people that those who zealously cultivate such godliness can hardly escape being suspected as secret papists, Weigelians,<sup>18</sup> or Quakers. In his time the sainted Dr. Balthasar Meissner, who was respected for the purity of his doctrine, complained that one could hardly avoid the suspicion of Weigelianism or attachment to neo-sectarian teaching if one promoted

---

<sup>17</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 44,45.

<sup>18</sup> Followers of Valentin Weigel, 1533-1588, a German mystic and pantheist. In the seventeenth century the label "Weigelian" was attached to anyone who was regarded as untrustworthy, heterodox, or antiecclesiastical.

godliness with proper zeal and constantly admonished the practice of what is taught.<sup>19</sup>

Controversies are not only the most important thing, although knowledge of them properly belongs to the study of theology. . . . Not a few stake almost everything on polemics. They think that everything has turned out well if only they knew how to give answers to the papists, the Reformed, the Anabaptists, etc. They pay no attention to the fruits of those articles of faith which we presumably still hold in common with them or of those rules of morality which are acknowledged by all.<sup>20</sup>

When men's minds are stuffed with such a theology which, while it preserves the foundation of faith from the Scriptures, builds on it with so much wood, hay and stubble of human inquisitiveness that the gold can no longer be seen, it becomes exceedingly difficult to grasp and find pleasure in the real simplicity of Christ and his teaching. This is so because men's taste becomes accustomed to the more charming things of reason. . . . Subtleties unknown to the Scriptures usually have their origin, in the case of those who introduce them, in a desire to exhibit their sagacity and their superiority over others, to have a great reputation, and to derive benefit therefrom in the world. Moreover, these subtleties are themselves of such a nature that they stimulate, in those who deal with them, not a true fear of God but a thirst for honor and other impulses which are unbecoming a true Christian. . . . When they really achieve the purpose they set themselves, they succeed in giving those of their hearers who have ready minds a fair knowledge of religious controversies, and these hearers regard it as the greatest honor to dispute with others. Both preachers and hearers confine themselves to the notion that the one thing needful is the assertion and retention of pure doctrine, which must not be overthrown by errors, even if it is very much obscured with human perversions.<sup>21</sup>

"Since conditions are such in the first two estates [the political and the ecclesiastical], which ought to govern the masses and lead them to godliness," wrote Spener, "it is easy to guess how things are in the third estate. Indeed, it is evident on

---

<sup>19</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 47,48.

<sup>20</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 56.

every hand that none of the precepts of Christ is openly observed."<sup>22</sup>

When one looks at the everyday life even of those among us who are called Lutherans (but who do not deserve this name, for they do not understand dear Luther's teaching about living faith), does not one find grave offense -- indeed, such offenses as are everywhere prevalent?<sup>23</sup>

We must confess that drunkenness is to be counted among such sins. . . . How is it that we pay so little attention to this one sin of drunkenness and are hardly willing to consider it culpable unless it occurs frequently? What can we advance in defense of it except that it is an ancient inherited custom of Germans and Scandinavians which is abetted by the temperament of some of them? . . . If some advance the argument that drunkenness cannot be so grave a sin because, if it were, there would be very few true Christians among us, I shall accept the conclusion and add that this sin is all the more dangerous because it has spread so widely and is recognized by so few.<sup>24</sup>

Let us also look at the general practice of lawsuits. If they are properly examined one must confess that it is rare for a suit to be conducted by either side in such a way as not to violate or go beyond the bounds of Christian love. Although it is not wrong to make use of the divine assistance in civil authority and seek it in judicial procedure, in such a suit we must do everything for our neighbor which we expect others to do for us. That this does not happen as a rule and that most litigants use the courts as instruments of their vindictiveness, injustice, and unseemly cupidity is also a sin which is not considered a sin.<sup>25</sup>

It is not accounted a sin to employ tricks which do not have an evil reputation in the world but are praised as shrewd and circumspect measures, even if they are burdensome to our neighbors and, indeed, oppress and impoverish them. The very ones who mean to be the best Christians have no scruples about such tricks.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 57.

<sup>23</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 57,58.

<sup>24</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 58,59.

<sup>25</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 59,60.

<sup>26</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 60.

Things have come to such a pass that not only is begging very common. . . , but most people hardly know any other way of helping a needy neighbor than reluctantly to toss a few pennies to a beggar once in a while. They are far from recognizing that they are obligated to perform such deeds of love even when their own livelihood may be noticeably affected by their gifts.<sup>27</sup>

How many there are who live such a manifestly unchristian life that they themselves cannot deny that the law is broken at every point, who have no intention of mending their ways in the future, and yet who pretend to be firmly convinced that they will be saved in spite of all this! If one asks on what they base their expectation one will discover, as they themselves confess, that they are sure of this because it is of course not possible to be saved on account of one's life, but that they believe in Christ and put all their trust in him, that this cannot fail, and that they will surely be saved by such faith. Accordingly they have a fleshly illusion of faith (for godly faith does not exist without the Holy Spirit, nor can such faith continue when deliberate sins prevail) in place of the faith that saves.<sup>28</sup>

Part two, "The Possibility of Better Conditions in the Church," forms a bridge between Spener's catalogue of the church's corrupt conditions and specific proposals for correcting those conditions.

If we consult the Holy Scriptures we can have no doubt that God promised his church here on earth a better state than this. . . .

There is no doubt at all that the counsel of God will be accomplished without us, and what is revealed in the Scriptures will be fulfilled no matter what we do. . . . We must fear, however, that he will punish us grievously for our negligence by depriving us of this light [of the gospel] and going to others with it. . . .

We do not understand the perfection which we demand of the church in such a way that not a single hypocrite is any longer to be found in it, for we know that there is no field of grain in which there are no weeds. What we mean is that the church should be free of manifest offenses, that

---

<sup>27</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 61,62.

<sup>28</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 64.

nobody who is afflicted with such failings should be allowed to remain in the church without fitting reproof and ultimately exclusion, and that the true members of the church should be richly filled with many fruits of their faith.

. . . .

In a matter which concerns all of us it is incumbent on all Christians, especially all whom the Lord has set as watchmen of his church in various places, to examine the condition of the church and consider how it may be improved. . . . After I have considered, according to the ability which God has given me, how the shortcomings of the churches which have been entrusted to me and to my dear fellow ministers may be corrected and how these churches may be built up, I make bold to set down here on paper what, on the basis of pious reflection and the guidance of the Scriptures, I think is useful and necessary.<sup>29</sup>

In his third part, "Proposals to Correct Conditions in the Church," Spener suggested these actions: 1) more abundant use of the Word; 2) establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood; 3) diligent inculcation of the truth that Christianity consists not merely of knowledge but of deeds; 4) altered conduct of religious controversies; 5) improved training of preachers in schools and universities; and 6) the preparation of sermons for the purpose of spiritual edification.<sup>30</sup>

Spener's considered congregational preaching useful and necessary, but yet judged it insufficient.

All scripture, without exception, should be known by the congregation. . . . If we put together all the passages of the Bible which in the course of many years are read to a congregation in one place, they will comprise only a very small part of the Scriptures which have been given to us. . . .

It should therefore be considered whether the church would not be well advised to introduce the people to Scripture in still other ways than the

---

<sup>29</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 76-86.

<sup>30</sup> Westerhaus, "Literary Landmarks of Pietism," p. 9.

customary sermons on the appointed lessons.<sup>31</sup>

He suggested three methods: (1) diligent reading of especially the New Testament in every home by the housefather or some other appointed person; (2) reading of entire books of the Bible at specified times in the public service, without further comment; and (3) reintroduction of "the ancient and apostolic kind of church meetings," house churches such as those pictured in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup>

One person would not rise to preach. . . , but others who have been blessed with gifts and knowledge would also speak and present their pious opinions on the proposed subject to the judgment of the rest, doing all this in a way as to avoid disorder and strife. This might conveniently be done by having several ministers (in places where a number of them live in a town) meet together or by having several members of a congregation who have a fair knowledge of God or desire to increase their knowledge meet under the leadership of a minister, take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all.<sup>33</sup>

In emphasizing the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood,

Spener wished to reaffirm one of the key principles of the great Reformer:

---

<sup>31</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 88.

<sup>32</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 88,89.

<sup>33</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 89. E.C. Fredrich, in "After Three Centuries -- the Legacy of Pietism" (an essay read to the Southeastern Wisconsin District Pastor-Teacher Conference at Hales Corners, WI, June 11, 1985, p. 10), commented on the almost revolutionary effect of this aspect of Pietism:

When [August Hermann Francke] and Paul Anton in Leipzig used the collegium philobiblicum for study of the content of whole books of the Bible, beginning with Genesis and Matthew, a new day in adult Bible study dawned. Students flocked to those evening lectures by the hundreds. Even though the main language was Latin, townspeople began to take parts. It was a novel and exciting experience to find that the Book of Books, previously used too often only as a source for proof texts and sermon texts, contained books whose contents edified.

Nobody can read Luther's writings with some care without observing how earnestly the sainted man advocated this spiritual priesthood, according to which not only ministers but all Christians are made priests by their Savior, are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and are dedicated to perform spiritual-priestly acts. . . . All spiritual functions are open to all Christians without exception. Although the regular and public performance of them is entrusted to ministers appointed for this purpose, the functions may be performed by others in case of emergency. . . .

No damage will be done to the ministry by a proper use of this priesthood. In fact, one of the principal reasons why the ministry cannot accomplish all that it ought is that it is too weak without the help of the universal priesthood. One man is incapable of doing all that is necessary for the edification of the many persons who are generally entrusted to his pastoral care. However, if the priests do their duty, the minister, as director and oldest brother, has splendid assistance in the performance of his duties and his public and private acts, and thus the burden will not be too heavy.<sup>34</sup>

Regarding religious controversies, Spener maintained that the church had a responsibility to its own members as well as to the erring. He particularly urged that doctrinal discussion be conducted with love.

Especially we should beware of invectives and personal insinuations, which at once tear down all the good we have in mind to build. . . .

To this should be added . . . a practice of heartfelt love toward all unbelievers and heretics. While we should indicate to them that we take no pleasure in their unbelief or false belief or the propagation of these, but rather are vigorously opposed to them, yet in other things which pertain to human life we should demonstrate that we consider these people to be our neighbors. . . , regard them as our brothers according to the right of common creation and the divine love that is extended to all. . . , and therefore are so disposed in our hearts toward them as the command to love all others as we love ourselves demands. To insult or wrong an unbeliever or heretic on account of his religion would be not only a carnal zeal but also a zeal that is calculated to hinder his conversion. A proper hatred of false religion should neither suspend nor weaken the love that is

---

<sup>34</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 92-95.

due the other person.<sup>35</sup>

Spener wanted preaching to be more concerned with meeting the spiritual needs of the people, and less interested in parading the intellectual abilities of the preacher.

Many godly persons find that not a little is wanting in many sermons. There are preachers who fill most of their sermons with things that give the impression that the preachers are learned men, although the hearers understand nothing of this. Often many foreign languages are quoted, although probably not one person in the church understands a word of them. Many preachers are more concerned to have introduction shape up well and the transitions be effective, to have an outline that is artful and yet sufficiently concealed, and to have all the parts handled precisely according to the rules of oratory and suitably embellished, than they are concerned that the materials be chosen and by God's grace be developed in such a way that the hearers may profit from the sermon in life and death.<sup>36</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate in Spener's diagnosis and prescriptions for the church, or the subsequent achievements and deficiencies of Pietism. It is fair to say that the Lutheran church at Spener's time was in need of renewal and that, at least on the surface, his proposals appear reasonable. He never wished to be considered outside the Lutheran church, but felt that the reformation in doctrine accomplished by Luther needed to be accompanied by a corresponding reformation in life.

Even as the Jews were not to let it suffice them to have escaped from Babylon, but were to desire to restore again the house of the Lord and the beauty of its worship, so we may not be satisfied with the knowledge that we have left Babylon, but we must be careful to correct imperfections which still prevail.

I have never been of the opinion, and am not so now, that the

---

<sup>35</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 98,99.

<sup>36</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 115.



Reformation of Luther was brought to completion as one might hope.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time it must be said that Pietism's entire analysis of the church's ills as well as its prescriptions for improvement inevitably led to misplaced emphasis: on sanctification rather than justification, on holy living rather than the forgiveness of sins, on Christ in us rather than Christ for us, on subjective experience rather than objective declaration, on fides qua creditur rather than fides quae creditur.<sup>38</sup> Despite its good intentions, Pietism told sinners to look into the mirror instead of to trust in the cross.

## II

In 1664 Austrian baron Justinian von Welz rebuked church people for spending so much "on all sorts of dress, delicacies, etc.," while "giving thought of no means for the spread of the gospel"; in return he was denounced by leading church officials as a "dreamer, fanatic, hypocrite," calling it "absurd, even wicked, to cast the pearls of the gospel before the heathen."<sup>39</sup> Johann Gerhard tried to demonstrate that because the apostles had already preached the gospel to the whole world in their time, Christ's great

---

<sup>37</sup> Spener, quoted by Harold O.J. Brown, Heresies (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1984), p. 361.

<sup>38</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 169-170,176; Brenner, "Pietism, Past and Present," pp. 7,8.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur T. Pierson, The New Acts of the Apostles (New York: Bake and Taylor, 1894), p. 76. Cited by Ernst H. Wendland, "Pietism's World Mission Enterprise," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 82:3 (Summer 1985), p. 186.

missionary command had ceased.<sup>40</sup>

Seventeenth century Lutheran orthodoxy was not always possessed of a driving missionary zeal, but Pietism is generally credited as the force that began the modern missionary movement of the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>41</sup>

The very best news about Pietism's legacy is the mission outreach beyond the territorial boundaries that preceded by a century and eventually bellweathered Protestantism's great mission drive in the 1800s. . . . Critics [of Pietism] . . . fall flat on their faces . . . when they try to belittle and downgrade this God-pleasing and God-blessed drive to reach out with the gospel beyond the boundaries of the little territorial church and the European center of interest. . . . There will never be any gainsaying the closing verses of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>42</sup>

Pietism not only provided the impetus to do missionary work; it also pioneered methods for carrying it out. Ernst H. Wendland, who served as a Wisconsin Synod missionary in central Africa for more than twenty years, observed:

The practical missionary methods which the Danish-Halle men employed were neither a part of Pietism nor orthodoxy. They were simply the result of using good common sense. First of all, to work among people one must have a heart for them, learn their customs and their language to be able to understand them and communicate with them evangelically. Secondly, one must have literary tools to work with -- Bibles, instruction materials, liturgies, hymns, written and printed in contextually understandable language. Finally, one needs to have a training program for nationals so that they from the very beginning become involved in its

---

<sup>40</sup> Gustav Warneck, A History of Protestant Missions, trans. George Robson (New York: Revell, 1906), pp. 28-31. Cited by E.H. Wendland, "Pietism's World Mission Enterprise," p. 186.

<sup>41</sup> "It was the Lutheran church within which the first German mission arose; not Lutheran Orthodoxy, however, but Lutheran Pietism was its spring and support. . . . It was in the age of Pietism that missions struck their first deep roots" (Warneck, A History of Protestant Missions, pp. 52,53. Cited by E.H. Wendland, "Pietism's World Mission Enterprise," p. 200).

<sup>42</sup> E.C. Fredrich, "After Three Centuries -- the Legacy of Pietism," p. 4.

activities and growth. These basic objectives of mission methodology are axiomatic today. At that time they were revolutionary. It just so happened that Lutherans out of the Pietist movement were the first to put them to use effectively."<sup>43</sup>

The Lord of history determined that the rise of Lutheran Pietism would coincide with the opening of the new world to Lutheran immigrants. A dozen years after Spener first advised Lutherans to meet in small groups for fostering spiritual growth, William Penn broadcast throughout Germany an invitation for settlers to move to his land grant in the New World. German Lutheran Pietists were among the first to say "Yes" to his invitation.<sup>44</sup> As appeals for help came from America to Europe, those in Pietist circles often responded more quickly and more generously than others. According to E. Clifford Nelson, men who came to America to become clergymen were sometimes Pietists and sometimes defenders of Lutheran Orthodoxy, "but the dominant influence among Lutherans in North America was pietistic."<sup>45</sup> Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, founder of the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1748, absorbed Pietistic theology while teaching at Halle and met Count Nicholas Zinzendorf soon after he arrived in Pennsylvania in 1742.<sup>46</sup> As his work progressed, Muhlenberg appealed to Halle for money and more manpower; thus

---

<sup>43</sup> E.H. Wendland, "Pietism's World Mission Enterprise," p. 201.

<sup>44</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, "Lutheran Pietism Comes to America," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 82:4 (Fall 1985), p. 263.

<sup>45</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, ed., The Lutherans in North America (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 63,64.

<sup>46</sup> Patsy A. Leppien and J. Kincaid Smith, What's Going on Among the Lutherans (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), p. 272.

"colonial Lutheranism in America was largely evangelized and organized from Halle."<sup>47</sup>

In the first charter of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, Muhlenberg made as one of his four requirements for membership that a minister "dare not be an anti-Pietist."<sup>48</sup>

The beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod came in the following century, a century colored by the Prussian Union. Since King Frederick William III proclaimed the Union involving Lutherans and Reformed, religious forces in German speaking countries were divided into either unionistic or confessional camps; Pietism helped create, and strongly infected, the unionistic side. Missionary societies composed of Lutherans and Reformed, short on confessionalism but long on enthusiasm, organized to spread the gospel to Africa, Asia, Australia and America. Among them was one society variously called the Rhine or Barmen or Langenberg Mission Society.<sup>49</sup>

Potential missionaries received training that was either "United" (a blend of Lutheran and Reformed theology) or a "mild and moderate kind" of Lutheranism. Inspector Wallmann further assured them that they when they got to America they could shape their ministry in a Lutheran, Reformed or "United" way.<sup>50</sup> Missionaries were directed to allow

---

<sup>47</sup> James Hastings Nichols, History of Christianity 1650-1950: Secularization of the West (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1956), p. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, "Lutheranism in America on July 4, 1776," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 73:3 (July 1976), p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> E.C. Fredrich, "By God's Grace a Confessing Confessional Lutheran Church," Southeastern Wisconsin Pastor-Teacher Conference, June 11-12, 1975, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> August Pieper, "The Significance of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke for the Wisconsin Synod and American Lutheranism (conclusion)," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 33:2 (April 1936), pp. 81-101. Translated by Werner H. Franzmann, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 88:2 (Spring 1991), p. 135.

their congregations in the New World to decide which of the supporting church bodies they wished to join. One of the arrivals from the Langenberg society, first in Rochester, New York, and then, in 1848, in Milwaukee, was Johannes Muehlhaeuser, later to become Wisconsin's first president.<sup>51</sup>

Muehlhaeuser was born in Wuerttemberg in 1803, apprenticed as a baker but felt a growing desire to be a missionary. He proved an unusually devoted disciple of the Lord, with modesty, humility, a love for others and a capacity for self-sacrifice. Although Muehlhaeuser received a typically unionistic and pietistic training, he had a distinct preference for Lutheranism. Typical of Langenberg students, he did not receive a thorough instruction in those doctrines that divided Lutherans from the Reformed. Even later in life, as president of the fledgling Wisconsin Synod, Muehlhaeuser was remembered as an earnest and forceful speaker at synodical meetings and conventions, but when doctrinal discussions arose he usually put a strong check on himself. In this area he did not feel at home. Men trained in the mission schools who arrived later, especially those with strong Lutheran convictions, easily surpassed him in this area.<sup>52</sup>

Muehlhaeuser wanted to be a Lutheran, but he disliked the "old style" Lutherans, such as those in the Missouri and Buffalo synods, whose insistence on the fine points of Lutheran doctrine he considered unfortunate. He regarded the Lutheran Confessions as

---

<sup>51</sup> John C. Jeske, "Amazing Grace -- 125 Years of It," unpublished paper, February 13, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> August Pieper, "The Significance of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke for the Wisconsin Synod and American Lutheranism (1st portion)," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 32:3 (July 1935). Translated by Werner H. Franzmann, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 87:3 (Summer 1990), pp. 175-178.

"paper fences" that divided Christians in wars over words.<sup>53</sup> Had he lived at Spener's time, he would have agreed that there were too much polemics and not enough pastoral ministrations among these "old Lutherans."<sup>54</sup>

Muehlhaeuser's viewpoint is revealed in a letter he wrote in November 1853 to Gotthilf Weitbrecht, who had recently converted from Lutheranism to Methodism. Weitbrecht refused to join the Wisconsin Synod because "your practice is neither strictly Lutheran nor strictly Evangelical, and yet you aim to be both."<sup>55</sup> Muehlhaeuser responded:

Just because I am not strictly [Lutheran] or Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence. [I] have quite often been together with English preachers of the various denominations in ministerial conference and we respected and loved each other as brethren and deliberated on the general welfare of the church. So I am not, dear Methodist brother, withdrawing the hand of brotherhood from you if you are a Methodist in the spirit of the Methodist church's founder. . . . As a non-theologian I am wondering how you a theologian, pledged to the confessional books, could take the step [to Methodism] without a struggle. You won't expect me to believe that the teaching of the Methodist church, especially regarding the Sacraments, yes, even pertaining to justification and

---

<sup>53</sup> John C. Jeske, "Amazing Grace," pp. 2,3.

<sup>54</sup> E.C. Fredrich, in "By God's Grace a Confessing Confessional Lutheran Church" (p. 4) cites a Pastor Johannes Deindoerfer of Frankenhill, Michigan, who after meeting Muehlhaeuser in 1853 reported that he felt compelled to "strike out in all earnestness at the deceptive and lying nature of the union church" (Kirchliche Mittheilungen aus und uber Nord America, 1854, 1, col. 5). This reference, according to Fredrich, is "mild compared to denunciations to be found in the pages of Der Lutheraner," for example, a characterization of Wisconsin as "New Lutherans" (December 27, 1859, p. 78) and an attack on Wisconsin's intersynodical matters (November 12, 1862, pp. 41-45 and December 10, 1862, pp. 58-60).

<sup>55</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), p. 11.

sanctification, is Lutheran?<sup>56</sup>

John Phillip Koehler's final appraisal of Muehlhaeuser is accurate and generous:

Muehlhaeuser's influence was not along the lines of confessional development which the growth of a Lutheran synod among the Germans of the midwest called for. His aim was directed toward the gathering of souls. . . . So Muehlhaeuser was not the founder of the Wisconsin Synod's confessionalism, nor did he organize it as it developed. But what he represented was no less great, a personal living faith, child-like trust in his Savior, and a burning zeal to build His kingdom and spend himself in the work.<sup>57</sup>

### III

As first president and "Papa" of the new Synod, Muehlhaeuser was bound to imprint his unionistic and Pietistic practice on the church body. Pastors and congregations did not offer a clear confessional signal in their actions. The same pastor served Lutheran as well as Reformed groups at the Lord's Supper. Reformed materials for liturgical and educational purposes were used in Lutheran congregations. Muehlhaeuser himself organized his first church in Milwaukee as an "Evangelical" rather than a Lutheran congregation, and at the dedication of its first church building a Congregationalist preached and a Presbyterian prayed for "amiable tabernacles."<sup>58</sup>

But into the 1850s Muehlhaeuser and other "mild Lutherans" of the synod found themselves contradicted and counteracted with increasing frequency by men with a firmer

---

<sup>56</sup> Quotation from John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod (St. Cloud, MN: Faith-Life, The Protes'tant Conference, 1970), pp. 43,44.

<sup>57</sup> Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 72..

<sup>58</sup> Fredrich, "By God's Grace a Confessing Confessional Lutheran Church," p. 5.

theological stance.<sup>59</sup> Two men can be credited with effecting much of this change in attitude: Muehlhaeuser's successor as synod president in 1860, Johannes Bading, and Wisconsin's first outstanding theologian, Adolf Hoenecke.

Upon receiving his first parish call at Calumet, Wisconsin, Bading insisted he be properly ordained rather than receiving the customary status of licensed pastor. Additionally, he disagreed with Muehlhaeuser concerning the kind of pledge he was to make to the Lutheran Confessions at his ordination. While Bading wished to make a quia subscription, Muehlhaeuser referred to the Confessions disparagingly as papierne Scheidewaende. Bading prevailed, then preached the sermon on the importance of the Confessions.<sup>60</sup> In his first annual report to the synod, in 1861, Bading not only placed strong emphasis on adherence to the Confessions, but also through an essay presented by a Pastor Reim, he demonstrated the confessional stand of the Synod as genuinely Lutheran, both fundamentally and historically. A Pastor Fachtmann delivered a paper on private and general confession, proving the position of the Wisconsin Synod was in agreement with the Confessions.<sup>61</sup>

Hoenecke studied at the University of Halle, where rationalism reigned, yet when he arrived in America there was hardly anything he hated and fought against more than

---

<sup>59</sup> Fredrich, "Lutheran Pietism Comes to America," p. 271.

<sup>60</sup> E.C. Fredrich, "Bading and the Formative Presidency of the Wisconsin Synod," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 72:2 (April 1975), p. 113.

<sup>61</sup> August Pieper, "The Significance of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke for the Wisconsin Synod and American Lutheranism (3rd continuation)," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 33:1 (January 1936), pp. 1-19. Translated by Werner H. Franzmann, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 88:1 (Winter 1991), p. 20.



Pietism, Rationalism and unionism.<sup>62</sup> He spent hours in quiet study of Lutheran doctrine, the Confessions and the writings of Luther. So many Wisconsin Synod pastors, including Muehlhaeuser, lacked a thorough theological training, so he used the newly formed magazine of the Synod, the Gemeindeblatt, to instruct pastors and people in the meaning and the value of the Lutheran Confessions. Hoenecke recognized that the Synod's financial and spiritual ties to Pietistic German mission societies lay at the root of the problem, and took unobtrusive but effective steps toward encouraging the Synod to sever those ties.<sup>63</sup>

During Bading's presidency, events moved quickly. The Missouri Synod undeniably played a role in urging Wisconsin Lutherans toward a more confessional, less Pietist stance, although that role has sometimes been misunderstood or overestimated in later generations.<sup>64</sup> On June 24, 1867 the Synod resolved to dissolve its association

---

<sup>62</sup> August Pieper, "Anniversary Reflections, III: Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, 1811-1887," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 20:3 (July 1923). Translated by R.E. Wehrwein, later revised, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 84:3 (Summer 1987), p. 191.

<sup>63</sup> Pieper, "The Significance of Dr. Adolf Hoenecke for the Wisconsin Synod and American Lutheranism" (3rd continuation), pp. 30,31.

<sup>64</sup> E.C. Fredrich, in "By God's Grace a Confessing Confessional Lutheran Church," accents this ambiguity (p. 7):

Among the influences that helped turn the Wisconsin Synod into a more confessional direction, the Missouri Synod, its publications, and Dr. Walther are frequently mentioned. This too was a blessing God's grace granted Wisconsin when it needed help so badly. Having said this, one may add that the importance of Missouri in Wisconsin's development may well be exaggerated. Twenty-five years ago [1950] when Wisconsin was offering Missouri much unsolicited advice regarding fellowship and unionism, the preface to the lesson usually was the obvious captatio benevolentiae device of suggesting that Wisconsin got so much direction

with the German societies. On June 12, 1868, a decisive struggle led to the departure of the unionists from the Wisconsin Synod. Meanwhile, in November a colloquium had not healed a separation between Iowa and Missouri. On October 22, 1868, Wisconsin and Missouri recognized each other as orthodox church bodies. After years of charges of unionism and false doctrine on the pages of Lehre und Wehre and Der Lutheraner, Dr. Walther wrote in the November 1, 1868 Der Lutheraner, "All our reservations about . . . Wisconsin . . . have been put to shame."<sup>65</sup> On July 10-16, 1872 the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was established at St. John's church in Milwaukee.

With such a resolute change in direction during the first quarter century of its existence, one might suspect that every trace of Pietism was duly removed from the Wisconsin Synod. Some remnants, however, remained.

Those in our midst with greying hair, like the essayist, may recall growing up in homes where use of a regular deck of cards was taboo but Flinch or Rook cards were given a clean bill of health. Several generations of our young people have had troubles with a ban on dancing. Some of our forefathers leaned in the direction of the dictum of the Pietists, "There is no such thing as an adiaphoron."<sup>66</sup>

---

from Missouri in the 1850's it wanted to return the favor in the 1950's. Perhaps that theme was overplayed. Some got the impression that back in the 1850's and 1860's it was almost a heathen mission operation with Missouri in mission and with Wisconsin playing the other role. To mention this is not to deny that blessings came to the Wisconsin Synod via the Missouri Synod. But these were transmitted much more by the example that Missouri was providing in the way of a confessional practice than by instruction in periodicals that was seldom edifying and often misinformed.

<sup>65</sup> Fredrich, The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans, pp. 50,52.

<sup>66</sup> E.C. Fredrich, "After Three Centuries -- the Legacy of Pietism," p. 20.

Orthodox Lutherans would be expected to preserve and promote historic liturgical worship, yet Wisconsin Lutherans have been ambivalent about many of the elements of that worship. Although "salvation" hymns that rehearse the great acts of God's grace and rugged Lutheran chorales have been fundamental to liturgical worship, many Wisconsin worshipers secretly (sometimes openly) prefer the frilly, emotional tunes and sentiments of Pietist hymns, perfected on the sawdust trail of American revivalism.<sup>67</sup> Wisconsin Lutherans are still noticeably "low church" in their worship tastes; in many congregations chanting is taboo, anything other than the black Geneva gown is deemed "too Katholische," and the impending change in hymnal and worship orders is viewed with horror in hundreds of parishes.

We have a strange inheritance, you and I. Theologically we are a long ways removed from Pietism, but, at least in our attitude toward worship, we are all sons of Pietist forbearers. . . . We have inherited from our spiritual fathers, as they did from theirs, a deep distrust of ceremony and ritual. . . . We rightly despise Pietistic enthusiasm and stand constantly on guard lest emotional displays enter our circles and services. . . . [Yet] our Pietistic orientation has made us disinclined to a full use of what impressed orthodoxy on the hearts of Luther's people, that is, ceremony, ritual, art and serious church music.<sup>68</sup>

Possibly the most damaging residual of Pietism lies in the attitude of thousands of WELS members toward the Sacrament of the Altar. Forty years ago E.W. Wendland lamented:

A more serious cause for alarm, however, is the fact that Pietism has

---

<sup>67</sup> James P. Tiefel, "Enduring Emphases in Lutheran Worship," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Pastors' Institute, Fall 1989, II, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> James P. Tiefel, "Enduring Emphases in Lutheran Worship," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Pastors' Institute, Fall 1989, V, pp. 3,4.

left its mark upon our present-day attitude toward the sacraments, which seems extremely difficult to overcome. The deplorable fact that our orthodox church has not succeeded in raising its average communion attendance to more than slightly over twice annually per communicant (cf. 1948 Statistical Report, Wisconsin Synod) is a definite throwback to Pietism, and a far cry from that which Luther preached. A further study will show that many of our customs regarding the sacrament which serve to discourage rather than encourage frequent communion attendance (quarterly celebrations, special confessional services, personal announcement, departure from the regular communion liturgy, etc.) are of pietistic, rather than Reformation origin.<sup>69</sup>

Speaking positively, however, Wuerttemberg Pietists, one of whom was Johannes Muehlhaeuser, had in most cases a high regard for the inspired Scriptures. This high regard was an invaluable asset in helping to shape Wisconsin's commitment to the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of the Bible, and was decisive in leading Wisconsin to believe the central teaching of the Bible, "justification both in the objective and in the individual sense."<sup>70</sup>

#### IV

"History repeats itself," observed Clarence Darrow. "That's one of the things wrong with history." Although 20th century American Lutheranism does not suffer the negative aspects associated with the state church, as Spener experienced in Germany, conditions in the church in this age and on this side of the ocean can become similarly serious, and call for comparable solutions. E.W. Wendland described the kind of malady that can infect congregations and a church body today:

---

<sup>69</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 182.

<sup>70</sup> Fredrich, "Lutheran Pietism Comes to America," pp. 271,272.

Especially in older, more established congregations one is apt to find that the "first love" of the first generation becomes gradually dissipated in the second, third and fourth. Children grow up in the church, as expected of them, become confirmed, and hold nominal membership at least while their elders keep an eye on them. As the church expands numerically, it becomes increasingly difficult to exercise proper discipline in cases of backsliders. Conditions of membership become more lax. Outward growth and success breed a desire for that which is even greater, and you can only be successful, humanly speaking, if you're big. The distinction between true spirituality and worldly-mindedness becomes less and less distinct, until the life and habit of a family holding church membership is ever more identical with that of the unchurched neighbor. In fact, the clamor of the unchurched individual, that "he is leading a far better and happier life than his neighbor, who is a good church member," grows with the years. Eventually people who are possibly quite sincere about the matter feel that a revival is necessary somewhere along the line, lest the church lose its pristine life.<sup>71</sup>

Certainly one of the liveliest commentators on the spiritual health of the Wisconsin Synod has been August Pieper, brother of Franz Pieper, professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary during the first four decades of this century. In 1919 he assessed the health of the body as it neared its 75th birthday:

The spiritual life among us is in the process of diminishing. We have now had the Gospel in its truth and purity in great abundance and power for so long a time, and have accustomed ourselves to this blessing so thoroughly, that we no longer regard it as something extraordinary. This is already the first step toward despising it. We have already begun to make of our entire church life and Christianity a matter of effortlessly transmitted tradition, inheritance, and custom, and thereby to retain the outward form or shell, and to lose the kernel and the essence, that is, the spirit of faith, of love toward God, of fear of God, the spirit of mortification of the flesh and of good works, and the spirit of brotherly love. . . .

Outside of the regular worship service there is little said or spoken concerning the grace of God in Christ among our people. . . . In our Christian homes there is and remains very little of God's Word. . . . In some Christian homes there is no common prayer at all any more. . . . The

---

<sup>71</sup> E.W. Wendland, "Present-Day Pietism," p. 178.

Bible is seldom or never opened. Only the grandmother still prays perhaps with her hymnal; all the rest either leave their hymnal at church, or they put it away immediately after the church services until the following Sunday.<sup>72</sup>

At the 1987 convention of the WELS, a significant memorial concerning spiritual renewal was addressed to delegates. The diagnosis of the eight WELS pastors who drafted the memorial is reminiscent of Spener's evaluation of his church three centuries earlier:

Within the congregations of the synod there are numerous evidences of spiritual weaknesses, such as [poor] attendance at worship services, [infrequent] participation in Holy Communion, [low] enrollment in Bible classes, and [scant] involvement in lay ministry. . . . The 'backdoor' losses are so great that the membership of our synod is basically not growing. . . . Increasingly the impact of a pagan society is causing pain for God's people in the form of many personal, marriage and family problem, and congregations are struggling to administer God's grace to those many members in need. . . . Inadequate staffing, misunderstandings of mission and ministry, impacts of the unbelieving world and other pressures have contributed to many congregations conducting a 'maintenance ministry' rather than an aggressive, growth oriented ministry.<sup>73</sup>

The memorial resolved

that the synod in convention determine that the highest need of our synod at this time is spiritual renewal [and] that under God's hand of blessing we seek the following as fruits of faith: substantially increased participation in worship, reception of the Lord's Supper and Bible classes; broad understanding of God's mission for his church and of ministry, both public and lay; substantially increased ministry on the part of God's saints in service to one another and in outreach to the community; substantially increased financial support for all aspects of kingdom work that are carried

---

<sup>72</sup> August Pieper, "The True Reconstruction of the Church," essay read at the Fifteenth Biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, New Ulm, MN, August 1919, trans. Heinrich J. Vogel, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 62:2 (April 1965), pp. 90,91.

<sup>73</sup> Reports and Memorials to the Forty-Ninth Biennial Convention of the WELS, Northwestern College, Watertown, WI, August 3-7, 1987, p. 270.

on among us, but especially for evangelism and missions; further development of our congregations and synod as a body of Christians who care for and love one another in Christ.<sup>74</sup>

Although the Wisconsin Synod officially repudiated Pietism more than a century ago, and although most Wisconsin Synod pastors continue to maintain "a profound and congenital distaste for pietism,"<sup>75</sup> current conditions in the Synod may lead many WELS members and some of its pastors to consider applying Pietism's remedies to the ailments of this age.

Spener voiced great concern that the clergymen in his time "do not understand and practice true Christianity," that they were "marked by carnal pleasure, lust of the eye and arrogant behavior," and that they preferred controversies and doctrinal polemics to growth in the fruit of faith.<sup>76</sup> Pieper wrote forcefully in the early part of this century about the importance of a rich personal devotional life for pastors.

Walther said time and again that the well-being of the church is dependent on a pious ministry. He never said anything more true. Our effectiveness in winning more souls does not lie in the measure of our learning, the keenness of our understanding, our oratorical ability or debating skills, but in the measure of our insight into the gospel, our faith in the grace of Christ, our dedication to our Savior's concern -- to rescue lost sinners -- and the degree of our personal edification and sanctification. All of that can be acquired only through unceasing prayerful reading, studying, meditating on, understanding and personally appropriating the Holy Scriptures, which offer us the gospel in perfect fullness. . . . We can work effectively in the church only to the extent that we personally live in

---

<sup>74</sup> Reports and Memorials, 1987, p. 271.

<sup>75</sup> Fredrich, "Foreword to Volume 82: The Legacy of Pietism," p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, pp. 44-49.

Scripture.<sup>77</sup>

We American pastors, also we who are German-Americans, with the exception of a few bookworms, study too little. Only too often we are satisfied with what we learned in school. . . . We read a lot, but we don't study. Reading is entertainment, whiling away the time; study is hard work. We so easily become lazy in the study. . . . Most days of the week, we may even leave the Bible unopened on our desk. . . .

In the parsonage, in the pastor's study, in his little den are the sources of the church's strength. If this little den becomes cold and empty. . . , the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. . . . That is the great evil of the church in our day: we pastors and teachers of the church do not study enough, and we pray even less. . . . We make externals the important thing and forcibly dry up our inner, spiritual life. The result is that we become more and more stunted as far as having the Holy Spirit is concerned, our religion becomes a mere formality, and we drag the church down with us into this maelstrom.<sup>78</sup>

A balanced recognition of our spiritual needs means we must not let our aversion to Pietism supply the excuse for neglecting piety in our personal or professional lives.<sup>79</sup>

Although Samuel S. Schmucker was not a great model of confessionalism, his observation is nonetheless true: "Without piety, no man can be a faithful minister."<sup>80</sup>

Spener urged pastors to "beware of invectives and personal insinuations" in discussions over doctrinal disagreements. While we must "take no pleasure in their unbelief or false belief," we "should demonstrate that we consider these people to be our

---

<sup>77</sup> Pieper, "Anniversary Reflections, III: Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, 1811-1887," p. 197.

<sup>78</sup> August Pieper, "Anniversary Reflections, IV: Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, 1811-1887," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift of the Wisconsin Synod, 21:2 (April 1924). Translated by R.E. Wehrwein, later revised, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 84:4 (Fall 1987), pp. 274-276.

<sup>79</sup> Fredrich, "Foreword to Volume 82: The Legacy of Pietism," p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Fredrich, "Foreword to Volume 82: The Legacy of Pietism," p. 4.



neighbors" and "regard them as our brothers."<sup>81</sup> As Richard Balge commented, "This was not liberalism or unionism but wholesome counsel for confessional Lutherans in any age."<sup>82</sup>

In the early part of this century John Philip Koehler authored a long study of legalistic thinking and methodology that tainted the ministry of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>83</sup> He wrote that in the Lutheran churches legalism "manifests itself first of all and primarily in the noisy self-satisfied to-do about pure doctrine."<sup>84</sup>

On account of the Lutheran emphasis on justification and faith it is natural in our midst that exposition of doctrine takes pre-eminence for the sake of the heralding of the gospel. . . . We lay greater stress on doctrine, purity of doctrine. Legalism obtrudes itself here in the form of harping on orthodoxy. Hereby is meant the insistence on the "right faith" where the emphasis has shifted from "faith" to "right". . . . Such insistence on orthodoxy is primarily intellectual, and in the nature of a challenge calling to account, and with an admixture of satisfaction with one's rectitude. This noisy ado about doctrine flourishes on petty parochialism which is opposed to the ecumenical spirit. For that reason it clings to the lees of the letter instead of living in the facts. The end result is traditionalism, which has lost the spirit of language, the spirit of the gospel. There you have legalism, which opposes the gospel and shows that the insistence on orthodoxy during the course of a doctrinal controversy has forsaken the basis of the gospel.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 98.

<sup>82</sup> Balge, "Pietism's Teaching on Church and Ministry," p. 253.

<sup>83</sup> John Philip Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law," originally published in the Theologische Quartalschrift 11:4 (October 1914) and 12:3 (July 1915). Translated by Alex Hillmer and Waldemar Gieschen and reprinted from the Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, August 5-12, 1959.

<sup>84</sup> Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," p. 9.

And in a truly amazing passage, Koehler seems to echo Spener in the attitude we should have toward heterodox Christians:

If I at any time meet up with someone that believes on the Lord Jesus, then the very fact of his faith and that, through his faith, he has become a child of God, member of the body of Christ, becomes the main thing and warms the very heart. To this I will give expression by emphasizing those things that unite us in faith, and not open up with reproach and criticism on those things that still divided us. Intellectualism and the lack of ecumenical sense, each conditioning the other, on the other hand express themselves predominantly in judgment and condemnation. . . . It goes without saying, however, that evangelical sense does not sacrifice truthfulness. Therefore, criticism will not be ruled out, but it will be colored by the Gospel.<sup>86</sup>

In the three-fourths of a century since Koehler wrote those words, the Wisconsin Synod has suffered the Protestant Controversy and the breakup of the Synodical Conference. Possibly as a symptom of resurgent political and patriotic conservatism in this country, some recent graduates of Wisconsin's seminary have exhibited what Koehler would have characterized as "a harping on orthodoxy," as well as a harshly judgmental attitude not only toward heterodox Christians but also toward those Wisconsin Synod pastors and professors they deem less orthodox than they. A select group of conservative WELS pastors have organized a watchdog association called the "Orthodox Lutheran Fellowship," to stalk and expose synodical doctrinal aberrations.<sup>87</sup> At least one member of the seminary faculty has expressed his concern that the Wisconsin Synod

---

<sup>86</sup> Koehler, "Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns," pp. 14,15.

<sup>87</sup> To my knowledge, the OLF welcomes new members by invitation only. To date I have not been extended an invitation. I suspect that the likelihood of my becoming a member of the OLF will be further diminished when it is discovered I have begun doctoral studies at a Lutheran seminary not in fellowship with the WELS.

today has lost to a great extent the spirit Koehler sought to instill in our attitude toward other Christians.

Spener complained that many godly persons were dissatisfied with the sermons they were hearing. Preachers quoted foreign languages "although probably not one person in the church understands a word of them." Pastors seemed more concerned with the artful mechanics of sermonmaking and oratorical flourishes than the life and death results of their preaching in people's hearts and lives.<sup>88</sup>

Ecclesiastical observers would probably characterize Lutheran preaching -- particularly in the WELS -- as tidy, orderly, often unemotional, doctrinally correct, centered in the intellect. WELS pastors, by and large, might even point to these elements as strong suits in their preaching.

It becomes worthwhile to ask whether this style of preaching is most effective for today's congregations. Pietism wished to place a greater emphasis on religious experience and heartfelt faith. Can this be reflected -- within proper balance -- in our preaching?

The sermon is probably considered by most worshipers to be the most critical and important feature of our worship life. We depend on it for inspiration, wisdom, insights into the Word, strength, and applications for daily living. In the past, the model for a good sermon was considered to be classical oratory: flowery language, elaborate, lots of big words, formal, somewhat impersonal, complex, and restrained, half-read from a manuscript.

May I suggest that the kind of preaching needed for the nineties and beyond is somewhat different: personal, intense, eye-to-eye, well-researched and yet down-to-earth, clearly outlined, simple, logical, with real

---

<sup>88</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 115.

applications to real life, talking and thinking out loud with your friends rather than orating at an audience, using all the storyteller's arts, even humor, radiating the joy of being a member of the royal family of Jesus Christ.<sup>89</sup>

It may not be true in anatomy class, but in our worship and spiritual life the head bone is connected to the heart bone.

How important it is that we maintain a healthy balance in our theology, neither overemphasizing nor underemphasizing the role of the intellect, on the one hand, nor, on the other hand, of the emotions!<sup>90</sup>

Pietists emphasized the practical purpose of Bible study. God gave us the Scriptures to nourish life, they insisted, not to provide a textbook for dogmatics. In their view, people could read the Bible for encouragement, warning, and consolation.<sup>91</sup> In his recommendations for the reestablishment of New Testament-style house churches, Spener suggested that persons other than the pastor "would also speak and present their pious opinions" and could "take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning."<sup>92</sup>

In Wisconsin Synod congregations there is a greater demand for practical Bible study on topics related to everyday living. Although the percentage of WELS members who regularly attend congregational Bible classes remains disappointingly low, it has

---

<sup>89</sup> Mark A. Jeske, "Worship in the WELS -- Changing Practices," essay read to the Southeastern Wisconsin Pastor-Teacher-Delegate Convention, Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, WI, June 12, 1990, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "Systematic Theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 87:3 (Summer 1990), p. 220.

<sup>91</sup> Robert G. Clouse, The Church in the Age of Orthodoxy and the Enlightenment: Consolidation and Challenge (St. Louis: Concordia, 1980), p. 94.

<sup>92</sup> Spener, Pia Desideria, p. 89.

increased noticeably in the past decade. Along with a greater demand for Bible study has come the request for different formats in study. Increasing numbers of WELS members want to participate in interactive or small group studies, where the leader assumes more a role of facilitator than authority.

Christian leaders often dream of multiplying the ministry of their church one-hundredfold. Small groups have provided the answer in numerous churches. They have become the launching pad for regular exercise of spiritual gifts both within the Christian community and outside to a world captive in sin.<sup>93</sup>

Church magazines emphasize the value of smaller class sizes with greater interaction among class members:

Noted church growth researcher Flavil Yeakely recently reported these findings about church growth. These observations are based on member interviews and samples from diagnostic studies of some 300 churches, including some that were growing and some that were declining.

Generally speaking, growing churches reflect a balanced program which includes a strong emphasis on good adult Bible study classes, along with strong programs for children and youth. Churches in decline spend more money, time and resources on their non-adult programs than they do on adults.

In growing churches, he observed smaller class sizes and smaller groups in adult classes. In declining churches he found that the trend was toward larger, lecture-oriented classes.

In the area of curriculum studies, Flavil noted a real emphasis on serious 'meaty' Bible study in growing churches. In declining churches the emphasis was on rehearsing doctrine.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Steve Barker, et. al., Good Things Come in Small Groups (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 122.

<sup>94</sup> Excerpt from an article in the Association of Leaders in Christian Ministry Newsletter, reproduced in Teach, November-December 1986, page unspecified.

This has interest produced an inevitable word of warning.

We in the Wisconsin Synod think of ourselves as a doctrinal church, but we are not immune to the tendency [of publishing and studying about self-life issues]. In seminars offered for our laypeople or in congregational Bible classes (and perhaps even in pastoral conferences) which topics are the most popular -- those which are doctrinal or those which are "practical," "personal," and "relevant"? We need to help our people deal with their personal problems in a biblical way, and we need to make initial contact with the unchurched at the point of their personal concerns.

We also need to beware, however, that we are not merely tapping into the deep currents of self-interest and self-realization which are flowing through our culture which are not even religious, let alone Christian. We should not mistake self-interest and efforts at self-improvement for piety and devotion to God's Word.

A Christianity which no longer sees its doctrinal foundation as its chief concern and its doctrinal message its chief "drawing card" is a Christianity which is no longer God's truth.<sup>95</sup>

This desire for lay-led, small group Bible study has also led to outright prohibition of the activity at one of the Synod's colleges.

After hearing reports for some time that students at Northwestern College were prohibited from small group Bible study, I telephoned Reverend Edward Lindemann, dean of students, on March 6, 1991 to ask if these reports were true. Dean Lindemann emphatically affirmed that NWC students are not allowed to gather together in small groups for Bible study.

...

Dean Lindemann shared with me a number of reasons for prohibiting small groups of students from studying the Word together. . . .

1. The Pietistic movement shows that small group Bible study opens the Christian church to spiritual abuses. . . .

3. The spiritual level of a good number of the students at NWC is not of mature enough depth to permit them to study the Word on their own.

---

<sup>95</sup> John F. Brug, news and comments, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 85:3 (Summer 1988), p. 232.

...

6. Small group lay-led Bible studies have the capacity to cause problems in a congregation. False doctrine, destructive cliques and pietism can be fueled by such groups. Small groups at NWC will encourage small groups later in the congregations they will some day lead. . . .

8. This has been a policy of NWC for over a decade. Only one other pastor ever questioned it.<sup>96</sup>

Another WELS pastor has challenged this decision, and offered his reasons:

I believe Jesus' kingdom among us is done a grave disfavor when our future pastors are forbidden to gather together in small groups as brothers to listen to their Father speak with them through his Word. . . .

I acknowledge that small group Bible studies led by NWC students pose some potential problems. . . . However, the solution is not to ban the activity. The solution is to teach spiritual guidelines, to provide some encouragement and accountability, and to assist students in their growth in those areas.

I am concerned that NWC seems, at least in this instance, to prefer to throw the baby out with the bath water because of one or more "bad experiences" with small group Bible studies. . . . A confusion of cause and effect also lies at the heart of assuming that small group Bible study of necessity breeds pietism.

I find it a frightening, if not a chilling indictment of our whole system of Christian education, that the dean of students believes many of our NWC students are not equipped to study God's Word together. . . . The majority of our students have come through the "system." If they lack those tools (after nine or thirteen years of being in our classrooms), our "system requires immediate revamping. . . .

We've made some significant strides as a synod in the area of spiritual renewal. Again and again it has been stressed that spiritual growth is dependent on our contact with the means of grace, notably the Word. But it should also be apparent to anyone that the WELS has severe

---

<sup>96</sup> James A. Aderman, pastor of Fairview Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, in an open letter distributed to the Metro South pastoral conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, April 1991, pp. 1,2.

problems with getting God's people into his Word. We worship less than 50% of our membership each Sunday. Those participating in formal Bible studies are an embarrassing 11%. Doesn't it make sense that, if our pastors have been taught that Bible study is fine but don't go overboard, we're going to see a lack of love for the Word among the people those pastors lead?<sup>97</sup>

Other areas of discussion could certainly be mentioned, but it becomes apparent that Pietism, generated on German Lutheran soil and instrumental in the formation of American Lutheranism, has not been fully repudiated by the Wisconsin Synod. The immorality and religious indifference in our time and place is greater than anything Philip Jacob Spener ever saw in his lifetime, yet it remains the assured conviction of Wisconsin Synod leadership that Spener's answer is not the right answer for us.

No matter how bad the times and the morals get, no matter what lags and failures in sanctification are encountered each day, no matter how much coldness our members show to Word and Sacrament, the answer to the problems is not a resort and return to Pietism.<sup>98</sup>

Pietism isn't the right answer against immorality any more than orthodoxy against false doctrine. As long as they have this heritage and face these challenges, Wisconsin Lutherans will continue to try to strike the proper balance between orthodoxy and orthodoxy, between piety and Pietism.

And the love-hate relationship will undoubtedly continue.

---

<sup>97</sup> Aderman, open letter, pp. 1-3.

<sup>98</sup> Fredrich, "After Three Centuries -- the Legacy of Pietism," p. 21.