

“SMELLS LIKE PIETISM”

COMPARING PIETISTIC CONVENTICLES TO MODERN LUTHERAN SMALL GROUPS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WI

DECEMBER 17, 2023

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ABSTRACT

Pietism has been criticized throughout history and one of the main reasons is its use of conventicles. However, there is a growing trend within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) where congregations are starting lay led small groups to retain membership and foster closer relationships. Some argue that this practice is too similar to conventicles and therefore unscriptural or dangerous. This thesis aims to compare Pietistic conventicles to modern small group practices, acknowledging their similarities and differences. In conclusion, I will demonstrate that Pietism can be avoided in small group practices. I will offer a few opinions on why labeling all small groups as Pietistic is an overreaction.

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that Pietism has garnered a bad reputation in contemporary contexts. “In twentieth-century theological parlance, Pietism has been identified negatively as emotionalism, mysticism, rationalism, subjectivism, asceticism, quietism, synergism, chiliasm, moralism, separatism, individualism, and otherworldliness.”¹ These are hardly flattering terms for a theological movement, and perhaps for good reason. Theologians have often found links between Pietism and the Great Awakening and between Pietism and Reformed theology.²

For a term that carries so much baggage, one would assume it would be used cautiously. Too often, however, claims of “Pietism” are attached to any ministerial practice that we do not like or understand. We start saying, “Well, if it looks like Pietism, and if it smells like Pietism, then it must be Pietism!” Suppose we start to condemn practices as pietistic based on what we were told in a conference paper or in a classroom instead of investigating the practice and asking questions about it. In that case, we use Pietism as a scapegoat, not a legitimate concern.

On the other hand, ignoring the strong influences of Pietism is just as dangerous as misunderstanding it. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Emeritus John Brenner says that understanding Pietism is vital in Lutheran circles because “some of the roots of our Wisconsin Synod reach into a background that was mildly pietistic.”³ Because Lutherans have seen

1. Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 10.

2. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 10.

3. John M. Brenner, “Pietism: Past and Present,” 1989, 1.

Pietism's dangers firsthand, we should not categorically ignore claims of its influence. Thomas

Oden notes:

Henry Ford's unforgettable maxim 'History is bunk' captures a characteristically American pragmatic attitude that is deeply ingrained in the group processes movement. There is not only a general dirth of historical awareness... but also a smug self-satisfaction among groups that 'we' have discovered something fabulously 'new'... it is a curious form of modern hubris with astonishing self-assurance, the movement assumes that the only significant moment of history is the present, the last single decade is more value than the remainder of the past century, and that the past century is of infinitely more value to knowledge than all previous centuries combined.⁴

Oden's point should be addressed. Nothing happens in a vacuum. Every movement has roots that need to be scrutinized and discussed; Pietism is no different.

To avoid both the ditch of misunderstanding and the ditch of ignorance, this paper will compare Pietistic conventicles to modern small group practices. This comparison will be accomplished by looking at the structure of early Pietistic conventicles, noting how they developed and formed, the scriptural principles that led the early Pietists like Spener and Francke to promote conventicles, and where Pietistic conventicles found successes and failures. Then, this paper will define the contemporary small group model based on four in-depth interviews of WELS pastors in various stages of the small group process, and published literature concerning modern small groups in evangelical circles. Next, I will acknowledge any similarities and differences between Pietistic conventicles and modern small groups. In conclusion, I will state why it is an overreaction to call all small groups Pietistic and offer my opinions on how Pietism can be avoided by those seeking to establish small group practices in their congregations.

4. Thomas C. Oden, *The Intensive Group Experience: The New Pietism*, (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1972), 58.

DEFINING PIETISM

So what makes “Pietism” so elusive? Some point to “the different faces depending on the time and place of the individuals involved.”⁵ Pietism was a multi-faceted movement with instrumental leaders at different points in history. Attempting to take a snapshot of Pietism is like trying to take a picture of a scenic view from a moving car. The picture almost always turns out blurry and incomplete because of the shifting leaders and emphasis in the movement. A picture of Spener and Franke's Pietism in the halls of Halle University would look vastly different than the Radical Pietism promoted by Gottfried Arnold, who “characterized his historical writing as *unparteyisch*, meaning that his view was not attached to any confession but intent on the true invisible church.”⁶

Another difficulty in identifying Pietism “is that we tend to define religious movements or bodies by the doctrines they teach, and most Lutheran Pietists at least begin by teaching correct doctrine. However, where Pietists went wrong is that they started to “apply ‘correct’ doctrine to the wrong situations.”⁷ Prange gives an example that clarifies how a Pietist might misapply doctrine. “Suppose a student came to you and broke down crying because he had stolen some money, spent it, and now realized that his actions were wrong in the eyes of God... An

5. Brenner, “Pietism: Past and Present,” 1.

6. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 46.

7. Paul T. Prange, “The Effects of the Age of Pietism on the Lutheran Church,” 1991, 1.

orthodox Lutheran teacher would assure the student from the Lord's own words that he was forgiven. Then the orthodox teacher might help the student think of ways to restore the money. A pietistic Lutheran teacher would review the seventh commandment and ask the student to make a commitment never to steal again. The pietistic teacher would be reluctant to let the student know that he was forgiven, because 'that would make it too easy' and 'he might do it again.'⁸ The subtle difference sticks out immediately. Pietism turns a person away from the objective truths of Scripture, such as justification by faith alone, to the personal and more subjective qualities. Pietistic emphasis on feeling and emotion introduces doubt into a Christian's mind, withholds forgiveness, and seeks specific fruits of repentance. In many ways, Pietists resembled Pharisees, who were more interested in outward appearances than repentance of the heart.

A final issue is that, at least in the beginning of Pietism, the main goal was to reform the Lutheran church, not to separate from it. "Believing the first Reformation had bogged down in dogmatics, polemics, and institutional rigidity, the Pietists offered concrete proposals for Bible study, conventicles, and increased lay participation... Pietism fostered no theology of its own; however, the emphasis on practice, exegesis, and mystical appropriation of the grace of God often assumed and represented certain theological presuppositions."⁹ The Pietist's goal was to attack the perceived "dead Orthodoxy" they saw among the Lutherans, not the theology.

Spener's book *Pia Desideria* "was well received by the German Lutheran church, including such strong orthodox theologians as the great Abraham Calov and even the more strident Johann Mayer of Hamburg, who would later become one of Spener's strongest opponents. Within a few years, Spener had received more than three hundred letters of approval

8. Prange, *Effects of the Age of Pietism*, 1–2.

9. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 27.

from teachers and pastors throughout Germany.”¹⁰ In large part, Spener's *Pia Desideria*, which can be translated as “pious wishes,” was accepted by the church, and even encouraged.

However, after a few years, when Calov and others started to see the dangerous practices promoted by the Pietist Movement, the same orthodox Lutherans who acclaimed Spener's work would start to be concerned. Those dangerous practices will be further expounded in the “Defining Conventicles.”

Historical Context Surrounding Pietism

Though it would be convenient to start with Spener and discuss Pietism and conventicles from there, Koester points out that “the more a person studies the Pietist Movement, the more important the background material becomes.”¹¹ Starting with conventicles would lack the proper amount of context necessary for this discussion. Isolating the conventicles may also lead to misdirecting criticism toward the conventicles rather than toward the principles behind Pietism which caused the faulty practice.

This paper does not have enough time or space to discuss every intricacy of the history and context surrounding the Pietistic Movement. However, I will speak about some of the challenging situations in the church in brevity and with the heavy aid of source work.

In Koester's excellent work, he provides eight points that contribute to the historical situation of the church. I will summarize his outstanding arguments here: The first topic that must be addressed is the implications of *cuius regio eius religio*, “whoever's region, so his

10. Robert J. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2020), 122.

11. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 10.

religion.” This state church system might have worked if the princes were godly and solidly Lutheran. However, many princes were corrupt and would govern the church for their political ends. These state-run churches led to a suppression of the spiritual growth of members.¹²

His second point is related. When someone was born into a state church, the church was inevitably plagued by 'nominal' members who had no interest in living out their faith. Some of the Pietists would see the immoral behavior on display and refuse to commune with people they did not see as Christian, let alone Lutheran.¹³

His third topic relates to the Thirty Year's War. The tragedy of the war cannot be overstated. Koester states that the most serious way the church was affected was “a heightened secularization of society, a growing lack of respect for God and the orthodox church, and an increased cosmopolitan outlook throughout Germany, especially in regard to religion.”¹⁴

The fourth and fifth topics Koester raised are closely related. He speaks about pastoral training in the Lutheran church, which had shifted in the hundred years after Luther's death. At first, Lutheran pastors focused on the study of Scripture. However, as years passed, theological training shifted to a philosophical study of Scripture. Koester argued that evidence shows that some universities shifted from the simple teaching of Scripture in the latter half of the 17th century. Preaching, in turn, became more academic, “displaying erudition” more than “grounding people in Christ.”¹⁵

12. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 102.

13. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 102.

14. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 102.

15. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 102.

Koester's sixth topic of discussion centers around the rich devotional life the people were consuming. Devotions from England were translated into German and distributed among the people. Pastors like Johann Arndt¹⁶ "published and displayed devotional material that displayed a mystical bent. Its main goal, at the expense of teaching justification, was to foster the re-creation of the image of God in Christians."¹⁷

Two final topics help to round out the German church's complexities. Koester states that "throughout the 17th century, most denominations experienced renewal movements similar to Pietism."¹⁸ For example, even the Jewish community faced its own "pietistic and mystic" sect in the Hasidim of Ashkenaz. Finally, human reason was replacing the Scriptures as a way to view reality. Whether Pietism caused this or not is up for debate. However, some would state that Pietism was simply the church's reaction to what was happening in the world.¹⁹ As stated earlier, this is a helpful summary for this study, but for a more nuanced view, please read Koester's insightful book which lays out the context in greater detail.

These eight points help to show the issues affecting the church in the 17th century while also forming a framework for our discussion of Pietistic conventicles.

16. Coincidentally, Arndt had a significant influence on Johann Gerhard and John Phillip Spener. Spener's *Pia Desideria* was initially published as a preface/introduction to one of Arndt's devotional books and was later published on its own due to its popularity. Gerhard, a sickly child, was visited by Arndt in the hospital.

17. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 102.

18. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 103.

19. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 103. As noted earlier, this is a helpful summary for this study, but for a more nuanced view, please read Koester's insightful book that lays out the context in greater detail.

DEFINING CONVENTICLES

Throughout the German Pietistic Movement, conventicles took on many different forms, with some groups of students meeting together after class to discuss Greek and Hebrew, others gathering together for catechesis instruction, and still others joining to commune outside of worship, there can be difficulty in defining such a shifting practice.²⁰ This paper will follow this specific definition of conventicles: A group of people who gathered together outside of worship, with the expressed desire of keeping one another accountable to goals for personal growth in faith, intending to practice the Scriptural principle of the universal priesthood. This section will show how the conventicles started, how they were successful, and where abuses to this system appeared.

Another limitation of this study is that much of our information about Pietistic conventicles has been collected by Pietism's opponents, such as Neumeister and Loescher. However, from the writings against Pietism and quotes from Spener's *Pia Desideria*, we can accurately identify the strengths and abuses of Pietistic conventicles.

Conventicles Conception

20. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 120.

The first conventicles happened almost by accident. In 1670, some members were upset at the kind of conversations that were taking place in and before worship. They went to Spener and asked if they could start meeting together to encourage holy living. Spener obliged and even decided to host the gatherings at his own house, so that they could avoid suspicion of wanting to separate from the rest of the church.²¹ Koester states that “the immediate impetus for meetings came from a sermon in July of that year when Spener preached on Matt 5:20: ‘For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.’ In that sermon, he described Christianity as practiced in Germany as lukewarm.”²² These sermons, as well as Spener’s urging of members to gather for mutual encouragement, set a fire under lay members that could not be quenched.

This was not a ministry plan carefully developed by Spener. Rather, the sermons and suggestions he made slowly snowballed into a completely different practice. Spener’s first group, headed by Schuetz “did not seem to cause division. This can be explained by the fact that the purpose of the first group was not to serve as a leaven for the rest of the congregation... but to provide an opportunity for pious conversation.”²³ The initial group, which was made up of about five people, started to grow. By the end of 1675 there were over fifty people attending, and by 1682, the group was so large that they needed to meet in the church.²⁴

It is hard to tell when the conventicles had a turning point, but they slowly became more sinister in nature. Instead of being a place where members could grow in their faith, members of

21. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 120.

22. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 120.

23. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 148.

24. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 121.

conventicles started to look at the sinfulness of the people around them who were not in conventicles. Instead of acting as a leaven (which Spener would often call the groups, intending for them to help the other members grow in their faith) they “wanted to keep their group segregated from the rest of the congregation— open only to who asked permission to join and were clearly intent on growing in piety.”²⁵

Spener eventually had to speak out against the conventicles that were rapidly spreading throughout the German churches.

In accordance with the original purpose, these conventicles were to supplement and not supplant the regular church services. The Lord’s Supper was forbidden in the private gatherings. In spite of this, conventicles soon gave rise to movements toward separation.... By 1703, in spite of the official approval of the *collegia pietatis* held in churches, Spener had grown cautious. He seriously questioned the value of introducing such meetings and consequently established no conventicles in his own ministry either in Dresden or Berlin.²⁶

When Spener, who formed and promoted conventicles began speaking against them, it should have warned others to take the abuses seriously. However, the abuses in conventicles would continue to grow.

Though Spener started the conventicles, they quickly spiraled out of his control. In the next section we will examine in greater detail the specific abuses that occurred.

Scriptural and Confessional Motivations for Conventicles

25. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 149.

26. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 61–62.

A challenging aspect of defining Pietistic conventicles is that they had some solid theology on their side. In the next portion of the paper, we will examine some of those principles that led to the formation of conventicles, both Scriptural and Confessional.

Priesthood of All Believers

Spener argues that trying to assign all spiritual work to the clergy would be a Roman Catholic abuse.

It was by a special trick of the cursed devil that things were brought to such a pass in the papacy that all these spiritual functions were assigned solely to the clergy ... and the rest of the Christians were excluded from them, as if it were not proper for laymen to diligently study in the Word of the Lord, much less to instruct, admonish, chastise, and comfort their neighbors ... the consequence has been that the so-called laity has been made slothful in those things that ought to concern it; a terrible ignorance has resulted, and from this in turn, a disorderly life.²⁷

Spener wanted to ensure that lay members would take ownership of their faith by studying the Word of God and living out their Christian lives. As far as Spener was concerned, equipping members for service was perhaps the best way to achieve that goal. By allowing the laity to read, study, and apply God's Word in their lives, Spener hoped that members would naturally start putting their faith into practice. Perhaps members would start teaching in their homes, confronting their neighbors when caught up in sin, and overturning the lackadaisical attitude toward faith that had run rampant in the church.

Spener's ideas do not lack scriptural support. Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9 NIV). God calls his own

27. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Fortress, 1964), 93.

to proclaim his name. The ministry is not a gift that God has given only to called workers of the gospel. Through his tremendous grace, God chooses to work through all his chosen people to bring them to repentance of their sins and to light in the gospel.

Pietists not only had Scriptural reasons for starting up conventicles, but

The early Pietists espoused continuity with Luther and reform orthodoxy. Pietist writings were replete with quotations from the father of the Reformation, with special emphasis on the young Luther's use of personal pronouns and his description of faith as a dynamic force which works through love... teachers represented the reform party, which had deplored many departures from Luther and advocated reforms such as increased lay participation and greater knowledge of Scripture, concerns which were later formulated by Spener in his *Pia Desideria*.²⁸

The Pietist's idea of conventicle was a certified Lutheran concept. Luther wanted to put Scripture into the hands of the laypeople; the Pietists would argue that they were following Luther's lead. Melancthon states in the AC V, "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel."²⁹ Pietists would still argue that the Holy Spirit was doing the work; they now could live out their faith by studying with one another.

In *Pia Desideria*, Spener's comments show that he views ministry as a collaborative effort. He does not see ministry functioning to its highest capacity with a sole leader in the congregation. He writes,

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 older

28. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 17.

29. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 40.

brother, has splendid assistance in the performance of his duties and his public and private acts, and thus his burden will not be too heavy.³⁰

This quote demonstrates the Pietists' desire to take ownership of the church's ministry and to work alongside their called pastor.

It might be helpful to note that the priesthood of all believers is more than participation in the public ministry of the gospel. Of course, we are all called to share our faith; even if it is not our primary occupation, it is one of the roles God has given to believers in which we faithfully participate. However, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers also includes being able to access the Father directly in prayer through the intercession of his Son (Heb 7:25). Laity can organize works of service in the church. God does not say that as members of the priesthood of all believers, we all need to be full-time ministers of the gospel (Eph 4:11–14). We are still called to serve in our various vocations, and one gift is not more important than another. Instead, all these gifts make up the body of Christ.

Pietism's mistaken overemphasis on the priesthood of all believers resulted in problems in the church. Members of the conventicles began despising the pastoral office. They started conducting services outside of regular worship times in their own homes. They communed outside of worship without a pastor present. Pietistic conventicles turned into a "church within the church." Disunity ensued and consciences were burdened.

We confess in AC XIV, "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call."³¹ This article does not invalidate the priesthood of believers. However, even the early Lutherans recognized

30. Tappert, *Pia Desideria*, 94.

31. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 46. The brackets were included by the editor.

that the public ministry was established by God for the purpose of order and unity. Opponents of Pietism saw the conventicles as abuses of the public ministry for several reasons. These abuses are highlighted by Erdmann Neumeister, one of the early opponents of Pietism.

He [Johann Heinrich Reiss] praises the *Collegia Pietatis* far beyond the mark and suggests that they often produce more benefits for Christians than the sermons which happen in good order. §19. Such excessive praise indicates well enough what went wrong in secret among the so-called *Collegia Pietatis*. In particular, the regular sermons were despised, and an inordinate gathering was introduced. Experience has shown that after the outbreak of these conventicles, the public divine service (*Gottesdienst*) has been attended much less than before. For this reason, Pietism cannot be from God since God is not a God of disorder (1 Cor 14:33)... They gather a *Collegium* weekly in which anyone is free to stand and speak about this or that passage of the Holy Scriptures and offer his ideas.³²

Neumeister's opinion was that conventicles introduced a despising of called public workers as well as a deemphasis on the Lutheran divine service. "Already in 1675, members of Spener's *collegia* declared that most of the Frankfurt clergy were unworthy of their office."³³ Even if this was the case, the Pietists went about this in the wrong way. They separated from the church entirely, instead of speaking directly to the individual pastors who were abusing their position of authority. Though Spener wanted to reform the Lutheran church, he inadvertently made separatists from the rest of the congregation.

Accountability and Spiritual Growth

The other Scriptural motivations for conventicles are rather simple to understand. With the lack of piety seen in the church and in the world around them, Pietists wanted specific advice when it

32. Erdmann Neumeister, *Priesterliche Lippen*, trans. Isaiah Duff (Hamburg, 1730), 6.

33. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 131.

came to growing in their faith. These groups provided opportunities to have accountability partners as they continued to learn more about God's Word.

Once again, these ideas are not without Scriptural support. God encourages his people to be built up and encouraged in their lives of faith. Passages like Heb 10:24–25 remind us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” First Thessalonians 5:11 tells us, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” Koester notes that Spener himself would “quote 1 John 3:18: ‘Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth,’ and he then says, ‘if we judge by this mark, how difficult it will be to find even a small number of real and true disciples of Christ among the great mass of nominal Christians.’”³⁴ The goal of Pietists was to become true believers. However, the Pietists overemphasized personal spiritual growth by focusing on individual effort rather than by focusing on the one who motivates proper growth, Christ.

Valentin Ernst Loescher takes a scalpel to this specific abuse. Perfectionism was running rampant among the Pietists. Though the perfectionist streak was not specifically tied to the conventicles, these tendencies started to creep into the Pietist movement. Though Loescher often attempts to find common ground with Pietists, in this case, he speaks as bluntly as possible. “They have all too firmly imagined that they do GOD a service when they, under the good name of the possibility of active Christianity, push the matter too far and teach an absolutely necessary and possible perfection. This is based not in fact, but in their imagination. This goes beyond what is written. This must produce either spiritual pride or desperation, according to the different

34. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 123.

working of the minds, and will finally ruin the saving doctrine and good doctrinal style.”³⁵

Loescher was most concerned about the consciences of those caught in the crossfire of pietistic perfectionism. The Pietists were convinced that achieving perfection was not only possible but necessary for any who wanted to enter the kingdom of God. Pride and despair followed. Pride for the one who was secure in his or her own works; Despair for the one who feared he or she could never do enough for God. Consciences were left burdened or wrongfully built up.

The other problem that arose out of this spiritual growth movement was the idea that some Christians were better than others. “In the summer of 1675, Spener started using ‘the phrase *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (little churches within the church) in letters to his fellow pastors and friends, a phrase which he also later used publicly. This was the classic phrase used in Pietistic church reform. It denoted the gathering of the pious within the church.’ In the context of a desire for church reform, such groups could not be anything but divisive.”³⁶ While Spener may not have intended to create little Pharisees, that is exactly what unfolded.

He [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 ... 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.³⁷

Despite the benefits and scriptural principles behind the conventicles, Pietistic conventicles often caused more harm than good.

35. Valentin Ernst Loescher, *The Complete Timotheus Verinus*, trans. James L. Langebartels and Robert J. Koester (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2006), 233.

36. Koester, *The Spirit of Pietism*, 150.

37. Brenner, “Pietism: Past and Present,” 3.

WALTHER'S EXPERIENCES WITH PIETISTIC CONVENTICLES

An interesting touch point to note between the conception of conventicles and the modern small group practices, C. F. W. Walther was involved in conventicles in his early years before migrating to America. In his series of evening lectures, Walther talks about his experience before and after attending conventicles. Two centuries removed from the start of Spener's conventicles in Germany, Walther gives a unique perspective of the benefits and dangers that are involved in the small group process.

Walther's Collegiate Experience With Pietism

After college Walther himself confessed, "I was no outspoken unbeliever, for my parents were believers.... When I entered the university, I did not know the Ten Commandments by heart and could not recite the list of the books in the Bible. My knowledge of the Bible was pitiful, and I had not an inkling of faith."³⁸ The effects of secularism in the colleges and universities likely played a role in Walther's lack of faith. "All of my associates were unbelievers; so were all my professors, with the exception of one, in whom there seemed to be a faint trace of faith."³⁹ The future president of the Missouri Synod and one of the greatest confessional Lutheran minds in

38. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 141.

39. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 141.

the United States, did not even know the Ten Commandments when he entered into the university. So what changed?

Walther states, “Not long before my arrival, he [Walther’s brother] had joined a society of converted people. Upon my arrival, he introduced me to this circle of Christian students... I began to like the company of these Christian students so much that I gladly attended their prayer meetings.”⁴⁰ Because of budding friendships in these Christian groups, Walther started to study, learn, and read God’s Word with such fervor, that in a short time, “I had really become a child of God, a believer who trusted in His grace.”⁴¹ It would not be unfair to say that Walther came to faith, of course by means of the gospel, but partly because of his run-in with Pietism in the universities.

However, the conventicles, which served as a spark to light his heart on fire with the gospel, quickly became a dampener for his faith. After about six months in the conventicle, Walther explains that “an old candidate of theology, a genuine Pietist, entered our circles... Now this candidate who came to us said: ‘You imagine you are converted Christians don’t you? But you are not. You have not yet passed through any real penitential agony.’”⁴² This burden weighed on Walther’s heart and made him question if he was really a Christian. He asked the Pietist what he must do to be saved. Instead of pointing to the grace, mercy, peace, and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ, the Pietist “prescribed a number of things that I was to do and gave me several books to read... the further I got in reading the book, the more uncertain I became whether I was a Christian. An inner voice kept saying to me, ‘The evidence that you

40. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 141.

41. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 141.

42. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 142.

have the requirements of a Christian is insufficient.”⁴³ That dark time in Walther’s life serves as evidence for some of the dangers of Pietism. This Pietist had no intention of pointing to Christ. He pointed to the subjective experience of a Christian. He turned Walther to what he must do and how exactly to go about accomplishing his goals. That emphasis on the subjective fails to give any sort of comfort. Thankfully, that was not the end of Walther’s story.

Walther started to despise the gospel. He loved reading books that told him what an awful sinner he was and hated hearing about the the gospel and faith.⁴⁴ Eventually, Walther came across “a man who was reported to be a real spiritual physician. I wrote to him with the thought in my mind that if he were to say anything about the grace of God and the gospel, I would throw his letter in the stove. However, his letter was so full of comfort that I could not resist its arguments.”⁴⁵ The gospel took hold of Walther’s heart. The objective truths of God’s Word, found in John 3:16, Isa 53:4–6, 1 Tim 1:15, Rom 8 and so many passages of Scripture, give comfort to the Christian who thinks that he or she is not enough. These passages direct the attention off of the sinner and what he or she *must* do and put the emphasis on what has been done for him/her on the cross through Christ’s holy and precious blood.

Walther’s evening lectures are dedicated to a proper distinction between the law and gospel, something that Pietist failed to do while he spent time in the conventicles. Yet, Walther’s time in the conventicle illustrates a powerful point. Christians must be wary of false doctrine which can easily infiltrate the church. This experience with pietistic beliefs would not be

43. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 142.

44. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 142.

45. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 142.

Walther's last interaction with conventicles. In the next section, we'll note the Pietistic movements that entered the church in the United States.

Walther's Experience with Pietism in the States

Even after migrating to the United States, the Lutheran church continued to face the spirit of Pietism in conventicles. It was a consensus that since the church (Missouri Synod) was so small and had already faced problems in establishing the church body, it would be easier to leave the religious gatherings back in Europe. In fact, David Zersen, one of the authors of *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, wrote that Martin Stephan, who was a huge proponent of conventicles in Germany, could not even start "the semblance of a religious gathering."⁴⁶ It was the expressed intention of the Lutheran church to "lead these people [their congregants] in the right direction, not to allow the heterodoxy of the multitudes to color the church's instructional position. There may have been some fear that conventicles provided too open and free an atmosphere in which to deal with doctrine."⁴⁷

It is worth noting the situation of the church during this time. The Missouri Synod was in desperate need of stability. In 1841, the synod was formed, and Walther's writings often centered around the office of the holy ministry. Pastoral oversight was already thin on the frontier, so there was no need to introduce conventicles. However, some people believed that small groups should be a priority.

Two lawyers who participated in the emigration, Dr. Carl Vehse and Dr. Franz Marbach, shattered by the confusion which had come at the hands of spiritual leadership,

46. David John Zersen, "C. F. W. Walther and the Heritage of Pietist Conventicles," *Concordia Hist. Inst. Q.* 62.1 (1989): 21.

47. Zersen, *Heritage of Pietistic Conventicles*, 21.

reemphasized the priesthood of all believers. Vehse averred that, ‘as spiritual priests, laymen had the right to judge all doctrine and to supervise all the activities of the clergy’.... This pressure caused C.F.W. Walther to devise a church polity which recognized the role of the laity in matters of church government as well as doctrine.... The working relationship between pastor and people soon reverted to a very paternalistic order in which the laity was decidedly subsidiary and secondary to the *Herr Pastor*. Thus, not only was it unlikely that the laity would have had any opportunity to minister to the pastor, but it was also just as unlikely that the clergy would have granted the laity any opportunity to minister to one another. The clergy reserved the role of ministry for itself.⁴⁸

It is difficult to criticize Walther for his stance against conventicles in the States. In the first instance, he had personally experienced the abuses of Pietistic conventicles. In the next case, the young synod had the potential for dangerous theology to be spread. Upholding the emphasis on the proper public call into the ministry of the gospel was important. Then and now, the question arises whether a Confessional Lutheran congregation can and should promote small groups within their own midst. The next section of this paper will explore modern small group practices and attempt to answer this important question.

48. Zersen, *Heritage of Pietistic Conventicles*, 21.

METHODOLOGY

To accurately compare Pietistic conventicles to modern-day small groups, most of my research in the second half of this paper consisted of in-depth interviews. Before starting my interviews, I spoke with Donn Dobberstein, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Director of Discipleship. He provided me a list of ten pastors representing five of twelve synod districts using small groups⁴⁹ for various spiritual, social, or service-related purposes. In this list of ten pastors, five were from what he perceived as more non-pericope-based in worship and five he perceived as more pericope-based in worship. One of the pastors interviewed was from a more non-pericope-based worship style; two were from a more pericope-based style. Pastor Dobberstein did not suggest the last pastor I interviewed, but in conversations with close friends, his name came up as someone I might want to speak to concerning small groups.

Each pastor was initially contacted via email. I introduced myself, gave my reason for contacting them, and asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed for my thesis project. As each person replied and agreed to be interviewed, I scheduled a time for the interview and sent them two documents: an “Informed Consent Form” and a questionnaire, which I told them would form the interview structure. The Informed Consent Form introduced the interviewee to the researcher and the researcher's project by summarizing the purpose of the thesis. The interviewee was informed that his information may be shared in the thesis project.

49. Also called connect groups, life groups, faith groups, growth groups, etc.

The form asked each interviewee for two permissions. The first permission request was for the researcher to use the interviewee's name in the project. The alternative was for the interviewee to remain anonymous while allowing the researcher to use the information provided in the interview. The second permission request was for the researcher to record the conversation. Each permission request was completely voluntary. All interviewees permitted me to record the interview, and all the interviewees permitted me to use their names in the project. Each interviewee signed and dated the form. A blank copy of this Informed Consent Form distributed to interviewees is found in Appendix 1. Each interviewee was also sent a questionnaire in advance. They were told that it would serve as a guide for our conversation and that I was not expecting them to have something written down for each answer. A blank copy of this questionnaire is attached to Appendix 2.

I wanted each interviewee to have an opportunity to read through the questions and think about their answers. The purpose was to increase each interview's productivity and efficiency. All the interviews lasted an hour at maximum. One of the interviewees expressed appreciation for receiving the questionnaire in advance and said he was glad to think about the issues and write notes down before speaking with me. All the interviewees, had the questionnaire in front of them, and it appeared as though the majority had, if not taken notes, at least given careful thought to the questions ahead of time.

Two interviews were conducted via Google Meet, one in person and one via phone call; all were conducted one-on-one. I used an app called VoiceRecorder-VOZ to record the in-person interview and the phone conversation. The Google Meet interviews were recorded in the app. Then, each interview was downloaded and moved to an app called GoTranscribe. For an hourly rate, GoTranscribe made my conversation available immediately, which saved time and helped

me to stay present in my interviews. After each call, I would spend about an hour reviewing the footage, fixing any minor mistakes that GoTranscribe had missed, highlighting pertinent quotes, and commenting on unique observations.

Limitations of In-Depth Interview

Certain limitations in this study are worth noting. By nature, this kind of research is highly anecdotal. Four case studies do not translate one-to-one to every congregation. One might also argue that it does not constitute a synod-wide trend because four congregations have found some success in small group Bible studies. While that is true, the purpose of this paper is not to state that every congregation should drop whatever ministry they are pursuing to try out small groups. Instead, these interviews will help determine what trends are in our synod, show some of the intricate details of small groups, identify common patterns, and accentuate differences between those standard practices and Pietistic conventicles.

One might also assert that this is too small a sample size to have an accurate pulse on the current practices of small groups. While that may be true, it would have been impossible to interview every church pursuing small group ministry due to time constraints. However, I hope to show that careful thought went into identifying these four pastors. My goal was to interview pastors at different stages in the small group process, pastors in various districts, pastors with dissimilar congregation sizes, and pastors with diverse small group methodologies. Below, I will describe each pastor's situation, noting their district, congregation size, and current stage in the small group process. Ideally, this will demonstrate how small groups can excel in many circumstances and validate my selection of these pastors.

Pastor Caleb Free is a 2013 graduate of WLS (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary). He was assigned to a new mission start in Dothan, Alabama, but after three years, the mission was defunded. Pastor Free had no experience with small groups in Dothan. Then, in 2016, he received the call to Risen Savior Lutheran Church at Lakewood Ranch in Bradenton, FL. When he started in Bradenton, the core group was about forty people. In six years, they have grown to be a congregation of about three hundred and forty.⁵⁰

In Bradenton, Pastor Free started small groups at the request of a lay member who had spent a few years attending Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. About twenty-five percent of the congregation participates in their small group ministries.

Pastor Joe Lindloff, a 2016 graduate of WLS, served until 2023 in Irmo, South Carolina. Hope Lutheran Church in Irmo is a mid-sized congregation in the South Atlantic District. For Pastor Lindloff, lay-led small group studies started almost out of necessity. Many members traveled anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour away, and he wanted to give congregation members a chance to gather outside worship of worship a little closer to home. With the help of their staff minister, a monthly, lay-led Bible study began in several locations around Irmo. Pastor Lindloff recently accepted a call to Marquette, MI, a new mission start, and is considering starting small groups there.⁵¹

Pastor James Hein was likely the most passionate person I spoke to about promoting small groups. Pastor Hein's passion around small groups has led him to present on the topic at WELS leadership conferences.⁵² Pastor Hein was assigned to Rochester, MN. For several years

50. Caleb Free. Interview by author. Google Meet. November 7, 2023.

51. Joseph Lindloff. Interview by author. Phone Call. November 11, 2023.

52. One of Hein's presentations on small groups has been published on Facebook and is worth watching. You can find it at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=SEO----&v=508461906700126>.

in Rochester, Pastor Hein started small groups from the ground up. After serving faithfully there, he received a call to St. Marcus in Milwaukee, WI. St. Marcus already had a few groups meeting together outside of worship, but he has helped enhance that portion of St. Marcus' ministry.

His comments were critical to this paper's findings for several reasons. On the one hand, he has valuable insights concerning starting small groups with a congregation with little experience in the small group process. However, he also has experience in enhancing existing small groups. He has experience working with both mid-sized congregations and large congregations. Finally, his thoughtfulness concerning the small group process and his many years of experience certainly shone throughout our discussion.⁵³

Pastor Alex Groth, a 2011 graduate of WLS, has faithfully served the souls of Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, for twelve years. His experience with small groups is different from any other on this list in that they meet only occasionally. However, his comments were still highly insightful. Pastor Groth mentioned that every three years, there would be a kick for small groups to start up again. Members, for the most part, would meet at the church and separate into various groups, some led by the pastor, others led by lay members. Pastor Groth is included in this discussion because this may be the more common exposure many WELS members have when it comes to small groups.⁵⁴

These four pastors were instrumental in this study. Hopefully, by seeing the variety of mission settings, readers can come away with three conclusions:

1. These small groups take on many forms.
2. Small groups have the potential to succeed in a variety of settings and congregations.

53. James Hein. Interview by author. Personal Interview. November 14, 2023

54. Alex Groth. Interview by author. Google Meet. November 10, 2023.

3. Despite the small sample size, these four pastors provided accurate and noteworthy data.

MODERN SMALL GROUPS

Like Pietistic conventicles, modern small groups can take a variety of forms. Some small groups advertised by congregations are centered on providing opportunities for people to fellowship outside worship. For example, a 20s and 30s group, morning basketball group, or senior group could be considered a small group. However, while beneficial, this kind of small group differs from the small group the early Lutheran Orthodox movement spoke against in Pietism in that they do not meet outside of worship to study God's Word. The expressed purpose of this type of small group is fellowship, not worship or study. For that reason, these will not be a part of this research.

Technically, a Sunday or Midweek Bible Class could be defined as a small group. They are a group from the congregation meeting to study the Bible outside of regular worship hours. However, while these small groups may experience many of the same qualities as Pietistic conventicles, Sunday and Midweek Bible studies are typically led by pastors or staff ministers. Pietistic conventicles were not usually led by called ministers of the gospel. As noted previously, one of the drawbacks of Pietistic conventicles was their contempt of called workers and a deemphasis on the means of grace. Because Midweek and Sunday Bible studies are less likely to adopt Pietistic tendencies due to the presence of a pastor and the primary focus on the Word of God, these will not be considered small groups for our discussion.

To avoid confusion, the functioning definition of modern small groups for the rest of this paper will be as follows: A lay-led group of congregants who gather outside of regular worship hours to study the Bible.

Scriptural Basis for Modern Small Groups

The scriptural basis for modern small groups is almost identical to Pietistic conventicles. The first of which is, of course, the priesthood of all believers. Pastor Hein had this to say, “ it's very, a very Lutheran concept, you know, that we're going to empower the laity with Word ministry. But confessional Lutherans have been really opposed to it for 100 years. It's just this bizarre incongruence.”⁵⁵ As we have discussed, even though there may be more factors in view (namely, Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession), his point stands. If we categorically condemn small groups, then we could also be speaking against a fundamental Lutheran doctrine.

Thinking about the danger of false doctrine being spoken in a small group setting, Pastor Hein continued by pointing to Acts Chapter one.

The quintessential example in the Bible of that posture is Jesus in Acts one. I take people through Acts 1:1-11, and we read through what the disciples' last recorded comments were before Jesus ascended into heaven. He tells them about how he's going to come back. And they say, “Lord, is it at this time that you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Very clearly they're insinuating some kind of political deliverance for the nation. What I then ask the people in the in the presentation is, okay, so what would we call that? The very last thing that the disciples say to Jesus is what we would call false doctrine. So literally, the last thing they say. He spent three years deprogramming the idea of a nationalistic messiah, you know, and they [the disciples] said the last thing they say is false doctrine. So I'm like, if the concern is to do small groups, is somebody is going to say something false in the group, I guarantee that's going to happen. And then I say, where would you rather they expose their false doctrine? You know, like at least they're in like the operating room here with open Bibles and guided materials and stuff like that. So if they have that false doctrine in them, you want them to get it out. You want it to be corrected by Scripture. Church members can do that. Not only are they capable of doing that, but if they're gifted, they have some level of necessity to do that. And if we pastors are humble, we might admit that sometimes they can do it better than we can.⁵⁶

The other pastors interviewed spoke about spiritual growth and accountability as positive aspects of small groups. Pastor Free noted, “The idea behind the name ‘growth group’ is

55. Hein Interview.

56. Hein Interview. Edits in brackets are mine for clarification.

absolutely a 1 Peter 3:18 thought, ‘Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.’ So that’s a huge part of it, but also the growth that you have with each other. So, the mentality for us is that we’re not looking to focus on just the pastor. But, as the body of Christ, we want to grow with each other as well.”⁵⁷ Here again, you can see a strong emphasis on growth in faith as a body of believers.

Pastor Lindloff talks about the importance of accountability in small groups. “A small group gives you things that a large group and or a worship setting does not. It gives you accountability. It gives you community. It gives you relationships.... If you’re in a small group, you can’t hide, you can’t run, you can’t blend in. You’re just going to have to open up at some point, answer a question, and talk about God’s Word. And it’s going to be the best thing for you.”⁵⁸

Benefits and Cautions of Small Group Ministry

In his book, “Sticky Church”, Larry Osborne heavily promotes these ideas of accountability and spiritual growth. “If the back door of a church is left wide open, it doesn’t matter how many people are coaxed to come in the front door– or the side door, for that matter ... we’ve offered high-powered programs and slick marketing of attractional churches ... but we’ve become so focused on *reaching* people that we’ve forgotten the importance of *keeping* people.”⁵⁹ Osborne’s point is that Christian churches need to get better at closing the back door, that is, letting people

57. Free Interview.

58. Lindloff Interview.

59. Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 13. The emphasis is original to Osborne’s text.

sneak out without ever being noticed. This is a frustrating experience in ministry. Lutheran elementary school students are confirmed never to be seen again. Married couples leave the church to go ‘church shopping’ for a ministry that is more suited for them. Though I will not be able to explain his entire book thoroughly, Osborne thinks that small groups are the closest thing to a silver bullet in ministry. They enhance ownership of the ministry of the church by the laity. They promote closer relationships in the church. Finally, they lead members to have a deeper understanding of the Bible. Osborne encourages churches of every size and location to adopt the small group methodology fully.

Some of the interviewed pastors would agree with Osborne. When asked what would happen if every church in the WELS started small group ministry and each member was exposed more often to the gospel truths of Scripture, Pastor Lindloff said, “I think you’d see people looking more at their neighbor and loving them.... I think selflessness would increase and selfishness would decrease.... I think people would care about each other more and serve more because they know what's going on. And I just think church culture would drastically increase across the Synod. And frankly, we need that.”⁶⁰ Hein also came to a similar conclusion.

However, Pastor Groth and Pastor Free mentioned caution in establishing small group ministry. Pastor Free stated,

Don't start until unless you have a good facilitator. The caution I would give, too, is like a pastor might automatically think that he could be the facilitator, but at least to me, my opinion is a pastor as a facilitator quickly turns from a growth group to a Bible study. And that's not bad. There's nothing wrong with that. But it becomes a lot more objective and theological than it does subjective and relational. So, if I was giving encouragement, the first thing would be to find that strong facilitator.⁶¹

60. Lindloff Interview.

61. Free Interview.

It is important to note that despite the appearance that Pastor Free is suggesting a reduction in objective Bible studies, this would be a misinterpretation of the quote. In the interview, Pastor Free stressed the importance of objective and subjective elements in Bible study. Additionally, he reiterated the need for a spiritually strong facilitator throughout the interview process. Pastor Groth mentioned that it would not be wise to hold small groups in certain mission settings due to a lack of qualified or trustworthy lay leaders, “A smaller church, I think, especially a smaller mission church where you don't have people that have been WELS their whole life. I think that that's a real challenge to find someone that you trust theologically.”⁶²

Without fail, each interviewee expressed the vital need for a strong, spiritually mature facilitator/lay leader. Pastor Groth states, “I think when you're picking a lay leader, you think of someone first and foremost who's going to be in it for the right reasons. This is about teaching God's Word, and this isn't about me.... Spiritual maturity. Definitely personality skills.”⁶³ It was evident in each case examined, that the pastors thoughtfully chose people they knew would facilitate conversation well. Pietistic influences are more likely to creep into the groups without strong, clear-minded Lutheran facilitators and leaders.

62. Groth Interview.

63. Groth Interview.

COMPARISON BETWEEN PIETISTIC CONVENTICLES AND MODERN SMALL GROUPS

The similarities between Pietistic conventicles and modern small groups are evident. Both are rooted in Scripture and emphasize the importance of the priesthood of all believers, accountability, and growth in faith. As stated in the historical portion of the paper, the Scriptural principles in Pietism are not inherently wrong. The malpractice of the Pietist movement was a cause of concern for Loescher, Walther, and Neumeister. This section of the paper aims to demonstrate how the practice of modern small groups is intentionally designed to avoid these pietistic issues.

Heavy pastoral involvement is one of the most positive aspects of modern-day small groups, as observed in studied cases. Each pastor invested time in developing small groups, whether through oversight, producing questions and study guides, or both. However, conventicles were completely lay-led and often despised the pastoral office. Pietistic conventicles would split from the church to form their own *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*. Pastor Lindloff states, “Be willing to put in the hard work upfront. Groups will grow and your congregation will flourish because of them later on.”⁶⁴ In 1994, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Emeritus James Tiefel, who served in the education department, commented, “Those men least inclined to promote small groups would be most inclined to exercise great care in

64. Lindloff Interview.

oversight. In my judgment, those most inclined to promote small groups would be least inclined to practice oversight.”⁶⁵ Although Tiefel recognizes this is a generalization, starting a small group in a church does not necessarily mean less work for the organizer. However, despite being a parish pastor extremely committed to small group ministry, oversight, and planning, Pastor Hein argues that these time commitments are manageable.

I look at it as proactive health care. So, if people are routinely meeting with one another each week and sharing what's on their heart, what their struggles are, I guarantee on the back end of that, I'm doing less personal counseling for members.... because a lot of times when people need counseling, they don't need some unique theological insight. They need another human being to compassionately, non-judgmentally listen to what they're struggling with. And that's it. You don't need to be a pastor to do that. So, it's time spent upfront. I would say I spend in the neighborhood of between 4 and 6 hours every week prepping materials and then a little bit of like administrative work attached to some of that. So that's probably what it costs me each week. But I actually think I save time in the long run.⁶⁶

Equipping members for service takes patience and work, but that work can be rewarding.

Another problem that often arose in Pietism was an overemphasis on subjectivity compared to objective truths in Scripture. This was combated in several ways. Pastor Groth spoke about the materials as being the key. “I think the strength of using the Synod materials is that the teacher's guides were already really, really well done. So were the materials that we put in the hands of these leaders. If you don't have a good handle on this, it's probably because you didn't prepare enough. There was less kind of independent work that they needed to do.”⁶⁷

Pastor Hein and Pastor Free were happy to embrace the criticism of being “overly subjective.” Hein stated,

65. James P. Tiefel, “Small Group Bible Study and Adult Education in the WELS” (WLS Essay File, 14 April 1994), 13.

66. Hein Interview

67. Groth Interview

I've heard that some pastors have concerns that you're not having people come to truth answers. They're just sharing their personal experiences and personal feelings. Well, that's often what application is, particularly in gray areas. But even in black and white areas where you're struggling against what you know is right or wrong like, you want them to make those applications that are not absolute truth claims.... We often say God is glorified by the struggle. So, like if you just wanted to create robots and automatons, he could have just behaviorally wired us that way. But what glorifies God is a heart that desires the pursuit of him and his glory ahead of ourselves. So, if he just told us exactly, here's what you do all the time, that might not be the best way to express somebody's trust in him. Rather, we have to actually talk through these things like, 'How should I be serving God in this situation?' He might not give you an answer. But he's glorified by you asking, what would glorify him?⁶⁸

Hein emphasizes that there are times when God's response to our prayers cannot be a simple *yes* or *no*. However, by keeping our attention fixed on the objective truths of Scripture, we can then apply those truths to the specific situations we encounter in our daily lives. Pastor Free stated, "A growth group, to us is not that theological objective opportunity to learn even more about what the Bible says, but to do fellowship with God's people. There is a role for theology in the growth group. But the subjective nature of it is a big part of it. We do want people to share this is an opportunity for us to say, 'Hey, here's what's going on in my life. I need your prayers and your support, encouragement, and love.'"⁶⁹ When Pastor Free discusses the subjective nature of small groups, he's referring to the actual human beings who require spiritual support and companionship. It's important to differentiate between an excessive focus on subjectivity, such as emphasizing "this is what God's Word means to *me*, and I will disregard whatever you see as truth," and seeking assistance and encouragement from fellow believers in the face of daily challenges.

68. Hein Interview

69. Free Interview

After finishing the interviews, I asked the pastors one crucial question: how could a small group go wrong? The pastors often cited the problems that arose in Pietism. They listed the following concerns: group members could form cliques, false doctrines could spread undetected, or relationships could be damaged. Despite these concerns, the pastors were highly enthusiastic about small group arrangements. Hein even commented, “I think it’s helpful for other congregations to see that you can do something and the sky isn’t falling.... There’s been congregations that have been doing it and have had weirdly low amount of incidents attached to it.”⁷⁰ All of these pastors spoke positively about their experiences, whether they were currently involved or reflecting on past sessions. It was encouraging to see that in spite the potential challenges, the gospel was still being shared in a meaningful manner.

70. Hein Interview.

FINDINGS

Gospel ministry is difficult. Even with the right scriptural principles and good intentions, sinful people will find a way to abuse positive ministries. This was seen so clearly in the Pietistic conventicles. Their overemphasis on subjectivity when it came to interpretations of Scripture, their despising of the pastoral ministry and their deemphasis on the Lutheran service led to a tremendous number of problems in the church.

However, just because a form is abused, does not mean that it is always wrong. Just because some church bodies turn sermons into self-help monologues does not mean that writing any sermon is wrong. It simply means that careful thought needs to go into proclaiming law and gospel from the pulpit.

The same can be said about small groups. The concept is not wrong. In fact, there are many spiritual blessings that can come from small group ministry. Members become equipped to take ownership of the church's ministry, members can grow in their faith and understanding of God's Word, and they can encourage and support one another. Relationships can be fostered in a totally new way.

However, those looking to establish small group ministries in their congregations should be aware of the dangers of Pietism. Knowing where forms have been abused in the past can help give a solid understanding to pastors in the future.

APPENDIX 1. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. My name is Duke Backhaus, and I am a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of my senior thesis project, in which I am investigating and evaluating this statement: “To what extent are contemporary small groups within the WELS reminiscent of historical Pietistic conventicles, and how do they differ in terms of their theological foundations and practices?”

You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will ask you questions about your experiences with small groups, the challenges you’ve faced, the benefits you’ve seen in small group study, and pitfalls to avoid. Your involvement in this research may be shared in the following way: The information you provide may be summarized, paraphrased, or quoted to help formulate a picture of your small group program, which will be included in my thesis. If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time, and the information that you provide will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Check one:

You may use my name in your study.

You may use the information I provide, but I wish to remain anonymous.

Name: _____ Date: _____

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.” _____ (initials)

APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INTERVIEWEES

General

1. If you were to start a small group from scratch, how would you set it up?
2. In your mind, what does an ideal small group look like?

Specific

3. How did small groups start at your congregation?
4. What obstacles did you face in setting up small groups in your congregation?

Lay Leaders

5. How did you identify lay leaders of small groups?
6. In an ideal world, what qualities would these lay leaders possess?
7. What materials did you provide to your lay leaders?
8. What kind of advice or cautions would you give to lay leaders?

Pitfalls? Benefits?

9. What benefits did you see in small groups?
10. Did you ever notice an over-emphasis on personal experience? If so, how? If not, how was that avoided?
11. Have you noticed any changes in church engagement? (Stewardship/Bible Class/Relations in the Church/Outreach)
12. Have you ever received backlash for your involvement in small groups (either from other pastors in your circuit or members of the congregation)?

Theoretical Questions

13. If every church in the WELS started doing small groups, what would we see?
14. Not saying you'd ever want this to happen, but how could a small group go wrong?
15. What additional reading can I do on this subject?

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