

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## Eco-Pietism vs. Eco-Piety

Ethan Brue

*Dordt College*, [ethan.brue@dordt.edu](mailto:ethan.brue@dordt.edu)

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## Eco-Pietism vs. Eco-Piety

### Abstract

"Good intentions undergird each practice and authentic faith formation has emerged from even our most legalistic practices."

Posting about true Christian piety from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/eco-pietism-vs-eco-piety/>

### Keywords

In All Things, piety, ecology, Christian stewardship, creation, faith

### Disciplines

Christianity | Practical Theology

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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 [inallthings.org/eco-pietism-vs-eco-piety/](http://inallthings.org/eco-pietism-vs-eco-piety/)

Ethan Brue

I grew up outside of a single Christian faith tradition. While this meandering journey in Christian community had its disadvantages, it did allow me to gain a better picture of what holds us together and what we hold in common. What holds us together is Christ and each day I am becoming more convinced of this reality. What we often hold in common is something altogether different. In my experience, what all Christian traditions hold in common is a propensity for the creation and re-creation of systems of pietism. This recurring habit influences everything, right down to our care for the environment.

In many of the church traditions I grew up in, true faith was manifest in abstaining. This included not drinking, not smoking, not watching movies, not playing cards, not using cosmetics, and making sure your prayers sounded spontaneous (i.e. not written). Other traditions leaned more toward not eating out on Sunday, not buying a Halloween costume, and not skipping an evening service. This just scratches the surface of the pietistic boundaries I've experienced. It is easy to critique such practices as false or unauthentic; however misguided they might be they are not altogether pharisaical. Good intentions undergird each practice and authentic faith formation has emerged from even our most legalistic practices. For example, while our teetotaling brothers and sisters may have a hard time defending their position that the aroma of righteousness will never smell fermented, they can build a case, on the grounds of stewarding resources, respecting the weaker brother, and being a prophetic witness in a hedonistic culture, that abstinence has its virtues. Along a similar vein, in their crusade to end smoking in the church in the 1960s, my evangelical brothers would have strengthened their case if their zeal for change would have included a push for earlier adoption of catalytic converters on all automobiles or a call for cleaner burning cook stoves around the world. Sometimes pietism is blind to its own most promising benefits.

Overall, most Christian communities expend a great deal of energy exorcising outdated pietistic protocols and reinventing new ones that are more compatible with our current cultural context. Conversely, most Christian communities would be better served (and would better serve the world) by recognizing the seeds of true Christian piety that can emerge from traditional pietistic practices, rather than by the unending deconstruction and reconstruction of pietistic walls.

I am an unapologetic advocate for true Christian piety. I realize the word carries baggage, but piety is simply what true faith looks like in practice. Piety is faith with legs! Take a look at Galatians 5:22-23, it is a faith hiker's guide to authentic piety. This guide helps us to discern pietism from piety.

- 1)** As opposed to piety, pietism is designed to be easy to assess. It focuses only on those things that can be counted, observed, marked, and applauded.
- 2)** Pietism plays to keep score. Piety plays.
- 3)** As opposed to piety, pietism is notably deficient in love, joy, peace, patience, etc.
- 4)** Pietism is endothermic (it consumes energy), piety is exothermic (it produces more energy than it requires).

So what does this have to do with stewardship and earthkeeping? First of all, I want to reaffirm writers in the Christian community who have taken the time to point out our modernist blinders.<sup>1</sup> This unbiblical

framework, driven by deterministic economics and positivistic science, undermines our ability to joyfully serve the Lord alongside the rest of creation and remember it for the gift that it is.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, I would like to evaluate our actions. Within the past year, I replaced most of the older lightbulbs in my house with LED lightbulbs. Weather permitting, I try to bike or walk to work as often as possible. I have helped to lead an effort to install solar water heating panels and solar photovoltaic modules at my workplace for renewable energy education and power generation. At this point, you cannot tell from this limited list whether I am acting out of true Christian piety or out of a religious pietism. Maybe it's a bit of both. However, what you will notice is that everything listed is countable, measureable, and capable of achieving a better "grade" in our systems of eco-pietism. In other words, this list is particularly skewed toward reinforcing a tendency toward eco-pietism. That said, it might help you to know that I still find the challenge of simplifying my life and minimizing my environmental footprint to be a creative and enjoyable task. This list of activities represents my feeble attempt at expressing my love for all that God loves. As an expression of gratitude, the list begins to read more like the fruits of the spirit.

Occasionally, I run into Christians who are so caught up in keeping a record of wrong that they forget that their duty of stewardship is foundationally a call to love. They are angry. They continually seek conflict. They are impatient. They are tired. Instead of seeing earthkeeping as a way to keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25), it becomes a project of scorekeeping.

I believe it is possible to be effectively prophetic without being pietistic. It begins with rejecting what we so often hold in common as a Christian community (pietism) and submitting to who holds us together (Christ). Once we understand that earthkeeping has more to do with who we are, rather than what we do, we are free to develop practices that reveal where our heart is. Earthkeeping cannot be reduced to a standard operating procedure for eliminating waste or inefficiency. When we focus on enabling the creation to flourish together, earthkeeping may require us to become more inefficient. We will at times be invited to waste more resources (time, energy, and materials) on the activities that enable the creation to be all that it can be. The environmental goal of "becoming" rather than "doing" will always bear more fruit. This is a win-win for all creatures.

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## Footnotes

1. De Vos, P., De Witt, C., Dykema, E., Ehlers, V., Wilkinson, L., [Earthkeeping in the 90s: Stewardship of Creation](#), Revised Edition, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991. ↩
2. Hoezee, S., [Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight](#), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998. ↩