

## PIETY VS. PIETISM

A Presentation by Rev. Thomas V. Aadland  
for the Consultation with Representatives of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod  
The International Center/St. Louis, MO  
March 7-8, 2006

Piety [εὐσέβεια or εὐλάβεια] is the attitude of faith and its expression in life which lets God be God. It finds its perfect instance in the life of our Lord, the man Jesus, incarnate Son of God. *"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear"* (Hebrews 5:7). In Gethsemane, in the cry of dereliction on the cross, to his dying breath, throughout his days, our Lord entrusted the whole of his life and his death to God his Father.

The opposite of piety is ἀσέβεια, godlessness, impiety. It is the distinguishing feature of fallen humanity, of whom the Scriptures say, *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."* (Romans 3:10-18, quoting Psalm 14:1-2, 53:1-2; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isaiah 59:7-8; Psalm 36:1).

The most striking statement of the NT – indeed, its most central content – is that God in Christ justifies the ungodly, the impious. *"While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly [ὑπὲρ ἀσεβῶν ἀπέθανεν]"* (Romans 5:6). This is an act which can be made ours not by our own achievement or pretensions at being pious in ourselves, but only through trusting that the death of Christ is for us. Such trust is born of the Gospel. *"And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly [τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ], his faith is reckoned as righteousness"* (Romans 4:5).

In these terms the Reformation may be seen as a recovery of the true, biblical meaning of piety – faith and life in relation to the living God. The Lutheran Confessions affirm that this piety is effected only by God the Holy Spirit, who creates, sustains and deepens faith through the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, God gives the Holy Spirit who works faith when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel (Augsburg Confession, V). True righteousness and godliness in God's sight come from faith and trust when we believe that God receives us into his favor for the sake of Christ, his only Son (AC XXVII, 37).

The nature of its hidden life implies that Christian piety is properly not under the ken of human judgment. That is so because what such piety trusts is not figurable according to the canons of human reasoning. To human judgment the things of God which are to be revered are hidden beneath the ordinary and so will always be seen to be derisible – the manhood of Jesus in the state of his humiliation and servitude, the water of Holy Baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion, the voice which speaks Holy Absolution. The human reason which judges by what is seen will always misapprehend the mysteries of God and so will ask, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" "How can water do such great things?" "How can eating and drinking do all this?"*

Yet Christian piety is properly devoted to the means of grace, which both humble our pride by their lowliness and guard us from despair by the certitude of the divine promise they convey. Such was the piety

of the early church: *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Acts 2:42). God speaks (the apostles’ teaching) and acts (the breaking of bread); the church acts (fellowship) and speaks (the prayers) in response.

This piety is directed not toward itself but toward the honor of God and the lowly ways in which God has chosen to reveal himself and to work salvation in us. This explains why the Bible as a whole is so reserved on the subject. Scripture’s only two explicit references to “piety” in the abstract (in the RSV) are almost wholly negative. Our Lord warns in the Sermon on the Mount, *“Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:1). Charitable giving, praying, fasting are not to call attention to themselves to impress, but are to remain hidden, just as God looks upon the heart and deals with the heart in lowly ways. Peter and John, after the man born lame had been healed in the name of Jesus, disclaim themselves in the following way: *“Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?”* (Acts 3:12).

Christian piety is lived in two dimensions – vertically towards God and horizontally towards the neighbor. This is so because faith in Christ gives piety a particular content, and is a dynamic, active thing, never without fruit. In the moment of justification, the structures of one’s existence are changed – toward God through faith and in substantial reality in love toward the neighbor for whom Christ died. Both dimensions are the work of God the Holy Spirit. The “spiritual righteousness” in the regenerate which fulfills the first table of the Law, is due to the work of the Holy Spirit (AC Apology, XVIII, 9). The new life of obedience is also lived by faith, not in order to gain merit and salvation from God, but simply because service of the neighbor is commanded by God in the second table of the Law, and the child of God wants to please the Father and so render service to the neighbor (AC VI).

If a given person feels they did not get the recognition they deserved for some “pious” act, their piety was misdirected in the first place. The person who lives piously is not conscious of their piety. They are in humility conscious rather of the God who is most at home when he is justifying the ungodly and giving life to the dead. Their life is lived spontaneously, freely, out of joy and gratitude that their sins are forgiven, that their hope is in heaven, and that a significant task has been put in their hand for the good of the neighbor.

The Epistle for Christmas Day announces the appearing of the grace of God for the salvation of all peoples, *“training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds”* (Titus 2:11-14). Grace disciplines us, calls us not to a more slovenly manner of life, but to a higher, nobler standard. The sound, life-bestowing doctrine [τῆ ὑγιαίνουσῃ διδασκαλίᾳ] spoken of in I Timothy 1:10, as also in Titus 1:9, and 2:1 (always with a definite article), changes conduct. Formalism denies this transformative power (II Timothy 3:5). Godliness accords with sound teaching (Titus 1:1). This pattern of life contrasts with the “sick” results of false, Gnosticising teachers. Since its content is the doctrine of Christ, godliness is a gain for eternity, in contrast to the perishing laurels of an athlete, worthy of pursuit (I Timothy 4:7-8; 6:3-6, 11). Specifically Christian piety has reverent regard for the orders of creation, for the exercise of “religious duty” toward one’s family, citizenship, daily work. Toward this are a widow’s children or her grandchildren directed [τὸν ἴδιον οἶκον εὐσεβεῖν] (I Timothy 5:4). Christians are directed to pray for their political leaders (I Timothy 2:2) *“that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.”*

Though Christian piety wholesomely affirms life in this world in contrast to a false asceticism, it is not for that reason absorbed in secularity. II Peter reminds believers to shun the passions of libertinism in light of the coming of the Lord, who, as with Lot, knows how to deliver the godly from trial and from the perishing world in which they will for a time often be vexed and suffer persecution (II Peter 1:3, 6,7; 2:9; 3:11).

Such is the biblical view of piety. A caution must be voiced here, however. Since the sources of this piety are hidden, the motivation of its expression cannot be judged. Even the redeemed cannot judge this (Matthew 7:1). Helmut Thielicke somewhere tells the story of a certain woman regarded as the "black ewe" of the family. She came to a family reunion, and there she sat down to play a hymn at the piano. A relative soon remarked, "Hypocrite!" Thielicke asks, "How does one know?" Indeed, how could anyone know and judge where only God can see? She might have indeed returned as did the prodigal with sincere repentance.

This understanding of piety excludes perfectionism. Measured by the law, all fall short. As Philipp Melancthon wrote: "All the Scriptures and the church proclaim that the law cannot be satisfied. The incipient keeping of the law does not please God for its own sake, but for the sake of Christ. Without this, the law always accuses us. [*Alioqui lex semper accusat nos.*] For who loves or fears God enough? Who endures patiently enough the afflictions that God sends? Who does not often wonder whether history is governed by God's counsels or by chance? Who does not often doubt whether God hears him? Who does not often complain because the wicked have better luck than the devout, because the wicked persecute the devout? Who lives up to the requirements of his calling? Who loves his neighbor as himself? Who is not tempted by lust? Therefore Paul says (Rom. 7:19), '*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*' Again (Rom. 7:25), '*I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*' Here he openly says that he serves the law of sin. And David says (Ps. 143:2), '*Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee.*' Even this servant of God prays God to avert his judgment. Again (Ps. 32:2), '*Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.*' Therefore in our present weakness, there is always sin that could be imputed to us; about this he says a little later, '*Therefore let every one who is godly offer prayer to thee*' (Ps. 32:6). Here [David] shows that even the godly must pray for the forgiveness of sins" (AC Apology IV, 166-168).

Finally, truly pious hearts are intrepid hearts. With the apostle Paul, a pious child of God will say, "*I know in whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me*" (II Timothy 1:12). What has been entrusted to the child of God is God's truth, the pattern of sound teaching. True piety can thus never be doctrinally indifferent. To let God be God requires that one confesses Christ as he is revealed in the sure Scriptures. So did the confessors of the Formula of Concord commend their statement of Christian conviction as the "teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account."

Pietism as a movement within the Lutheran church took root in Germany after the time of the Thirty Years' War, its most classic expression given by Philip Jacob Spener in *Pia Desideria* ("Pious Wishes" or "Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform"), first published in 1675. The movement began in response to recognition of over-intellectualization of Christianity in the pulpits and classrooms of the time and a perceived lack of spiritual life in the state church congregations. Spener lamented corruption in his day – the "irresponsible caesaropapism" of the civil authorities, the formalism and arid intellectualism of the clergy, drunkenness, unscrupulous lawsuits and general lack of charity among the laity. He deplored the reintroduction of the notion of the means of grace as an *opus operatum*, and the offense given by moral

laxity to Jews and papists and other heretics. Spener took hope from passages in the Bible for an improved condition of the church, regarding them as foretelling the general conversion of the Jews and the fall of the church of Rome. He proposed a half dozen measures as steps toward that aim: a more extensive use of the Word of God among the laity, beyond hearing the appointed lessons; the establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood; an increased understanding that Christianity is not mere knowledge but practice; a proper manner of conduct in religious controversies, with an aim of conversion and edification, not disputation for its own sake; improved training of those to be called into ministry, in matters of godliness, not merely correct doctrine; encouraging sermons which edify, their aim being faith and its fruits.

Although the AALC has no specific mention of pietism in its founding documents, some of its congregations have roots in traditions which themselves date back to what might be called a kind of pietism in the manner of Hans Nielsen Hauge of Norway, marked also by the long use of the explanation of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* published by Erik Pontoppidan (1737). In 1962, the former Lutheran Free Church merged with The American Lutheran Church. The LFC did not have a constitution but ordered its life on the basis of four guiding principles, the last of which it styled "pietism."

Pietism to be sure has taken many diverse forms since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, one may speak of common tendencies to it as a whole. With the emergence of these tendencies, one must be concerned for the undermining of true piety by the subjective displacements present within this reform movement. Although we have not the space here to discuss all possible criticisms, nor any in detail, we may indicate a few areas where this is so.

Pietism's programmatic purpose for the reform of the church had a different basis than Luther's. Many attempts to reform the medieval church had occurred before Luther without success. While others attempted to attack outward behavior, the gluttony of the monks, Luther went straight for the jugular – doctrine. Doctrine first, then life follows. So the order of Matthew 7 – first make sure the tree is good, rooted properly, then good fruit follows. Good fruit of wholesome conduct cannot grow on the bad tree of unbelief.

Commenting on Galatians 4:6, Luther writes (1535): "The chief point of all Scripture is that we should not doubt but hope, trust, and believe for a certainty that God is merciful, kind, and patient, that He does not lie and deceive but is faithful and true." But the papists persist in this abomination – not the abomination of scandalous behavior, scandal though that be – but in denying that we are justified by faith alone. Without the assurance that one has the pure and true doctrine of the Gospel, a "monster of uncertainty" [*monstrum incertitudinis*] remains, "worse than all the other monsters." "Let us thank God, therefore, that we have been delivered from this monster of uncertainty and that now we can believe for a certainty that the Holy Spirit is crying and issuing that sigh too deep for words in our hearts. And this is our foundation: The Gospel commands us to look, not at our own good deeds or perfection but at God Himself as He promises, and at Christ Himself, the Mediator. . . And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."

Pietism makes a shift by placing the emphasis on experience over doctrine. Religious experience is substituted for doctrinal integrity. This reintroduces the monster of uncertainty once exorcized by Luther. Not that Spener would at every point agree with those who followed him, especially where they departed from Luther, but the tendencies can still be found at some point, even among the first generation in the Pietist movement.

Spener wrote: “It is to be lamented that in some places congregations are better off where they are under a ruler of a different religious persuasion than are those who live under a ruler of their own religion but experience more hindrance than help from him. The former may have much to endure, yet they may not be altogether prevented from the practice of that which contributes to edification.” Under such conditions, the focus shifted to the experience of regeneration and edification, distinguished from justification. Another way to make the same point is to say that Pietism drew attention to the *fides qua creditur* as common and essential despite differences among the confessions as statements of the *fides quae credimus*.

Easily then, Pietism introduced distinctions among kinds of faith – heartfelt or living faith, as opposed to head knowledge of doctrine. Classes of humanity were identified, as though one could be “awakened” but not yet “converted,” or a “carnal Christian” but not “born again.”

Quite consistently, pietism tends to view prayer as a means of grace. A pamphlet appeared some years ago, within certain Lutheran circles, entitled, “*Can A Lutheran Know for Sure?*” Each of its six sections, except the last, sets forth citations both from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. The final section, however, lacks any reference to what the Lutheran symbols see as the vital basis of personal assurance of salvation, certitude as opposed to false security. Yet this is just the point at which one would expect the quotation from the Large Catechism (LC IV.57), grounding our assurance not in our own prayer life – for prayer is not a means of grace – but in the sure and objective Word of the God who “cannot lie.” It is just this – and only this – which enables Lutherans and all others to “know for sure.”

Pietism generally places the emphasis on sanctification over justification and separates them. Sanctification is seen as “empirical piety,” as visible changes in outward conduct or behavior. It is true that God changes unwilling hearts into willing hearts, and brings about the obedience of faith so that believers begin to delight to please God (FC, Solid Declaration, II 88). But when good works begin to be measured by things indifferent which become marks of Christian faith, then legalism and Phariseeism have come back to take root.

Pietism takes a certain amount of its inspiration from medieval mysticism. These roots in mysticism leave it open to misunderstanding such passages as II Peter 1:3-4 – “*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.*” By understanding γένησθε θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως not as fellowship but as theosis, the mystical union of the believer with Christ is so overstated that the line between creature and Creator is transgressed.

Even as we today address issues in social ethics and face the moral laxity of our culture, we are also surrounded by forms of Christianity descended from Pietism with its subjective displacements. It is needful to beware of false solutions, lest “the child be thrown out with the bath water,” something Spener wanted to avoid. Our need is still the right use of the means of grace, and the application of the Word with the proper distinction in its preaching and use in soul care between law and Gospel.