

How Pietism Deceives Christians
By Bob DeWaay

There are no extraordinary Christians; but being an ordinary Christian is an extraordinary thing. How I wish I would have understood that when I was a new Christian. But I didn't. Soon after my conversion I began a quest to become the best possible Christian. In so doing I fell prey to teachings that promised me a Christian life superior to that of ordinary Christians. What I did not know was that I had embraced pietism. I didn't become an extraordinary Christian, and I did walk straight into error.

My journey into the "deeper life" oftentimes involved embracing contradictory teachings. For example, two of my favorite teachers in the early 1970's were Watchman Nee and Kenneth Hagin. One taught a deeper Christian life through suffering¹, and the other taught a higher order Christianity that could cause one to be free from bodily ailments and poverty.² The hook was that both claimed to have the secret to becoming an extraordinary Christian. I found out that they didn't.

My dissatisfaction with the Christianity taught in Bible College³ led me to join a Christian commune some months after graduation. That group's founder taught that all ordinary churches and Bible Colleges were caught up in "religious Babylon." He taught that the kingdom of God was to be found by quitting one's job, selling one's possessions, giving the money to the commune, and moving in together to be devoted to the "kingdom" twenty-four hours a day. So, in my search to become an extraordinary Christian, I did what he said and joined.

By the time I had fully explored many versions of pietism seeking to escape the tainted Christianity found in ordinary churches, I had squandered the first ten years of my Christian life. I was converted in 1971 and by 1981 I had given up on becoming a superior Christian. I bought a house for my family and began a car repair business to pay the bills while I tried to figure out what to do with my calling to preach now that most everything I had been taught, practiced, and taught had failed.

By God's grace I went back to the Bible and determined to merely teach verse by verse from that point on. It took another five or six years to rid myself of the various errors I had embraced, and then I taught the book of Romans in 1986. Through that study, I understood the doctrines of grace. That understanding opened my thinking and was the turning point for my ministry. I also came to realize that the wrong thinking that attracted me to pietism was that I held to a theology based on human ability rather than grace alone. Once I grasped that, I never looked back.

If the "secret" to a higher-order Christianity is based on something we discover and implement (the secret to the deeper life), then it makes sense that some Christians could achieve a higher status than others. But if salvation *and* sanctification are God's work through His grace, then we are all in the same boat, and there's no higher order.

¹ Nee had an unusual anatomical sanctification scheme that requires distinguishing between body, soul and spirit with the spirit being the pristine source of sanctification and the body needing to be subdued as the soul learns to follow the regenerated human spirit.

² One thing Hagin and Nee had in common that probably attracted me to both of them was the idea of the primacy of the human spirit and the idea of gaining special knowledge by following ones spirit.

³ Though the college had a pietistic 2nd blessing doctrine, my teachers were sound and pointed me in the right direction. I could have been saved from years of error had I listened more closely to some of them.

Understanding the Basics of Pietism

Pietism is difficult to define because it can be taught and practiced in an unlimited number of ways. Some versions appear to be innocuous while others are so radical that most people would see that something is wrong. I now know that no version of pietism is actually innocuous. If a teaching is called pietism but teaches no more than what God has always used to sanctify Christians, then it is not really pietism. Real pietism always harms those who embrace it.

The essence of pietism is this: It is a practice designed to lead to an experience that purports to give one an elite or special status compared to ordinary Christians. The Bible addresses this error in the book of Colossians.⁴ The false teachers in Colossae claimed to have the secret to a superior Christian experience that would cause people to rise above the bad “fate” they feared. Paul went on to explain that they already had everything they needed through Christ and His work on the cross. Another way of stating this is: If after having fully trusted Christ’s finished work on the cross, you are told that you are still lacking something, you are being taught pietism.

Church history is littered with misguided pietistic movements. Many of them are linked with mysticism. I will give examples later in this article. Pietism can be practiced many ways including enforced solitude, asceticism of various forms, manmade religious practices, legalism, submission to human authorities who claim special status, and many other practices and teachings. The fact that pietism has many forms can be seen by the litany Paul gives in Colossians:

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day -- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:16-23)

Paul calls this approach “self-made religion” which is exactly what all forms of pietism are. They all suggest that—having been converted by the Lord through the cross and practicing His ordained means of grace by faith—is inadequate. They have discovered a better way that leads to a higher-order experience. Paul says they have “the *appearance* of wisdom.” (emphasis mine)

His list includes ascetic practices. These appear, to most poorly taught Christians, to be what the Lord wants. They reason, “Of course God is happier with a person who sells all and moves into a convent where he takes an oath of poverty than He is with someone who goes to work forty hours a week and uses some of the money to buy things.” Is He? When I was a pietist, if someone told me he prayed two hours a day, then I had to pray three hours to make sure I wasn’t missing out on something. I reasoned, “Of course, God is happier with a Christian who prays three hours than one who prays two.” Is He? When I was a pietist I would work on cranking up

⁴ See CIC Issue 69; March/April 2002 The Colossian Heresy Part 1 for a detailed, theological explanation of Colossians chapter 2. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue69.htm>

my desire for holiness because I reasoned that holiness is found through something in the person rather than through God's grace. Based on sermons I'd heard, I reasoned, "Christians are not experiencing a higher degree of holiness because they do not desire it enough." Is that true? No! None of these pietistic statements are true. Such teachings lead to elitism and comparing ourselves to others. The Bible tells us not to do that. Paul stated that these practices "are of no value against fleshly indulgence."

God is committed to the holiness of everyone He has redeemed. He makes them holy through His ordained means of grace. Paul warned both the Galatians and the Colossians against adding anything to the work of Christ: "*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him*" (Colossians 2:6); "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" (Galatians 3:3). This means that salvation is by grace through faith and sanctification is by grace through faith. There is no secret principle to be discovered that creates higher-order Christians. Here is how it is explained in Hebrews: "*By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*" (Hebrews 10:10, 14). Pietism is an attack on the scriptural truth that Christ has already done it all and that this is true for all Christians. I believe in progressive sanctification, but God is sanctifying all Christians by the same means.

Pietism in Church History

Since pietism existed in Colossae in Paul's day, it has always been in the church. But we want to analyze some expressions of it to see why it arises and how it works. Church historian, Justo Gonzalez, chronicles the beginnings of the monastic movement, which was apparently a reaction to a perception that popularity and success had tainted Christianity after Constantine endorsed it.⁵ The question they dealt with was how to overcome Satan (pietism often offers special protection from Satan) who was tempting people with success now that martyrdom was no longer available. Gonzalez writes, "Many found an answer in the monastic life: to flee from human society, to leave everything behind, to dominate the body and its passions, which gave way to temptation. Thus, at the very time when churches in large cities were flooded by thousands demanding baptism, there was a veritable exodus of other thousands who sought beatitude in solitude."⁶ This version produced the Desert Fathers as they have come to be known.

Some documents from the early church fathers describe the lives of "anchorite" monks who fled society to live in the desert. One was Anthony who gave away all his riches before entering his new life: "He then [after leaving his teacher] went to live in an abandoned cemetery, where he subsisted on bread, which some kind souls brought him every few days. According to Athanasius, at this time Anthony began having visions of demons that accosted him almost continuously."⁷ Ironically, fleeing the city to escape Satan's temptations did nothing to actually deliver him from Satan.

The monastic movement led to the idea that one could become a higher-order Christian and be more pleasing to God. The movement also introduced mystical practices that today are being brought back into the church under the guise that they came from a time when Christianity was

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez *The Story of Christianity* Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1984) 136, 137.

⁶ Ibid. 137.

⁷ Ibid. 140, 141.

pristine and not tainted by modernity.⁸ What is really happening is a repeat of history. When Christians perceived that the success of churches in times of prosperity caused certain ills, they fled to solitude where they became mystics. This process is again happening today. But these pietistic movements did not lead to a more pristine Christianity in the past, nor do they do so today. They lead to elitism as Gonzalez points out: “On the other hand, this sort of life was not free of temptations. As years went by, many monks came to the conclusion that, since their life was holier than that of most bishops and other leaders of the church, it was they, and not those leaders, who should decide what was proper Christian teaching.”⁹ Some today have determined that ordinary Christians¹⁰ are so tainted by modernity that these elite ones refuse to be called “Christian” but rather prefer the term “Christ followers” because the elite deem themselves to be following Christ in a pristine way that is not true of the rest of us.

The monastic movement became more organized and still exists today. The Roman Catholic Church acclaimed their deeds done beyond what is required of ordinary Christians and developed a teaching called “works of supererogation,” a teaching rejected by the Reformers.

An example of the ‘works done beyond’ is the monastic vows taken by certain monastic orders: They are considered works of supererogation in Rome. Those who take the vows are deemed more pious than ordinary Christians.

Luther wrote a lengthy essay demonstrating that scripture rejects the validity of monastic vows.¹¹ His essay is also an interesting look into the issues that were debated at the time of the Reformation. One key issue for Luther was that the monastics went beyond the gospel and made commandments out of matters that God has not commanded and in so doing sought to achieve a superior standing before God. One such example was celibacy. Luther argued that vowing something that God had not commanded is sinful: “The very foundation of the monastic vows is godlessness, blasphemy, sacrilege, which has befallen them because they spurn Christ, their leader and light, and presume to follow other things they think better.”¹² They thought they could improve on the teachings of Christ and live a superior spirituality by swearing oaths to live pious lives beyond anything Christ required of His people. Luther condemned this as sinful. Luther wrote, “If you obey the gospel, you ought to regard celibacy as a matter of free choice: if you do not hold it as a matter of free choice, you are not obeying the gospel. ...A vow of chastity, therefore, is diametrically opposed to the gospel.”¹³ So, in Luther’s day, he taught that Christians were in error and sin if they bound themselves by oath to a practice not required by Christ. Though they may think themselves more pious than ordinary Christians because of their special vows, Luther called them gross sinners.

In spite of Luther’s thundering condemnation of those who practiced the pietism of Rome (not called pietism at that time), in less than 200 years it was a Lutheran, Phillip Jacob Spener,

⁸ The Emergent Church movement is well known for doing this.

⁹ Gonzalez Vol. 1, 143.

¹⁰ When I speak of “ordinary Christians” I mean those who are truly converted but claim no special or elite status. Nominal “Christians” who are actually unregenerate are not Christian at all in the Biblical sense.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* from *55-Volume American Edition Luther’s Works on CD-ROM* (Fortress Press, Concordia Publishing: Minneapolis, 2001) Vol. 44, page 243.

¹² Ibid. 260.

¹³ Ibid. 262.

who is credited as the creator of the movement that gained the name “pietism.”¹⁴ However, Spener himself apparently was not a pietist in the sense of claiming a higher-order Christianity. The list of Spener’s proposals for the church includes more intensive Bible study, the practice of the priesthood of believers, practicing deeds of unselfish love, and dealing with unbelievers and heretics with dialogue and loving persuasion rather than compulsion.¹⁵ Spener’s concern was corruption: “He was reacting against the polemical orthodoxy that was sterile amid the immorality and terrible social conditions following the Thirty Years’ War.”¹⁶ Though it could be argued that the term pietism should be reserved only for movements that seek to reform a corrupt situation in the church, the fact is that it became attached to the mysticism of Jacob Boehme and his many spiritual descendants. Not only that, many movements to fix perceived problems in the church have taken a mystical, elitist, trajectory which is what characterizes pietists.

So with due respect to people who consider themselves “pietists” along the lines of Spener, I believe that my definition describes the key ideas that have been promoted in church history. The problems Spener wanted to cure were caused by the existence of the state church, which was not a biblical idea. They did not need more piety; they needed to define the church in biblical terms. Unregenerate people forced into a state church because of a war are by nature impious. The state church will always be corrupt because Christ’s church is not attached to a particular civil government.

Mysticism and Perfectionism

Boehme’s mysticism included an eclectic mix gleaned from Cabbalism, alchemy, Neoplatonism, and other really bad sources. Even Theosophists claim Boehme as one of their own.¹⁷ People of his ilk have arisen with some very strange versions of pietism. One was Jane Leade whose mystical, elitist writings are preserved on websites of her present-day followers. This sample of Leade from *An Enochian Walked with God* shows how elitist pietism can be:

But now methinks, I hear some say at the Reading of This, Oh! You have mentioned a high and lofty State, which is as a new thing that hath not been declared; as that in this present Life there should be found any to ascend to the New-Jerusalem, to feast and worship GOD There; This, you will say belongs to the *Enochian Life*; but That Age of the World is not yet come, so as to know a Translated State. We grant it, that it is not common, only peculiar to some, that in *Enoch’s* Spirit are raised to walk with GOD, and so are taken up in the Spirit wholly. But we may hope This day of the Spirit is coming on, whereby it shall be known more universally; in the which Angelical Spirits shall ascend, and That Divine Principle shall open, that now hath been so long shut up: Then you will know a New-state of Living, that you never knew before; for it will turn the Love of all mortal Things out of the Hearts-door: This will in very deed be known.¹⁸

Leade’s pietism re-emerged in the twentieth century in the Latter Rain Movement that also claimed that certain elite Christians would emerge. They claimed that the “manifest sons of God”

¹⁴ The New Dictionary of Theology, Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J.I. Packer ed. (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1988) s.v. Pietism, 516.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <http://www.wisdomworld.org/setting/boehme.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.passtheword.org/Jane-Lead/enocwalk.htm> in a section called “The Enochian Life.”

that Paul mentions in Romans 8 are not all the saints at the resurrection (which is what Paul taught) but certain elite Christians who achieved that status now. The Latter Rain movement has now become the Latter Day Apostles and Prophets movement that is also pietistic to the core. They claim special status that ordinary Christians know nothing about. It is followers of that movement who typically post Leade's writings on websites.

Not all versions of pietism are as radical and heretical as that of Boehme and his spiritual descendants. For example, Boehme's ideas influenced William Law: "Although they [Boehme's writings] strongly influenced *The Spirit of Love* (1752, 1754) and other later writings of William Law, causing a rift between Law and John Wesley, who described Boehme's writings as 'most sublime nonsense.'"¹⁹ But Wesley's Methodism and perfectionism were themselves pietistic. Wesley is an example of a much less extreme pietism. But the idea that some humanly discovered and implemented method can lead to the achievement of a better Christian life than through the ordinary means of grace is nevertheless pietism.

Some of our Evangelical denominations have been pietist from their very inception. Charles Finney's teaching in the mid 19th century caused the problem. Finney's teachings, as I have argued before, were heretical. He too taught Christian perfection. Wesley at least held to prevenient grace so as to avoid Pelagianism.²⁰ Finney was fully Pelagian in his approach to both salvation and sanctification.²¹ And his innovations permanently changed much of American Evangelicalism. After Finney other perfectionist movements arose. The Holiness movement, for example, came not long after Finney. Both the Holiness movement and the subsequent Pentecostal movement held to second blessing doctrines that by nature are pietist because they create an elite category of Christians who have had a special experience that ordinary Christians lack. The Keswick Holiness movement (also known as the "Higher Life" movement) is an example of pietism and elitism as well. The Holiness movement in general is a pietistic movement that claims a special experience that creates higher order, (often supposedly perfected) Christians. They are in error. Ironically, the deeper life or higher-order Christians do have something distinct about them—they have also embraced error.

Today the largest new pietist movement is the Emergent Church. As I pointed out earlier, pietism often arises in response to the perception (sometimes warranted) that the church has become too worldly and it seems true once again today. Some now assume that since ordinary Christianity is compromised, they must discover an extraordinary way to become better Christians. One Emergent leader has even entitled one of his works, "A New Kind of Christian."²² But this movement really isn't all that new. It draws on teachings and practices found in other pietist movements in church history. In fact, a recent Emergent book includes essays by those experimenting with communal living, something I tried in *my* pietist days!²³

¹⁹ The New Dictionary of Theology, s.v. Boehme, Jacob 106.

²⁰ Pelagius was an early heretic, condemned by church councils, who taught that all humans have the ability to obey God without a prior work of grace.

²¹ See CIC Issue 56 *Charles Finney's Influence on American Evangelicalism* -- <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue53.htm>

²² Written by Brian McLaren

²³ *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones editors (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007)

Furthermore, the Purpose Driven movement is also a pietistic movement. Rick Warren claims there are world-class Christians that are in a better category than ordinary Christians. He had his followers take a long oath at a baseball field to pledge themselves to serving his *new reformation*. I already mentioned the apostles and prophets movement that is pietistic. So ironically, three huge movements in American evangelicalism (Purpose Driven, Emergent, and C. Peter Wagner's latter day apostles) are all based on pietism. The three movements seem radically diverse, but each one claims to be a new reformation and each offers a higher status than that of ordinary Christians.

Is True Christianity Dead?

Church history tells us that the charge the pietistic reformers level against the church is that the church practices "dead Christianity." Some years ago I hosted a pastor's meeting at which pastors could discuss theological ideas. Position papers were presented and then critiqued by the group. Some of the pastors came from the Charismatic movement (also pietistic). A common theme from the Charismatic pastors was their distain for doctrine. Because theirs was a reform movement, they were fighting "dead Christianity."

I spoke after one of our meetings with a pastor who told me that when he was a Lutheran, reciting creeds and doctrines caused him to be spiritually dead. I responded, "So believing that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, who lived a sinless life, who died for sins and was raised on the third day and bodily ascended into heaven killed you spiritually?" He said, "I didn't really believe those things." He had assumed that the cause of his unbelief was not sin, but a church that recited creeds. I believe that it is much better to preach those doctrines from the pulpit and call for people to repent and turn to Christ than to make recitation part of a liturgy. But, nevertheless, the creeds were not the problem, unbelief was.

True Christianity simply means holding to the true beliefs revealed in Scripture. These beliefs are often systematized as topical teachings such as the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of Justification, and so on. Genuine faith in the truth of the gospel is saving faith. No one having saving faith is "dead." In Ephesians 2:1-8, Paul teaches that we were dead, but God made us alive, and He did so by grace through faith. As Paul asserts in Ephesians 2:10, it is also true that where genuine saving faith exists, it produces evidence in the lives of those who have it. So, when James says that faith without works is dead, he refers to something other than the type of faith that Paul says is a work of grace. It is the type of faith that demons have (see James 2:17-19). In the Gospel of John, John uses the term "believe" in two ways.²⁴ There are those, for example, who "believed" (see John 8:30) but when confronted with their need to be set free began to debate Jesus and later accused him of sin (see John 8:31-47). Jesus told them they were definitely not from God. However, in many other places in John, those who believe are true believers who have eternal life.

My conclusion is that "dead Christianity" is Christianity that people might fight for because of parochial reasons ("this is *our* tradition and no one is going to change it") but in which they put only mental assent faith. I gave mental assent to creeds when I was 12 years old because it was my duty to join the church at that age, but I was a dead sinner. But it most assuredly was not

²⁴ See Ryan Habben's article *Formulating a Theology of pistueo_ (believe) in John's Narrative*: <http://cicministry.org/scholarly/sch007.htm> published at cicministry.org under "articles/scholarly."

the truth contained in the creeds that killed me; it was my unbelief. Those “believers” in John 8 proved themselves to be unbelievers by refusing to become Jesus’ disciples, learn the truth, and be set free.

Pietism misdiagnoses the problem and creates a false solution. It sees a compromised church that is apparently caught in dead Christianity. The real problem is not dead Christianity but spiritually dead sinners who give mental assent to biblical truth but show no signs of regeneration. If indeed such a church existed (if truth really is there, God has His remnant there as well), that church would be characterized by worldliness and sin. This is the case because dead sinners do not bear spiritual fruit. There was a church in Revelation that Jesus called “dead.” Pietism holds to the true gospel but goes beyond it imagining that the dead sinners who are church members are true Christians. When some of them become regenerate through the efforts of the pietists, they assume they have now entered a higher class of Christianity. They posit two types of Christians: “carnal” Christians and “spiritual” Christians. But, in reality, there are only Christians and dead sinners.

Furthermore, pietism sees the lack of good fruit in the “dead Christian” churches to be a sign that teaching doctrine is of no value and that what really matters is practice. So they gravitate to “works righteousness.” This is precisely the mode of the Emergent Church. It has been the approach of pietists throughout history. But works that do not result from a prior work of grace (which is the result of God’s work through the gospel to convert dead sinners) are in fact “dead works” no matter how pious they look. Mother Theresa did good works but denied the exclusive claims of the gospel. That “piety” is of no eternal value if those who were the recipients of the good works never hear or believe the gospel and thus end up in hell.

God’s revealed truth is never dead, but sometimes it falls on dead ears. In John 6, multitudes who were interested in following Jesus for bread left Him when He spoke the truth to them. The few who did not have dead ears were asked if they would leave too. Peter answered for the group: “*Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God’*” (John 6:68, 69). Genuine faith like that is not the domain of higher order pietists who learned the secrets of the deeper life; it is characteristic of every one of Christ’s true flock who ever exists. Pietists think that adding some man-made process to what Christ has provided for all Christians throughout the centuries can cure a problem that *never* existed: being “dead” because of believing the truth. Instead of a cure, they create an illness as they lead people away from the finished work of Christ.

Pietistic Misuse of 1Corinthians

The favorite proof text for pietists of all sorts has been this passage: “*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ*” (1Corinthians 3:1 KJV). I cite the KJV because that is where the term “carnal” as in “carnal Christian” came from. In my early pietist days, as I said, I was influenced by Watchman Nee. He made a strong point about a passage just before this verse: “*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man*” (1Corinthians 2:14, 15). The word “natural” from the Greek is literally “soulish.” Nee

used that as proof for his anatomical sanctification scheme. In that scheme, the spiritual man is one whose soul is inclined to the spirit (i.e. their spirit as joined to the Spirit) rather than to the external world through the body. My other early teacher, Kenneth Hagin, had a similar teaching but it was based on the idea of following one's spirit rather than what he called "sense perception" (lying symptoms that you were sick when God said you were healed for example). The result of these teachings is a two-tiered schema for the church: the carnal Christian and the spiritual Christian. In pietism, there is always a process that leads to an experience that brings one into the more favorable category.

But was Paul teaching that some Christians are actually not spiritual but carnal or "soulish"? I used to think so until I read Gordon Fee's excellent commentary on 1Corinthians. The "carnal Christian" teaching fails to take into consideration the larger context of Paul's letter. The "natural man" who receives the things of God on the ground that he thinks them "foolish" is not a carnal Christian, but a person who has rejected the gospel. This can be seen by Paul's prior use of "foolish" in chapter 1: *"but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men"* (1Corinthians 1:23-25). The lost, who are not "the called," are the ones who consider the message of the cross "foolish."

Furthermore, 1Corinthians 2:14 teaches complete inability, not merely a lack that is only due to not having the right teaching. In the pietist scheme of things, the carnal Christians could remedy their problem if they would only adopt the teachings and practices promoted by the pietists. But the Greek of 1Corinthians 2:14 literally says that the natural man is *"ou dunatai gno_nai"* not able (i.e. without power) to know. He cannot know because he is unregenerate; he does not have the Holy Spirit. Believers have the Holy Spirit; unbelievers do not. The natural man is an unbeliever, not a carnal Christian. Paul makes this clear in Romans:

*For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. **But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.*** (Romans 8:5-9) (emphasis mine)

In Romans it is made explicitly clear that those who are "fleshly" and "without power" (the same word as used in 1Corinthians 2:14 – *dunamis*) to serve God, obey God, or please God are not Christian. They are not carnal Christians; they are lost in sin.²⁵

Gordon Fee points out that this section in 1Corinthians has been subjected to misuse for a very long time:

²⁵ See Gordon Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" in *The NewInternational Commentary on the New Testament*; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 115 – 120 for an excellent scholarly discussion of what Paul means by the "natural man." It is noteworthy that Fee is a Pentecostal and as such belongs to a denomination that tends to pietism; but Fee warns against such interpretations of 1Corinthians.

This paragraph has endured a most unfortunate history of application in the church. Paul's own point has been almost totally lost in favor of an interpretation nearly 180 degrees the opposite of his intent. Almost every form of spiritual elitism, "deeper life" movement, and "second blessing" doctrine has appealed to this text. To receive the Spirit according to their special expression paves the way for people to know "deeper truths" about God. One special brand of this elitism surfaces among some who have pushed the possibilities of "faith" to the extreme, and regularly make a "special revelation" from the Spirit their final court of appeal. Other "lesser" brothers and sisters are simply living below their full privileges in Christ. Indeed, some advocates of this form of spirituality bid fair to repeat the Corinthian error in its totality.²⁶

The great irony is that those who find a hyper-spirituality doctrine in 1Corinthians are falling into the very error Paul wrote to correct, as Fee so eloquently pointed out. If you have been subjected to pietistic teachings of one form or another, I urge you to buy Gordon Fee's commentary that I cite here and read it. It was very instrumental in helping me find my way back to the truth.

But you may be thinking, "Paul did call the Corinthians 'carnal' did he not? So how can you say there are no 'carnal Christians'?" That is a very good question. The answer is found in Paul's use of irony. Some of the most misinterpreted passages in the Bible are misunderstood when an ironic statement is taken to be literal. Another example is the passage in Revelation 3 where Christ is standing at the door knocking. This is an example of irony—Christ on the outside of His own church seeking to come in for table fellowship when the table fellowship of the church is supposed to be all about Christ! But not seeing the irony, people take this as an evangelistic passage and teach that the sinner has to open the door or Jesus will be stuck outside.

Similarly, when Paul says to the Corinthians that they are "carnal" (1Corinthians 3:1) he is issuing an ironic rebuke! They were the ones listening to the "super apostles" who suggested Paul was not spiritual like they were. The Corinthians prided themselves in their supposedly superior spirituality. Paul said that true spirituality was always centered on the cross, not the wisdom of men. The Spirit's work in our lives is because of the cross. But the Corinthians were thinking and acting like unbelievers, i.e. the "carnal." Again, Fee helps us:

First, picking up the theme of being "spiritual" from what has just preceded, Paul makes a frontal attack and pronounces the Corinthians as not spiritual at all. Indeed, they are just the opposite: they are "fleshly"—still thinking like mere human beings, those who do not have the Spirit. With this charge Paul exposed himself to centuries of misunderstanding. But his concern is singular: not to suggest classes of Christians or grades of spirituality, but to get them to stop *thinking* like the people of this present age.²⁷

So Paul's use of irony to rebuke the Corinthians is interpreted as literal in order to set up an elitist version of Christianity, which is the very thing the Corinthians did that Paul was rebuking.

Pietistic teachings based on bad exegesis of 1Corinthians have abounded for centuries. Those I have mentioned in this article are merely a sampling. Another I heard was that the bride of Christ will consist of the elite Christians and that lesser Christians will merely be "handmaidens"

²⁶ Ibid. 120.

²⁷ Ibid. 122.

who get to watch but are not part of the marriage supper of the Lamb. I am sure that my readers have heard versions of this that I have not. But if you understand one thing, the two categories are the regenerate and unregenerate—the first category are those who are spiritual, the second are those who are carnal—you will have understood Paul’s teaching in Romans and 1Corinthians. Being regenerate is an extraordinary thing, which is the miraculous work of grace that God gave to unworthy sinners.

Conclusion

Pietism cannot help but take people’s minds off the gospel. When I was a pietist I thought salvation was an interesting first step a person took, but mostly lost interest in the topic unless I ran across someone who needed to pray the sinner’s prayer. The gospel of Christ was only of marginal interest to me as I sought the “deeper things.” The more I tried to be a very special type of Christian, the further my mind wandered from the cross. I was guilty of the very thing for which Paul rebuked the Corinthians.

I sometimes lament the wasted years; but my wife reminds me to think about God’s providence. She says, “If we had not gone through all that back then you would not be able to help people the way you do now.” This is true. My prayer is that my “wasted” 10 years will help some of my readers avoid falling into the same type of trap. If you have salvation—the forgiveness of sins, you have the greatest, imaginable, spiritual riches. It truly is an extraordinary thing to be a Christian.