



A Tale of Two Pieties

Reformational Holiness

Many of us were reared in pious evangelical homes and churches where “Christianity” and “Churchianity” were regularly contrasted. Christianity involved having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, whereas Churchianity involved an attachment to mere externals. This contrast could also appear in terms of the informal versus the formal, real versus nominal, born-again versus dead religion-or as an inward, individual, direct, and deeply personal experience with God as contrasted with an external, corporate, mediated, and sacramental faith. In these sharp antitheses between personal experience and churchmanship, unnecessary divisions occur that rob us all of what each side of genuine piety provides.

It is well worth exploring Christian piety as a cascading phenomenon. Reformation piety, I will argue, rather than expressing Christian life as flowing outward from the individual to broader relationships (i.e., the Church as the aggregate of the individually regenerate), sees it as cascading down from the Church and the family to the individual. And, thus, authentic Christian piety never requires choosing between a personal relationship with God in Christ and a commitment to the duties of Church and family.

In defense of duty

In contemporary culture as well as in evangelicalism, a great deal of time and energy is spent on an apparent duty to ourselves and our personal growth. Yet in other contexts, duty is almost a dirty word. Partly out of reaction to a stultifying legalism and rote traditionalism, evangelicals tend to avoid the word duty in nearly every reference to Christian growth. We find it particularly difficult to speak about our duties to family and church. If we want our children to go to church, then it cannot under any circumstances be out of a sense of duty. If Sunday evening worship is to be defended these days, then the argument must not invoke duty.

Yet duty is a crucial word. Think about how “disciple” relates to “discipline” and about how the Apostle Paul thinks of the Christian life as a race that requires serious commitment to exercise. How many things do we in fact make ourselves do – even when we don’t feel like it – precisely out of duty and in the best interest of others as well as ourselves? If we are successful at anything, we have to concede that it is at least in part because we have denied ourselves a little leisure or pleasure by forcing ourselves to exercise, to practice, to study, or to do whatever was necessary for reaching a goal beyond our immediate gratification. In the aftermath of 9/11, Americans are coming to appreciate again the duty of citizenship. We can only hope that we will not have to wait for disaster in our churches or families to awaken our sense of duty in these spheres.

Without a sense of duty, we are left to our own whims. As the most superficial of reasons for doing or not doing this or that, decision-by-whim-spontaneity-leaves us forever in the shallow end of the pool. And as those who claim to believe that even Christians remain simultaneously both sinful and justified, we should need little convincing that if we are to wait for the spontaneous upwelling of desire for good works before we love God and our neighbors, we will live passively, surrendering to our selfishness. To be sure, the gospel’s indicative – what God has done in Christ to save us – drives all of its imperatives – all of the commands of the Christian life; nevertheless, just as duty to our athletic goals requires sustained effort, so we cannot expect to grow in our faith over our lifetimes if we refuse to act on duty. The difference for those who understand the gospel of God’s free grace is that we know that our salvation has already been objectively secured by Christ and

subjectively applied by the Spirit. We know that fulfilling our duty contributes not even in the slightest toward our redemption.

Which piety?

Our view of piety is shaped not only by how we conceive of the spontaneity/duty contrast. A brief look at Church history reveals even deeper contrasts.

Advocates of pietism and early American revivalism saw themselves in continuity with the Reformation, but they were also self-consciously critical of that tradition. Not only doctrinally but also practically, pietistic revivalism and reformational piety are quite distinct. In the late nineteenth century, the great American Presbyterian minister and theologian Charles Hodge was among those voicing concern that the revivalistic spirit in American Protestantism had eroded the Reformation's covenantal approach to Christian formation. Children reared in Christian homes were no longer being considered heirs of the covenant but targets of conversion. Instead of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, they were expected to have a radical experience that they could relate to others with distinct "before" and "after" pictures of themselves. Beyond relying on God's ordinary means of grace and family nurture, parents were to seek extraordinary means or to avoid means altogether in attempting to bring their children to a supposedly immediate encounter with the God of blinding glory.

These two quite contrasting visions of piety create divergent approaches to practical devotional exercises. Governed by the covenantal mentality, Reformed and Presbyterian churches at least used to conceive of piety as a family affair. Its center was family worship, with Bible and catechism reading, singing, and prayer. Such daily exercises fed off a churchly piety in which the Lord's Day blessing cascaded down to each family unit and was renewed and increased throughout the week. These practices are still central in many Reformed and Presbyterian homes with which I have become familiar.

Coming as I have from a quite different background, they are a constant witness to me of God's faithfulness "*to a thousand generations*" when I see the truth of God and praise of his name on the lips of babes.

At least in its American version, pietistic revivalism has generated a completely different conception of proper Christian piety. Instead of God's blessings cascading down from church to family to individuals, it tries to work the other way around. But, then, just as the focus of salvation falls almost exclusively on the individual, piety is largely regarded as a private affair. One's personal relationship with God is too intimate, too personal, to be regarded as mediated within ordinary social structures-even if they are structures such as family and Church, which God himself has founded.

To be sure, any defense I would wish to make of the covenantal model of piety would have to include a defense of infant Baptism. However, I believe that even those brothers and sisters who do not view that practice as biblical can agree with me about the dangers of American individualism when it affects our practice of piety.

The individualistic approach does not actually do away with means or methods. In fact, it multiplies them. Since each person is supposedly unique, a multitude of techniques must be available. Nineteenth-century Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield speaks of the Higher Life Movement, enormously formative in twentieth-century evangelicalism, as representing an "*infection*" arising from Wesleyan perfectionism rather than from Reformation Christianity. "*These two religious systems,*" he declares, "*are quite incompatible. The one is the product of the Protestant Reformation and knows no determining power in the religious life but the grace of God; the other comes straight from the laboratory of John Wesley (Eighteenth-century Anglican reformer and founder of Methodism), and in all its forms – modifications and mitigations alike remains incurably Arminian, subjecting all gracious workings of God to human determining. The two can unite as little as fire and water.*"

Everyday – in every way

Seeking spectacular conversions requires embracing spectacular means; and the more we concentrate on these, the less stock we put in the ordinary means that God has promised to bless. To be sure, extraordinary means are initially more attractive; they offer shortcuts like *“How to be Filled with the Spirit in Seven Easy Steps.”* Like new diets – “At least 3 inches off your waist in your first week or your money back!” – new strategies for spiritual discipline and warfare are marketed almost daily. These spiritual shortcuts appeal to us for precisely the same reasons that dieting and exercising shortcuts do. And yet, as any good dietician, coach, or weight trainer will say, “No pain, no gain.” Shortcuts end in disappointment and despair. The same is true in the Christian life. You can’t become a master of English literature by attending a seminar or reading Cliff’s Notes. Good parents do not set their children in front of a television all day. Everything worth having requires cost-counting – and discipleship is framed by Jesus explicitly in these terms. Becoming an English literature scholar requires years of hard work, not all of which is always interesting or exciting. But with the goal in mind, one works at it. Similarly, we come to think and to act in Christian ways by long years of pursuing that goal. Coming home from work each evening to lead the family in worship often seems tedious. It’s easy to say to ourselves, “Hey, it’s been a long day at work today. Let’s just take tonight off.” But whether it is family training or bodily exercise, there is a very simple law of cause-and-effect in play here. We must be willing to pay the price. Those who work at a goal have a better chance of reaching it than those who don’t.

This does not diminish grace at all. But it does underscore that ordinarily God fulfills his covenant promise through the diligent care of parents, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and the larger covenant community.

So when some of our Christian brothers and sisters think that we Reformational folk do not care particularly about piety or life in the Spirit, they could not be more mistaken. It is just that our understanding of piety and life in the Spirit contrasts markedly with American Christianity’s prevailing patterns. As we search the Scriptures together, we become aware of a piety that runs deeper and further than anything we have seen in pietism. By seeing the Spirit’s work as intertwined with the ordinary means of grace we do in fact see him as crucially active in the everyday lives of his people. We see him at work whenever we encounter the Word of God preached and read, whenever we witness a Baptism, or receive the Supper. We also see him working in the fruit he produces when his people think of others as more important than themselves-even when it comes to cultivating piety.

A personal illustration

I want to close with a personal story. Although I have been Reformed for many years and a church planter in the United Reformed Churches (URC), I have only recently become a parishioner in a predominantly Dutch congregation. This happened when my wife and I moved to Escondido, California, to take up my new post teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, and we joined the URC church there. I occasionally had visited this church as a seminarian and had seen it as seemingly ethnically ingrown, unconcerned about outreach, and its members as somewhat nominal in their commitment to “real Christianity.” There just wasn’t the excitement I had known in other churches. “Are they really converted?” I sometimes wondered, although I knew theologically that such a question was not for me to answer.

Over the last three years, my wife and I have become involved in the life of this congregation. My parents, upon moving to the area, joined as well. During this time, I have had the pleasure of revising my earlier opinions.

This has occurred in the midst of personal trials. In addition to my wife’s difficulties with pregnancy, my father has had brain surgery to remove a benign tumor. This surgery has resulted in severe paralysis that makes it quite difficult for him to communicate. In our distress, God heard our cry, and he has used his people to nurse our wounds. Cards have promised to remember the family in prayer. And tangible expressions of service abound, such as the pastors and elders bringing God’s Word and the Lord’s Supper to my father, the deacons moving my mother closer to us, and meals

being provided for her until things return to normal. More recently still, there has been a steady outpouring of love and assistance with the birth of our son. I have never seen a church so prepared to care for its flock.

As we have become closer to the church families, we have learned, in spite of their Dutch reserve, that they are deeply pious and committed to expressing it. But they express it in covenantal terms, as the long-term piety that James talks about in his epistle, rather than in the individualistic, self-directed way so prominent in the churches of my youth.

Perhaps this is why I did not see it before. These folks do have a personal relationship with Christ, and they display just how real Christ is to them in fairly mundane, practical ways each day. They may not talk about the “spiritual disciplines” and how much time they spend alone with the Lord daily, but most of them attend church twice on Sunday and nurture their family’s spiritual growth throughout the week. Their own private time in God’s Word and in prayer is enriched by the substance that God provides in these communal contexts. When we dine with them, we hear their children recite the Catechism with its supporting Bible verses. They pray with knowledge and understanding as well as with zeal and familiarity.

Countering a low view of the Church

So what should we make of Churchianity? If it is a merely external commitment to an institution, then our evangelical brothers and sisters are right to reject it. A personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ is essential, and no matter how pristine one’s external standing in the Church or in a commitment to his or her family, each child of God must be related individually and personally to him. We must make time for our own refreshment, for our own opportunity to be confronted with the Word of God and to talk to our Heavenly Father in prayer. If, however, the Church is God’s gift through which he promises to deliver on his gospel and sanctify a people for himself, then there can be no proper piety apart from churchmanship, family worship, and catechesis. As Scripture itself corroborates (see, e.g., Heb. 10:24, 25; Acts 2:42), there is no place in Christian discipleship for a piety that expresses itself in various routines of private devotions but is willing to forego membership in the visible Body of Christ and regular attendance upon the public means of grace even while it lays aside essential duties to the covenantal nurture of one’s family.

There is good reason why the New Testament speaks of God’s people in covenantal terms, a temple of living stones, an assembly, an ark, a body, a holy nation, a vine, a tree, a spouse, and so forth. For the Church and the family are regarded as much more than mere aggregates of individuals who have a personal relationship with God. We are supposed to see our individual piety as resulting from our belonging to the people of God, at church and at home. We are “*living stones*” only as we are “*being built up*” into “*a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet. 2:4-5). It is by being grafted onto the Vine that we who were dead and fruitless are made alive so that we may bear fruit to God. It is only by virtue of our connection with the body whose head is Christ that we are anything but lifeless, amputated limbs.

Authentic Christian piety is expressed with others over a lifetime, as God’s people are exposed to the work of the Spirit through Word and Sacrament, so that their union with Christ is concretely experienced in this life by their union with each other. This piety is not as flamboyant as the individualistic piety encouraged by spiritual fads, but it runs deeper and further under God’s promised blessing. Then, instead of concentrating exclusively on our own spiritual blessing, we become instruments of blessing for others wherever God has placed us in this world and in the flock he has purchased with his own blood.

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