

Why do we do things like that in church?

The Pietists

15.08.2004

Last week, we began a series to look at some reasons why ministers and churches are different. We are looking at 4 historical movements, who struggled out of dry lifeless Christianity to seek warmth, reality and closeness with God. Each has affected us. Last week we looked at the Puritans, who stressed preaching, memorising Scripture, and living a carefully examined life knowing that God holds us accountable.

In Europe, the late 1600s saw a 30 year war in the German states. People, morality and religion were devastated. Religion had lost its vitality. It was dry and academic, and failed to touch people's emotions. But some concerned Christians in Frankfurt changed this. They grew in number and influence across Europe, and were eventually involved in John Wesley's conversion in England. They were the **Pietists**.

What was it that changed most of European and English Christianity? What emphasis did they find in the Bible that broke through the church's dry and deadly character, and made church come alive and transforming?

The Pietists emphasised that Christianity is a heart religion. As Jesus said John 3, you need to be born again. The heart and the brain are needed. They spoke of Christianity in restoration terms such as, renewal of your heart, and new birth. Jesus said we must love the Lord and our neighbour. Involving your heart must also affect your life. For them, the "pure life" was more important than "pure doctrine".

"Doing" was greater than "knowing". And ministers were not to be exempt. Their ministers were trained in theology, but most of them did not know the Lord. So the pietists pushed for a complete reform of their training. They wanted converted pastors, so that they could inspire a living faith in their hearers.

In Europe and England, churches were run and enforced by the state. In the 16th century Reformation, churches wanted a figurehead to replace the pope. They knew God placed kings

and rulers in command of countries, and as all people of a state or country belonged to the one church, the king was seen to be the natural leader of the church.

The Pietists blamed the dryness of the church on the government, and they called for separation of church and state. They wanted the church to regulate itself and train its own ministers independent of a king or parliament. But they did not want multiple churches in each community either.

National churches were constantly bickering over doctrine, but pietists wanted none of that. Their teaching stressed the universal church of God, which no state boundary or doctrine should split. This has flowed through history to the rise of the Protestant ecumenical movement.

The divisions between churches which multiplied after that time would have appalled the early Pietists. They desired unity, so much that they worked out how to be converted and stay within dry and academic churches. They did this by developing little churches within churches. ie they began small groups.

The groups held Bible Studies, and encouraged each other to grow in putting God's love into practise in their lives. Small group Bible Studies became popular.

Time showed some difficulties with small groups. Because they wanted experience more than doctrine, some left the Bible aside and yearned for God to speak directly, which led people away from Biblical Christianity into mysticism. Others wanted to separate, and became independent churches and denominations.

However, there were many good aspects of Pietism, which were fostered through the small groups. eg In England and America, with the Wesley and Whitefield revival, some of the pietists' views were put into practice. Whitefield did not like small groups, and did not encourage them. John Wesley set up many small groups.

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As Whitefield (the better preacher), lay on his death bed, he is reported to have said he wished he had drawn people into small groups, because his work was not continuing, whereas Wesley's groups were training people and keeping them growing in the Lord even without him.

The pietists were also influential in other ways. Throughout history, there have been times when people neglected reaching out to others. The European church was in one of those slumps at that time.

As the pietists increased, their love and concern for others flowed in a variety of ways. The modern missionary movement came with pietism. But along with it also came a much greater emphasis on caring for people's earthly needs as well. Their social outreach included welfare, schooling, poor relief and orphanages.

And churches changed because of them. Christianity became more personal and emotional, not just remembering facts, or living in a traditional way. People grew more caring and friendly.

Bible Study groups, which were more than just the household groups of the Puritans, spread through churches, and people grew in their commitment and love for God.

Even the way they looked at the cross changed.

They looked at it in a more subjective way. If someone were to ask, how do you know Jesus Christ died and rose again, what would you say? One popular answer of the time would have been the objective view, which is that the Bible says Jesus died at a certain time in history, and rose again 3 days later. It is a more depersonalised answer. It is as if its significance is it occurred once for all back then.

Many of the pietists thought that was too dry and academic, and pleaded for its immediate impact on life now to be stressed. They wanted to stress that you knew He died because He died for you, your sins were nailed to the cross with Him (subjective view); and He is alive because

you experience Him in your life. There is nothing wrong with saying that, but if that is all you base your reasons for believing on, then you are lacking the historical basis. I believe both aspects should be held together: "it happened in history, and he did it for me."

The Pietists wrote and inspired many hymns. Isaac Watts wrote this hymn, which gives an idea of their view of the cross:-

1. Alas and did my saviour bleed?
& did my saviour die?
Would he devote that sacred head
For such a one as I?

2. Was it for sins that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! grace unknown!
& love beyond degree!"

So, in summary then of the way they have influenced various churches: They have been influential in small groups. They stressed that being a Christian is not just a head knowledge and church-going, but it also involves our heart and emotions. They brought a stress on being born again, which is different to the ecstatic Spirit filled idea of the charismatics.

They also brought a Godly attention to the desperate plight of the poor, sick and uneducated; so it highlighted meeting social needs while accompanying this with a concern for seeing them saved.

In the Anglican church in Sydney, more ministers have stressed what we heard last week with the Puritans, stressing preaching, memorising scripture and examining ourselves to identify and confess sins. However, some have also been concerned in a greater way with people's needs.

It is a criticism of our diocese (but not this church), that we concentrate so much on preaching and conversion that we neglect social needs. It may be a valid critique, but it is in part due to influential ministers drawing more from the Puritans than Pietists or other social

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traditions. But in our modern supermarket Christianity, we draw from a variety of traditions.

As you think through your Christian lifestyle, you may start to see areas which have drawn from the Puritans and Pietists. Personal Bible Study, family devotions, learning memory verses, wanting to meet on Sundays to hear sermons, and being aware of your sin are areas from the Puritans.

Whereas going to Bible Studies, singing moving hymns, wanting more than dry sermons and faith, and truly caring for physical and spiritual needs of others are from Pietists.

Next week, we will look at the Puseyites or Oxford Movement, which has had a greater influence on this parish than in many of the other local Anglican churches.