

Pietism

By Hilton P. Terrell

Technically, this word refers to a movement in the Lutheran church in the 1600's which stressed personal devotion over formal doctrine and orthodoxy.

My use of it will be broader; I will use it to tag a problem in the North American church (at least) today. Please recall that there is a necessity to have a personal devotion to Jesus Christ. What is lacking is a balance between personal devotion and the fullness of the Great Commission. We have trailed off into a kind of Christian navel gazing, an overweening concern with ourselves in introspection.

God gave mankind a mandate in Genesis – to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it. The “Great Commission” in the last few verses of Matthew’s gospel is the only way that the Dominion Mandate can be fulfilled. We are to seek to convert the entire earth to Christianity and to teach the converts “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”

In North America, about 200 years ago, Christians began to abandon the “subdue the earth and have dominion over it” aspect of our commission and to focus upon saving souls, counting them as saved, then resting in our salvation and in the salvation of others. The gospel was all about us and Christianity soon became all about us. In a sense, Christianity and Christians retreated into psychology. Evangelism became a psychological technology under Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Charles Finney. It was about how to get someone to “make a decision for Christ,” by coming down a sawdust trail in a tent revival or brush arbor meeting and sitting on a mourners bench while an evangelist and others prayed specifically, by name, for the ones sitting there – a form of pressure. Eschatology changed radically in the first half of the 1800's as well, with the rise of dispensational premillennialism. Our hymns moved from praise to God for His attributes, from Psalms, and from doctrines, to testimonies about the rapturous psychological state of our heart.

We have never moved past these fixations of the first half of the 1800's. We have merely refined them. First Billy Graham and then a plague of televangelists have perfected the head-count, bank account evangelism. Christian bookstores bulge with Christian self-help advice: how to make it through your divorce, how to improve your prayer life, how to improve your family finances, and so on. “Heavy” doctrine is tacitly if not actively disdained. We have “doctrine light” and it is stated with a downcast gaze, an apologetic, hesitant tentativeness. “It seems to me that it might be better if Christians were careful about being judgmental. Of course, I could be wrong!”

Meanwhile, the pressing issues of our day pass the Church by. They fly by, not under our radar, but soaring over it. Our radars are aimed inwardly only, not ever up. We are focused on our navels. Christians exist for decades in a congregation and still have not progressed beyond the most basic doctrines. Faced with ethical issues, we are as much at sea as any pagan.

Should a nation invade a nation which has not committed against it an act of or declaration of war?

What is to be done with someone deemed mentally ill who commits a serious crime?

Is Social Security a biblical plan?

Which, if any, of the fertility techniques available today is acceptable to God?

You are a printer by trade. Printing hadn't been invented during Bible times. What, if anything, does the Bible have to say about how you should conduct your trade?

What, if any, is the place of a Christian today in the art community?

Should women be allowed to serve in the military?

These things seem abstract until it is your daughter who wants to enlist in the Air Force, until your printing company receives an order to produce a mailer for a strip club on the edge of town, until you sit on a jury hearing a case of murder by someone alleged to be mentally ill.

Where have our pulpits been? Reviewing the plan of salvation for the umpteenth time. Making sure that we know that salvation is by grace and is not of ourselves. Basics. Good basics. But, it is as if we have lavished two centuries building a foundation and have not started on the superstructure.

I have worked for 30+ years in a profession in which ethical issues are known to abound. I am much more mild a word for the fact that the Protestant Christian church has had an anemic development to guide me in my work. Yet, it seems to me that most Christians have ethical issues at work which they have never addressed. Do you have a biblical grasp of your work? If not, why not?

We sit atop the mother lode of excellent biblical thought from past generations in the form of books now cheap and readily available through the mail. But, they are not easy to read. The language is quaint. What are you reading?

While we have been reviewing, on a good day, the doctrine of election the pagans have been exercising dominion over the earth. They have captured the schools, the universities, the large corporations, the seats of political authority, the news and entertainment media, fashion,

medicine, finance, and law.

You are planted somewhere, in a family, in a job, perhaps in a school. You must have an interior, psychological devotional life. You must know the basic doctrines. But, are you stuck there? Do you not hunger and thirst for righteousness, not only in yourself but in the place where you live? Do you have a vision for dominion over the portion of the earth where God has placed you? Is there some place, beyond your own heart, where you can challenge Satan's illicit dominion?