

Persistent and Deadly “ISMS” – Pietism

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This month I begin a three month newsletter series on three deadly ideas (which I call “isms”) that have afflicted the truth of God’s Word for many centuries – perhaps since the fall into sin. Each newsletter will be a very brief overview. Books could be written on each “ism.” What I have to write will pale in comparison. This month I begin this series looking at *pietism*.

Pietism may be one of the least known of the three “isms” that I will write about in this series. And sometimes pietistic teachings and practices can be treated like a catch-all boogeyman that gets blamed for every falsehood under the sun, and at other times pietistic teachings can skate by unrecognized because they are incorrectly assessed as being harmless (or perhaps even mistakenly viewed as actually being Biblical). And though it has had a particular history with Lutheranism, pietism, though, can infect all branches of Christianity. Though pietism technically didn’t exist until after the Reformation, yet some of the core ideas embedded in pietism were concepts that were vehemently opposed by the Lutheran Reformers (especially Luther). And sadly, pietism still infects the church today as well.

So, what is it? Well, like the other “isms” I’ll be examining in this series, pietism can have more than one definition. My working definition for this article is that pietism is the misuse of piety. See, piety is good. Being attentive to worship & prayer, the Scriptures, and good works are things that should mark the life of a faithful Christian. And the Lord desires that His children in Christ be pious disciples. But pietism turns piety in the wrong direction by making human piety into a source of accessing God or obtaining His favor. The truth, though, is that our piety doesn’t make us any more deserving of God’s forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. In fact, it cannot. But why?

Well, in his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul described the sad state of our fallen and sinful condition. ***“For,”*** he said, ***“we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; 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 have not known.’ ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes’”*** (Romans 3:9-18, ESV).

Well, this certainly doesn’t sound like pious hearts reaching out to God in sincerity, honesty, and earnestness. See, by nature human beings are devoid of piety because our first parents lost the original holy and righteous image that God had given them at creation. They lost it when they forsook their Creator by listening to the devil. For our first mother believed the Satanic lie that it was okay to partake of ***“the fruit of the tree that [was] in the midst of the garden”*** (Genesis 3:3, ESV). ***“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the***

eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3:6-7, ESV).

But see, in our sorry state, we sinners have hope. For ***“[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”*** For because you and I have no holiness of our own, no intrinsic piety, God’s Son become one of us to remove our guilt, defeat our enemy the devil, and suffer our hell and death so that we now have forgiveness, deliverance, and everlasting life with God. And God’s Son Jesus accomplished this by His suffering and dying upon the cross. And rising victoriously from His grave three days later, Jesus now delivers His salvation to us through His Means of Grace - ***“[bringing] life and immortality to light through the gospel”*** in His Word and Sacraments.

See, holiness and true piety come from Jesus Christ who justifies us before God and makes us holy. For ***“God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. And God has chosen the base things of the world and things which are despised. Yes, and He chose things which did not exist to bring to nothing things that do, so that no flesh should boast in His presence. But because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, whom God made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’”*** (1 Corinthians 1:27-31, Modern English Version).

My fellow Christians, you and I have been forgiven and declared holy by our Lord. Yet, He doesn’t want our focus to be upon our piety or our faithfulness or our obedience. Instead of looking to ourselves, the Lord wants us to look to our crucified and risen Savior. Instead of reflecting upon their own glory and piety, Christians ought to daily remember their Baptism into Christ. This means walking in repentance – sorrowing over one’s sin and then trusting in Jesus who forgives by His cross-won salvation that He offers through His precious Gospel.

But see, pietism tempts us to focus upon our own piety instead of upon Jesus our Savior who is the source of true piety. Pietism would have us look upon worship as primarily a human activity instead of primarily as “Divine Worship” (where God is the primary actor giving His gifts). Pietism tempts believers to place themselves at the center of prayer instead of placing God and His promises at the center. Pietism whispers into the Christian’s ear that the feeling and response of the believer (i.e. personal experience) makes God and His Word real. But see, God and His Word are true and effective even if no human emotion is evoked. And faith likewise is real regardless of feelings. Yet, pietism seeks to place feelings in the front seat of the Christian life and God’s Word in the back seat. A very noticeable example can be witnessed in a pietistic worship service as style and emotion are much more in the forefront than are God’s Word and reverence for His sacramental presence among His people.

One of my predecessors at St. John’s, the late Rev. Dr. John Theodore Mueller (who served at Hubbell a little over a century ago), described pietism as follows: ***“In the Lutheran Church the***

Pietists directed the alarmed sinner not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that he might win his way into a state of grace. They also instructed the believer to base his assurance of grace not on the objective promise of the Gospel, but on the right quality of his contrition and faith and on his *feeling* of grace (*Christian Dogmatics*, by J.T. Mueller, Concordia Publishing House, Copyright 1934, pp. 455-56).

My fellow Christians, pietism may be the most subtle of the three “isms” I’ll write about. But the danger is that it is subtle in an insidious way. And it’s been quite active within the LCMS throughout the entire time I’ve served in the Office of the Holy Ministry. I had never heard of pietism before attending seminary, and was a little taken back that a threat that is so active in the church was unknown to me. Once I learned more about it and entered the ministry, its existence became as clear as day.

But this shouldn’t come as a surprise. In the New Testament, the Greek word “eusebeia” is often interpreted by English Bible translators as “piety” or “godliness.” And St. Paul used this word when he wrote to Pastor Timothy: ***“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self... having the appearance of godliness [eusebeias], but denying its power. Avoid such people”*** (2 Timothy 3:1-2, 5, ESV).

See, God told us that false piety would exist in His church and would tempt His people until He returns. But let us not fret. For while pietism is an “ism” that God’s church should beware, yet our conquering Messiah promises to be with His church. ***“What if some [are] unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, ‘That you [God] may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged’”*** (Romans 3:3-4, ESV). For ***“the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever”*** (Isaiah 40:8, ESV).

See You in Church,
Pastor