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God's Glory, Neighbor's Good: The Story of Pietism

DVD Study Guide

Written by Mark Safstrom and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom

This guide is intended as a resource for teachers and pastors to facilitate post-viewing discussion of the 75-minute overview of the history of Pietism. This episode is divided into three main chapters, which have brief summaries provided below. In addition, the questions for these chapters have been further divided into smaller sections, to allow flexibility for viewing in shorter installments and allow greater time to focus on the many people and concepts profiled in the film.

Chapter 1 – “From Wittenberg to Halle”

Summary:

In 1675, the Pietist movement in Germany was energized by Philip Jakob Spener's *Pia Desideria* and his desire to bring hope to Christians in a turbulent era following the Reformation. At that time, Europe was recovering from widespread devastation following decades of religious wars that discredited Christianity. Devotional texts from Johann Arndt and then Spener's program to renew hope inspired many toward holy living. Emphases included reading Scripture, engagement of the whole priesthood, an active faith, tempering controversies with love, strengthening seminary education, and making preaching accessible and practical. From these emphases also came social change, particularly through the educational work of August Hermann Francke, and the inclusion of previously excluded or marginalized groups including women, children, the undereducated, and lower classes. In particular, Johanna Eleonora Petersen, a pioneer leader of women's conventicles, educated and led women and youth in reading the Bible.

Section A (04:38)

Questions:

- What role did international and religious conflicts play in shaping the priorities of early Pietist movements? Are there parallels today between social turmoil and religious renewal?
- Pietists in the 1600s were looking for something they identified as “true Christianity.” What were they looking for? How might people be looking for these things today?
- How did Pietists find inspiration from earlier reformers like Luther? What did they see as unfinished?
- What were the six “Pious Wishes” that Spener articulated in *Pia Desideria*? Which do you most resonate with? How do you practice this in your church or vocational context?
- If you were to articulate a short list of pious wishes for Christianity today, what would they be? Would they include any of the Spener's points?

Section B (13:34)

Questions:

- What were the conventicles? How and why did they develop? Why do you think they were popular? Why were they often outlawed?
- How did the conventicles involve laypeople in new ways? How did they involve women?
- What strikes you about the story of Johanna Eleonora Petersen? How did she break the mold for women in her context? Do you find inspiration in her story for utilizing your own gifts for ministry?

Section C (18:06)

Questions:

- What social issues were most important to August Hermann Francke and the Halle Pietists?
- How did the ministries at Halle expand on those of Spener? Where are there connections? Different emphases?
- How did the Halle Pietists connect education with their plans for reform? In what ways were they innovative for the time period?
- What ways does the story of the Halle Pietists inspire your hopes for creatively addressing social justice issues in your context?

Chapter 2 - "From Halle and Moravia to Herrnhut"

Summary:

The changes in Christian practice inspired by Pietism were life-giving to some but caused suspicion among others. In spite of criticism from within the state churches and society, communities of Pietists continued to carve out space for their unique expressions of faith. Intentional Scripture reading and prayer were hallmarks of their spirituality, as exemplified in the life of Henriette Catharina, the grandmother of Nikolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf. His grandmother's prayer life and dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ influenced Zinzendorf greatly, and he was also inspired by contact with Pietism at Halle. When a group of Christians known as the Moravians sought refuge on his estate in Saxony, this led to the founding of the religious community at Herrnhut. Their communal settlement was radical in its attempts to establish an intentional Christian community that strove to be peaceful, ecumenical, and oriented toward mission. The Moravian tradition represented yet another articulation of Pietism, with its emphasis on experience and counter cultural lifestyle.

Section D (25:50)

Questions:

- What were the goals and priorities of Zinzendorf and the community at Herrnhut?
- How do you understand intentional Christian community? What are the benefits? Risks?
- How did Zinzendorf's conversion experience differ from Francke's? What does this indicate about the diversity of experiences within Pietism? How does the "dark night of the soul" differ from the experience of exuberant joy, and what do each say about the understanding of Christian conversion?
- It can be said that the Moravians "sang their faith." How would you describe your congregation's expression of faith? How else do you compare your tradition with that of the Moravians?
- How did the Moravians engage with social issues?

Chapter 3 – "From Halle and Herrnhut to Scandinavia, India, Greenland, Siberia, and the Americas"

Summary:

The activities begun at Halle and Herrnhut came to have global implications. International contacts prompted exchange with other Christian renewal movements within the British and American contexts, such as with the Methodists. In Lutheran lands, Pietism resulted in a renewed interest in foreign missions, facilitated by the Francke Foundations and at Herrnhut, reaching from Siberia to the North American colonies. As Scandinavia was also Lutheran, Pietism had gradually spread there as well. Through contacts with the Danish monarchy, missionaries from Halle and Herrnhut were sent to places like Greenland, Labrador, and India. These missionary ventures corresponded with European colonization, thus engaging Pietists in complex socio-political dynamics. While often reflecting the prevailing cultural values of their time, there was also critical engagement with issues

like the slave trade, the plight of prisoners, and capital punishment. In Scandinavia, Pietism found a variety of expressions, including notable preachers and clergymen like N.F.S. Grundtvig, Hans Nielsen Hauge, and Carl Olof Rosenius. There were also lesser known people like Maria Nilsdotter in rural Sweden, whose orphanage and school came to have a lasting legacy. A major avenue for women's involvement is exemplified by the Deaconess movement, which contributed to the rise of the modern nursing profession. The great immigration of Germans and Scandinavians in the 19th and early 20th century brought people from many different Pietist traditions to North America, in turn establishing new church denominations that extend the legacy of Pietism down to the present day.

Section E (32:11)

Questions:

- How did Pietism spread beyond Germany? What do you think made it popular? Or practical?
- What inspired the ecumenical spirit of Pietism? Which historical figures gave shape to these exchanges between different Christian groups? Is there anything to learn from here, regarding how Christians today do or do not collaborate with other Christian traditions or denominations?
- In what ways did Pietism manage to cross ethnic, racial, and cultural boundaries?
- What questions does the missionary activity of the Pietists raise for you? For instance, consider the two Moravians who allegedly requested to be "made slaves" so they could evangelize to enslaved Africans on an even footing. Respond to this.
- How ought Christians to reflect on and respond to the complex legacy of missions?

Section F (41:49)

Questions:

- What were the connections between Pietism in Germany and Scandinavia, as well as with Evangelicalism in Great Britain and America? Where is there overlap with Methodism, for instance?
- What was notable about the reading culture of the Scandinavian Pietists? Why were some of them called readers?
- What new social causes did Pietists engage with in the 1800s?
- What are the connections between Pietism and the emergence of democratic practices within congregational life, as well as in society in general?
- What were the "inner mission" movements? How did Pietists, while being critical of state churches, seek to reform them from within?
- How were the Pietists understood as a dissenting movement?

Section G (56:25)

Questions:

- What significance did music have for the revivals? What opportunities did women hymn writers have for influencing theology through their music, for instance?
- How did some Pietists in the 1800s attempt to reform education? What were their goals? What was unique about the folk high school movement, for instance?
- What do the critiques of radical voices like Kierkegaard or Laestadius have to say about what it means to witness to the truth, about conscientious dissent, or suffering? Why do you suppose their critiques were articulated so starkly?
- What was the experience of the Baptists within the Pietist traditions? Why was it such a struggle for them within the state church context to achieve the right to perform baptisms according to their consciences?

Section H (106:14)

Questions:

- How might the international deaconess movement be seen as a result of Pietism? What implications did these nursing ministries have had on expanding the possibilities for women's participation in public ministry and professional service, both originally and in subsequent generations?
- What strikes you about the story of Maria Nilsson? What does her engagement with the social and economic inequalities of her context say about the nature of her faith? What role did education play in her ministry, and how did it connect with broader educational priorities among Pietists?
- How do you see the influence of Pietism in the present day life of your congregation? Where do these stories from Pietism overlap with, or differ from, the overall history of Evangelicalism or other Christian traditions?
- What are your own personal hopes for "better times for the church"? What does the history of Pietism have to offer to contemporary discussions of church life?

Further Reading on Pietism

This list offers a range of options for individual or group study, including historical primary sources, biographies, and scholarly treatments.

Arndt, Johann. *True Christianity.* Translation and introduction by Peter C. Erb. New York: Paulist 1979.

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