Education for "God's Glory and Neighbor's Good":

The Pietist Idea of a Christian College

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Not (Quite) Ready for Prime Time Presentation

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Embarrassingly enough, this is the first time I've been to one of these highly valuable presentations, so I'm not sure just how to start. But as I've already started with one embarrassing confession, let me continue with two others.

First, I am an historian of international relations, diplomacy and warfare, and so I fear I am out of my element acting as a supposed expert on either Pietism or higher education. (If you want to hear me talk about something I actually know, in two hours I'll be killing over 9 million people in a lecture on the diplomatic failures that resulted in World War I. HIS354 Modern Europe, in RC 422A.)

And second, until I applied for my job at Bethel and saw the phrase appear on the application form, I had never seen the phrase "faith-learning integration." I certainly did not know that it is associated with the work of Reformed scholars like Arthur Holmes.

(While I'm at it, another confession: I had never even heard of the Reformed tradition until graduate school – the Covenant can be an insular culture.)

How can this be? For the first twenty-seven years of my life, I lived two different lives. One started at age five when my parents handed their somewhat precocious, newly literate son an illustrated history of the Civil War, and continued through a series of decidedly non-Christian educational experiences: a private college prep school just north of Woodland Hills Church; a formerly Anglican state university in Virginia; and a formerly Congregationalist research university in Connecticut. The other life also started at age five, when I knelt next to my mother, folded my hands and bowed my head, and asked Jesus into my heart. And while my Christian life was never anti-intellectual, I belonged to churches that did not use phrases like "life of the mind" and cared little for theological precision and much for experience and emotion. (Subdued Swedish emotion: warm hearts and stone faces. But emotion nonetheless.)

And so it has been both a joy and a challenge to work at a university that views education as a Christian calling. To teach in a class that combines study of Christianity with study of Western civilization. To find that collegiality involves as well as prayer and fellowship as well as intellectual debate. To integrate (or reintegrate) my faith with my learning, and to continue my own education by reading works like Holmes' *Idea of a Christian College* and George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship.*[1]

[1] Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977; revised, 1987); George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York, 1997).

But much as I appreciate the contributions of Reformed scholars like Holmes and Marsden – in particular, their confidence Christian scholars can excel within a sometimes anti-religious academy – I must also admit that I am not always comfortable with the so-called integrationist model.

Now, I will not bore you by detailing my discomfort with the Reformed model. That estimable tradition of Christian scholarship has become so easy a target in recent years that you can all probably guess any intellectual objections I could raise. In any case, my difficulty likely stems from the ineluctable conflict of my belonging to a distinctly non-Reformed faith tradition, that of Swedish-American Pietism.

Pietism draws on influences as diverse as medieval mysticism, the Moravian descendants of the Waldensians, and English Puritanism, but it is most often associated with a revival within German Lutheranism in the decades after the Thirty Years War. Inspired by the Lutheran spiritual writer Johann Arndt and the Jesuit-turned-Calvinist Jean de Labadie, a pastor named Philipp Jakob Spener sought to reform Lutheranism from within.

While he never abandoned the state church, he did fear that it had become calcified, focused so much on defending its own orthodoxy against Catholic, Reformed, and Anabaptist challenges that it had lost the spirit of the Reformation. In his 1675 book *Pia Desideria*, Spener expressed six "pious wishes" for the continuing reformation of his church, including a greater emphasis on Bible study (both in the pulpit and in small group meetings like his own *collegia pietatis*), a more active role for the laity in the

church life, and an irenic spirit extended towards those holding different views.[2] Perhaps most distinctively, Spener proposed that having knowledge of the Christian faith, or assenting intellectually to propositional statements like those contained in the Lutheran "Symbolical Books," was vastly less important than living out what Luther had called "faith active in love."[3]

Spener's movement, derisively called Pietism by its orthodox critics, spread rapidly. First to the Prussian city of Halle, where August Hermann Francke established a new pietistic university, plus schools, orphanages, and other institutions, then to a Moravian community led by the Pietist-trained nobleman Nicolaus von Zinzendorff. Later in the 18th century, the influence of Moravian missionaries and a fortuitous visit to a Moravian society in Aldersgate, London led John Wesley to start the greatest revival in British history. And a variety of Pietist, Moravian, and Wesleyan influences led to revivals in 19th century Scandinavia, some of whose impoverished people brought Pietism with them to a new life in North America.

Beyond this flimsy outline of a history, let me just add that Pietism had a unique interest in and commitment to education. This is true of Spener and Zinzendorff, of their Moravian-influenced predecessor Johann Comenius, and especially so of Francke, who founded schools and a university and whose educational writings were remarkably ahead of their time in their intuitive understanding of child psychology and

[2] The most common English translation is Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, tr. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia, 1964).
[3] K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago, 1986), 99-100.

development.[4] And, needless to say, Francke always saw education through the lens of his Christian commitments.

And it shouldn't surprise us to find Pietists interested in education. It might even be possible that Pietism can sustain a life spent in the academy. In *Conceiving the Christian College* (one of many books inspired by Arthur Holmes), Wheaton president Duane Litfin provides a familiarly Reformed model, but even he describes piety (which he defines as "a passionate personal allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ" and "loving God with our *minds* as well as our hearts, souls, and strength") as providing the "deepest and most enduring motives for Christian scholarship."[5]

At the same time, Litfin prefaces his brief discussion of piety and scholarship with a warning: "If such a personalistic emphasis [the Christian scholar's allegiance to Jesus Christ] strikes some as pietistic, we must nevertheless not shy away from it."[6] If piety can so deeply and enduringly motivate Christian scholarship, why would Litfin fear that his readers would recoil from the faintest scent of Pietism? Perhaps he shares the old concern that Pietists devalued the life of the mind, since they privileged right practice (orthopraxy) over right belief (orthodoxy) and rejected the Lutheran Scholastics' "philosophical quest for God" in favor of what Dale Brown terms a "theology of experience."[7] Supporting Spener's description of Christianity as a religion of the heart rather than of "empty thought," Brown quotes Francke's frank assessment of

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[4] For a survey of Comenius and Francke's contributions, see Kenneth O. Gangel and Warren S. Benson, *Christian Education: Its History and Philosophy* (Chicago, 1983), 153-87.
[5] Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids, 2004), 60.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, 1978), 27-28, 105.

himself as a student: "I kept my theology in my head and not in my heart, and it was much more a dead science than a living knowledge."[8]

While the fair-minded Reformed historian Mark Noll understands that "warm piety and hard thinking" need not be in conflict, he reminds us that the same emphases that helped Spener, Francke, *et al.* "[breathe] a badly needed vitality into several parts of the church"[9] might also have helped bring about the very separation of faith and learning that required (re)integration in the twentieth century. Noll restates the shopworn critique that pietists may feel too much and think too little, but then goes further:

> At its extreme, the Pietist emphasis on religious life gave very little attention to self-conscious Christian thought. To be consumed by feeling was to have no time for thinking through the relationship between God and his creation. Once this point had been reached, it soon became difficult to distinguish between those forms of feeling that remained within the Christian orbit and those that had spun off as meteorites with no fixed center.

Noll therefore holds "unchecked Pietism" partly responsible for the rise of theological liberalism and the "humanistic romanticism" that supplanted an orthodox view of God and the world in favor of a "vague nature mysticism."[10]

In his book Catholic scholar James Burtchaell would agree, though less charitably. Because Pietism emphasized personal feeling and simple piety rather than right belief and rigorous scholarship, Burtchaell blames its "subversive influence" for accelerating the once-Christian academy's descent into "liberal indifferentism," inclusivism, and then rationalism.[11] If pietists were not willing accomplices in the secular revolution that

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[8] Ibid., 108-109.
[9] Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, 1994), 47.
[10] Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 49.
[11] James Turnstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges & Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 838-47.

transformed so many of America's religious colleges, it seems that they were at least, in Lenin's lovely phrase, useful idiots.

It is nice to be noticed, though. What really drew my attention to this project was that, in discussions of Christian higher education, Pietism has been quickly dismissed as a precursor to the scandalous anti-intellectualism of American evangelicals that Noll so famously critiqued, or simply ignored altogether. For example, Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen of Messiah College, who sympathize with Anabaptist and other traditions that dissent from the integrationist norm and teach at a school that has pietist roots, lump Pietists together with Baptists and Evangelicals in a hasty discussion of the "primitivist tradition." Although they find "something very energizing and important" in the primitivists' centering of the "Bible alone," the Jacobsens also see little of scholarly value in that tradition, since its need continually to start "from scratch" tends to result in "immature and amateurish scholarship."[12]

If not individual scholarship, can Pietism provide a model of Christian higher education? The Lutheran scholar Robert Benne did not see fit to include a Pietist school among his elite six colleges and universities who "keep faith with their religious traditions," but he did agree with James Burtchaell that the Pietists' "interiorizing of faith was and continues to be a fatal flaw."[13] Even Richard Hughes, who is a scholar of

[12] Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (New York, 2004), 89-90.
[13] Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, 2001), 36.

the primitivist tradition mentioned by the Jacobsens, has almost entirely passed over Pietism in choosing models of Christian higher education to study.[14]

And so I find myself temporarily less interested in the history of international relations than in testing this implication that Pietism is incapable of inspiring a distinctive model of Christian higher education. In my more ambitious, less humble moments, I dream of writing a Pietist reply to Arthur Holmes – hence the subtitle of today's talk.

I'm certainly not there yet, but I think you're getting me at an interesting point in my project: I've framed the question and done enough research to start to refine that question and propose hypotheses, which I then hope to test using historical case studies (starting this summer with research in the archives of Bethel and North Park University, the Evangelical Covenant school in Chicago).

In our remaining time today, I hope to accomplish three purposes. First, I would like to propose several distinctive features of the Pietist college. Second, I want to identify the potential drawbacks of such a model. Third (and most importantly for me) I hope to get feedback from you all: what do the professors, staff, and students who work at a university that identifies its heritage with Pietism believe to be the Pietist idea of a Christian college?

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[14] See his discussions of Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anabaptist/Mennonite models in Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, 2001), 57-96. To these he adds Baptist, Evangelical, and Wesleyan models in *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Hughes and William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids, 1997).

Two caveats before I continue on. First, as George Marsden would say in my place, something can be *distinctively* pietist without being *uniquely* pietist. I would guess that many other Christian traditions (including the Reformed) would not disagree with much of what I am about to say; a wide variety of Christian colleges will have something in common with the "Pietist" model I am trying to describe. But if they are not unique contributions, they are certainly distinctive of Pietism.

Second, I do not mean to suggest that Bethel University is my prototype for this idea of a Pietist college, but given my audience and location today, please forgive me if I comment occasionally on how Bethel epitomizes this idea – or where it seems to stray from it.

Without further ado, permit me to suggest some distinctive features of the Pietist idea of the Christian college:

#1. The Christian college is Jesus-centered.

Phyllis Tickle notes that it was the Pietists who likely inaugurated the evangelical preference for the more personal name "Jesus" rather than the theological claim that is "Christ." It seems like a useful nuance here, if only because saying that a Christian college is "Christ-centered" has become as clichéd as it is profoundly beautiful. The Pietist college is a Christian college because it centers on a personal experience of Jesus, not so much because its administrators, professors, staff, and students can accede to truth-claims about his Incarnation, his Resurrection, his Lordship, etc. (though they can), or because those claims are foundational to its curriculum (though they are).

During faculty retreat this year, this distinction seemed to be at the heart of guest speaker Roger Olson's critique of the "Christ-centered" Christian college conceived by Duane Litfin. Olson held up Bethel as an alternative to Litfin's "systematically" Christian college: "Here [at Bethel] Christ-centered education begins with the experience of knowing Jesus Christ personally…. Jesus Christ and our experience of him called 'conversional piety' form the glue that holds everything together."[15] I believe that he would find a similar Jesus-centeredness in the history of North Park, whose founder, David Nyvall, told students in 1901 that the "very pulse [of the school's life] is the love of Christ and of all those whom he loves, making this school a center from which radiates to all ends of the world the light of Christ's truth, and the warmth of Christ's love, and the beauty of Christ's character."[16] (Alright, so Pietists also call him "Christ.")

In this vision of Christian education, orthopraxy and orthopathy are more important than orthodoxy. For Francke, all "our earnest [educational] endeavors are constantly directed" at "Unfeigned *Faith* in our Lord Jesus Christ… and a real sense of *Godliness*, attended with a conscientious *Behavior*."[17] In his fictionalized biography of Philipp Spener, the 19th century German writer Karl von Wildenhahn has the Pietist patriarch assert that " All knowledge, all learning, is dead and useless, as long as it does not impart true life to the heart, or promote the cause of practical Christianity."[18] If Spener did not say these exact words, they seem consistent with his distinguishing between "literal and living knowledge."[19]

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[15] Roger Olson [faculty retreat talk, August 2006].
[16] Quoted in Scott E. Erickson, "David Nyvall and the Shape of an Immigrant Church: Ethnic, Denominational, and Educational Priorities among Swedes in America" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Uppsala, 1996), 267.
[17] Quoted in Gangel and Benson, *Christian Education*, 177.
[18] Quoted in Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 85.
[19] Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 81.

For Spener, this "true life" begins with the experience of conversion. While he never had the dramatic epiphany described by his disciple Francke, conversion was central to Spener's understanding of salvation (and church and social reform), and would, I think, agree with Olson that it is the starting point of Jesus-centered education. Likewise, when seeking students for his new Baptist seminary, John Alexis Edgren stressed that they "be conscious of a real conversion and a call to the gospel ministry," not that they be able to agree with a set of doctrinal statements.[20] After conversion, "true life" blossoms with the process of renewal or regeneration, which brings us to a second distinctive feature.

#2. The Christian college educates the whole person, not solely (or even primarily) the intellect.

For David Nyvall, this is what set apart North Park and others like it: "Only one kind of education even pretends [to concern itself with the whole person]. And that is *Christian Education*. Therefore, as a matter of fact, Christian Education is the only one existing worth the name."[21] Here too, we are trafficking in clichés: rare is the college nowadays (Christian or otherwise) that does not claim to educate the whole person. But, historically, pietist educators were unusual in this respect. Nyvall wrote the above words at a time when the dominant philosophy governing higher education in the West was that of Germans like Wilhelm von Humboldt, who stressed the acquisition of knowledge rather than vocational training or character or spiritual formation. And in the late 17th century, as Pietism began to gather steam among students and instructors

[20] Quoted in Norris A. Magnuson, *Missionsskolan: The History of an Immigrant Theological School; Bethel Theological Seminary, 1871-1981* (St. Paul, 1982), 10.
[21] Quoted in Erickson, "David Nyvall and the Shape of an Immigrant Church," 264.

at the University of Leipzig, the orthodox theology professor Johann Karpzov insisted that "Our mission as professors is to make students more learned and not more pious."[22]

To be sure, the Pietist college would hope to graduate more learned students; intellectual development is crucial. And some Pietists would be comfortable with the language of faith-learning integration. Almost throughout his two terms as president of North Park, Nyvall fought to preserve a liberal arts curriculum and high academic standards, and even encouraged undergraduate students at the school (for decades an academy and junior college) to continue their education at leading national universities. Karl A. Olsson, the University of Chicago-trained Covenant historian who, as North Park's president, realized the fondest dream of his mentor Nyvall when he guided North Park's final evolution into a four-year college, told his faculty in 1959 that "[North Park] is Christian because it has believed from its very beginning that the Christian faith forms a necessary presupposition for all meaningful intellectual activity."[23]

But intellectual development is not the only or even highest goal of a Pietist college; it also seeks the formation – better, the transformation – of the whole person. As Litfin has already reminded us, loving God requires the mind, but also the heart, soul, and strength; all are regenerated in this "new life" that starts with conversion. Famously, John Alexis Edgren believed that it was more important for his aspiring preachers to "cultivate the spiritual life" than the mind: "Thus, while storing the mind with useful

[22] Quoted in Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 13.
[23] Quoted in *The Covenant Companion*, September 1, 1968, 6.

information of a biblical as well as a secular nature, spiritual edification must never be lost sight of."[24]

I will try to refine what I mean by "whole-person education" in a moment but let me offer one concrete suggestion of how Bethel might improve in this area. I do not believe that a Pietist college would differentiate sharply between Student Life, Campus Ministries, and Academics. Certainly, some people are called to different emphases in the larger field of education; most professors, for example, do not have the skills necessary to counsel students suffering from clinical depression, or to envision and preach a series of sermons in Chapel. But these are not absolute differences, and students don't necessarily compartmentalize their lives in this way. Yet because I am in an academic department and not Residence Life, I fear that I know very little of how my students live (even though their living environment is likely where they study for my classes). Nor do I know much about how they worship, or pray, or read their Bible. Nor do I think this problem resides solely with the faculty. I wonder how much our campus ministry or student life staff know about the general education curriculum, or professors' expectations for student progress in the classroom.

I recently sat in on a job interview along with Jim Ferreira, and was struck by how little I knew of the problems that he deals with as Dean of Student Life – even though those problems no doubt affect students' academic performance in my classroom. Integrationists like Holmes and Litfin believe that every Christian scholar, regardless of discipline, must also study theology and philosophy. In a Christian college that

[24] Quoted in Magnuson, *Missionsskolan*, 11.

emphasizes experiential piety rather than propositional faith, it seems at least as important that professors know something of physical and mental health sciences.

#3. The Christian college integrates learning with love and hope, not just faith.

[3. If any, Pietist education would focus on heart and spirit. As Pietist *ecclesiolae* offer "heart-religion." The Pietist educator would likely agree with C.S. Lewis that education is not so much about the accumulation of information, or even the training of intellectual disciplines, but the cultivation of "habits of the heart" – as Alan Jacobs suggests, Lewis' goal for education is that students have the capacity to take delight. Emmaus Road passage as a touchstone. Answer the challenge to integrate love and learning, not just faith and learning. And an emphasis on spiritual formation…]

[4. Education as both individual and communal experience: no doubt, there must be an individual conversion and regeneration, but it's important to understand the emphasis that Pietists place on community. The genius of the *collegia pietatis:* contra how most in the West read the Bible (Jenkins), Pietist bible study was done in a small group that *cut across* divisions based on social, economic, or ecclesiastical hierarchy. Learning as a collaborative act between student and teacher. (Edgren again.) A danger here: can a Pietist college exist as a larger university? If so, must be intentional about creating building smaller communities that cut across student/faculty/staff divides, as well as those of discipline, division, etc.]

[5. Education as preparation for service: Francke's model of education, especially, is vocational. He sees schools and colleges as "workshops of the Holy Spirit," permitting God to work through the particular gifts and passions of the individual to His glory and

the good of our neighbors. Obvious emphasis on the particular vocation of preaching, going back to *Pia Desideria*, but also for the vocations of evangelism, healing, charity, and teaching itself. No surprise that Bethel "prepares teachers, nurses, and social workers."]

[key problems:]

[1. Can a school rooted in "experiential piety" reach out to those who haven't experienced conversion? Can it become more diverse? While it's important to remember the unusual ecumenicism of Spener *et al.* and the notion of "irenic spirit," seems fair to ask whether a Pietist college could exist as an "umbrella" institution. There is a debate among Pietists: some believe that conversion came come as part of the educational process… A perhaps related problem, Pietist colleges in this country have been tied to a particular ethnic experience – Erickson's thesis that Nyvall meant North Park to institutionalize Swedish-American Pietism?]

[2. For those who prefer a "systematic" model, a different problem: isn't "dead orthodoxy" better than heterodoxy? Couldn't a Pietist college, with its emphasis on the subjective experience of God, lead to any number of heresies, from rationalism on one side to spiritualism on the other? Reiterates the importance of community and biblical foundation… At the same time, should make us consider the faith screen: If following Christ is about right experience and conduct, why require community members to accede – even voluntarily – to a rather lengthy list of beliefs? – many of which are rooted in the Protestant Reformation and other particular historical experiences]

[3. Can a Pietist college be a "liberal arts" college? Historically, this has been the issue, for Francke as much as for Nyvall. Francke seemed suspicious of fields of study beyond Scripture itself, but he also seemed to believe in the "unity of all truth." Nyvall rejected the Moody/Wheaton notion that Christian students ought to study at Christian institutions only, as well as the pressure from his denomination that North Park do more than educate "simple Gospel preachers," but he also questioned – later in life – why a Christian school would teach, say, Socrates. What do we mean by "liberal"? Classically, liberal arts are useful arts – again, rejects education for the cultivation of the intellect alone.]

[4. Doesn't "whole and holy" just mean "anti-intellectual and legalistic"? The first, because Pietists emphasize heart over head; will a Pietist college ever train large numbers of its students for grad school or the professions? The second, because Pietists are often accused of subverting the doctrine of "justification by faith" to make it seem like following certain rules of conduct will make one righteous.]