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PIETY
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The Heartbeat of Reformed Theology

JOEL R. BEEKE
THE WORD *PIETY* has become a pejorative term today. Classifying someone as “pietistic” most often connotes excessive religiosity, self-righteousness, or a holier-than-thou attitude.

The etymology of the word *piety*, however, is more upbeat. The Old Testament term for this word means “the fear of the Lord,” and its equivalent in the New Testament, *eusebia*, means “reverence for God” and “godliness.” The Latin term for piety (*pietas*) indicates a childlike affection for God and his family. The German word (*fromm*) signifies “godly and devout” or “gentle, harmless, and simple.” The English word implies pity and compassion.¹

The sixteenth-century Reformers, most notably John Calvin (1509–64), would be shocked to see how poorly piety is regarded today, even among those who profess to be Reformed. For Calvin and his successors—the Protestant scholastics, the English Puritans, the Dutch Further Reformation divines, and, to some extent, the German Pietists—theology and practice were inseparably wed. Reformed theologians viewed piety as the heartbeat of their theology and of godly living.

Let us examine the importance of piety in Reformed theology, specifically in the work of Calvin, William Ames, and Gisbertus Voetius. We then will look at various definitions of Pietism, and conclude by offering some practical ways in which we may cultivate true piety in our daily lives.

¹ This paragraph is adapted from Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.
PIETY IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

John Calvin

Piety (pietas) is one of the major themes of Calvin’s theology. While Calvin is known for his systematization of Reformed theology, his intellectual and doctrinal concerns must not be viewed apart from the spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. As John T. McNeill rightly remarks, Calvin’s theology is “his piety described at length.”

Calvin’s concept of piety is rooted in the knowledge of God and includes attitudes and actions that are directed to the adoration and service of God. For Calvin, piety flows out of theology and includes heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love. Knowing who and what God is (theology proper) includes right attitudes toward God and doing what he wants (piety). Calvin connects theology and piety in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, stating, “I call ‘piety’ that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.” According to Calvin, love and reverence for God are the necessary corollaries to true knowledge of him.


Calvin says piety embraces every aspect of one’s life. He writes, “The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness.” This same concern for pious living is reflected in the subtitle of Calvin’s first edition of the Institutes: “Embracing almost the whole sum of piety, & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety.” Calvin’s comments on 1 Timothy 4:7–8 also reflect the importance of pietas: “You will do the thing of greatest value, if with all your zeal and ability you devote yourself to godliness [pietas] alone. Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking. . . . Thus the conclusion is that we should concentrate exclusively on godliness, for when once we have attained to it, God requires no more of us.”

The supreme goal of this full-orbed piety is the glory of God. The primary desire of every regenerate person is to live according to the original purpose of creation—namely, that God may be glorified. Personal salvation, though critical, is therefore secondary for the pious person. So Calvin writes to Cardinal Sadolet:

5. Inst. 3.19.2 (italics added).
It is not very sound theology to confine a man’s thought so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive for his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. . . . I am persuaded that there is no man imbued with true piety who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God. 8

The pious person’s deepest concern is God: God’s Word, God’s authority, God’s gospel, God’s truth. Glorifying God—which is synonymous with pious living—means taking refuge in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and living within the bounds God has revealed. 9 The pious person’s response to the gracious declaration of the gospel is complete surrender to the revealed will of God. In short, the comprehensive desire of the pious person is Calvin’s oft-quoted vow: “I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely.”

William Ames

William Ames (1576–1633), a renowned Puritan who authored a classic titled The Marrow of Theology, defines theology as “the doctrine or teaching [doctrina] of living to God.” 10 For

8. OS 1:363–64 (emphasis added).
9. Calvin writes, “God has prescribed for us a way in which he will be glorified by us, namely, piety, which consists in the obedience of his Word. He that exceeds these bounds does not go about to honor God, but rather to dishonor him.” Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia, eds. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, Corpus Reformatorum, vols. 29–87 (Brunswick, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke and Son, 1863–1900), 49:51.
Ames, theology is a divine-human encounter that is not merely speculative but culminates in a practical end—the alignment of the human will with the will of a holy God.\footnote{Ames, \textit{Marrow}, 1.1.9–13.} In his fullest definition of theology, Ames concludes: “Theology, therefore, is to us the ultimate and the noblest of all exact teaching arts. It is a guide and master plan for our highest end, sent in a special manner from God, treating of divine things, tending towards God, and leading man to God. It may therefore not incorrectly be called \textit{θεοξία} [\textit{theoxia}], a living to God, or \textit{θεουργία} [\textit{theourgia}], a working towards God, as well as theology.”\footnote{Ibid., 1.1.13.}

Ames says that everything in the study of theology is related to practical godly living. He writes, “This practice of life is so perfectly reflected in theology that there is no precept of universal truth relevant to living well in domestic morality, political life, or lawmaking which does not rightly pertain to theology.”\footnote{Ibid., 1.1.12.}

Reformed theologians, such as Calvin and Ames, have always taught that godly living finds its source in God’s gracious activity. According to Calvin, piety is rooted in the believer’s mystical union (\textit{unio mystica}) with Christ; this union is piety’s starting point.\footnote{Howard G. Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” in \textit{Protestant Spiritual Traditions}, ed. Frank C. Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 61.} Union with Christ is possible because Jesus Christ assumed humanity, filling it with his virtue. Although Christ is not united with us in a crass mixture (\textit{crassa mixtura}) of human...
to “practically treat the solid and orthodox science of theology, which is by nature practical.”

The writings of Voetius, along with his thirty-six years of pastoral work (including part-time preaching, visiting the sick, and catechizing Utrecht’s orphan children), confirmed his love for the practice of theology (*theologia practica*), which induces God-glorifying piety. Though known for his polemics and scholastic methodology, Voetius was no ivory-tower theologian. Rather, he taught that the practical and experiential dimension of theology can be enhanced by the scholastic method, for, in the words of Johannes Hoornbeeck, “There is no practice without theory.”

Like Ames before him, Voetius carefully distinguished theory and practice but never separated the two. A theology that is rooted in faith must be practical; it must, according to Voetius, be used to encourage the spiritual exercises of the divine graces of repentance, faith, hope, and love.

**TWO FORMS OF PIETISM**

Calvin, Ames, and Voetius all advocated a theology that encouraged holy, dependent living. They might therefore be called pietists. Some might recoil at that suggestion; however, I believe the term *pietist*, much like the term *puritan*, may be properly applied to more theologians than is sometimes done, provided we use the term *pietist*, with a lowercase *p*, rather than *Pietist*, with a capital *P*.

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Two Forms of Pietism

an uppercase \( P \), which refers to members of the historical movement of Pietism that developed in Germany.\(^\text{22}\) Let me explain.

Defining pietism is not an easy task.\(^\text{23}\) Comparing the historiographical development of this term to a “vast swamp,” Carter Lindberg helpfully outlines two broad camps of “strict constructionist” and “transconfessional phenomenon.”\(^\text{24}\) The strict constructionists, led more recently by Johannes Wallmann, consider Pietism to be a definable historic movement that began in the late 1660s in Frankfurt, Germany, with a Lutheran pastor. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) became discouraged at the church’s inability to motivate its parishioners to godly thinking and action, so he started meeting with small groups of believers on Sabbath afternoons to prompt Bible study and discussion. These groups, which Spener called \textit{collegia pietatis} (“study classes in piety”), grew and spread throughout Germany and beyond. Critics of Spener dubbed those who belonged to these groups “Pietists.” The movement lasted only a few generations, ending in the mid-eighteenth century, though its results have lingered until today.\(^\text{25}\)


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