

WHAT IS REFORMED SPIRITUALITY? PLAYED OVER AGAIN LIGHTLY

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Several months ago I was asked by *Perspectives* to write an article on what a Reformed spirituality might be. The article generated a number of questions and even requests to reprint it. *Christianity Today* wanted me to rewrite it in a more popular style, which I did, but then they edited it with a heavy hand. Several letters to the editor of *Perspectives* elicited responses from me which have appeared in that periodical. With John Leith's recent request to reprint it I suggested to him that he allow me to rewrite the article in light of the discussion which has followed. So, once again I write on the subject of what is Reformed spirituality.

The Reformation was a reform of spirituality as much as it was a reform of theology. For millions of Christians at the end of the Middle Ages the old spirituality had broken down. For centuries spirituality had been cloistered behind monastery walls. To be serious about living the Christian life had meant to separate oneself from the world and enter a religious community. It was there, in the convent or monastery, that medieval spirituality flourished. It was at its very heart a celibate, ascetic, and penitential devotion. With the Reformation the whole focus of the Christian life changed. Rather than separating themselves from human society, Christians began to think of devotion in terms of living out every day life according to God's will (Romans 12:1-2). For Protestants spirituality became a matter of how one lived the Christian life with the family, out in the fields, in the workshop, in the kitchen, or at one's trade. Let us look at several characteristics of this Reformed spirituality.

A number of years ago an attempt was made to collect the classics of Western spirituality. Some of us were surprised that only a few token Protestants were included. And a number of these were sort of offbeat. The piety of neither the Quakers nor the Shakers can be regarded as typically Protestant, however highly we may regard these groups otherwise. Jakob Boehm, William Law, and Emmanuel Swedenborg are more properly regarded as theologians, even if formally they may have belonged to Protestant churches. The classics of an obviously Reformed spirituality such as the metrical psalms of Clément Marot and Theodore Beza, so filled with adoration and ardour; both John Calvin's and Samuel Rutherford's letters of spiritual counsel; Jonathan Edwards' *A Faithful Narrative*; the Bible commentary of Matthew Henry, so full of devotional insight; the hymns of Horatius Bonar, so rich in their sense of God's holiness; the missionary journal of David Brainerd, who gave his life preaching to the Indians in the back woods of Colonial New Jersey; Thomas Shepard's sermons on the wise and foolish virgins, preached in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; and even Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* were all overlooked. This led many to ask if there is any such thing as a Reformed spirituality. I have been asked this question a number of times. But I have to insist that the question would hardly arise if we became a bit clearer about our terminology. Calvinists have usually preferred the term

“piety” to the term “spirituality.” Reformed theologians have usually spoken of the doctrine of the Christian life when they have wanted to speak about what Roman Catholics call “spirituality theology.” None of us would ever think of questioning whether there is any such thing as a Reformed piety, or a Calvinist doctrine of the Christian life. I have no objection to using the term “spirituality,” especially in the ecumenical discussion, as long as we realize that in Protestant circles other terms are more frequently used.

There is something else which somewhat beclouds the question of a Reformed spirituality. The older generation labored under the impression that once Calvin put down his pen nothing produced by his successors was worth much attention. Only recently have we begun to realize that seventeenth century Protestantism produced some masterpieces as well. In fact it was in its second and third centuries, as Protestantism was becoming more and more mature, that it produced its best works on the Christian life, on prayer, and on worship. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it became more and more clear that there was a Protestant culture, that it was a very devout culture and that it had its own way of expressing its faith, that is, it had its own spirituality, or, if you prefer, its own piety. Let us look at some of its central characteristics.

The first thing I would like to suggest is that a Reformed spirituality is a spirituality of the Word. A spirituality of the Word is nothing new to Christianity. Already in the Gospel of John we find a highly developed spirituality of the Word. The opening verses of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18) set the theme of this spirituality and through the whole rest of the Gospel it is developed. Jesus is presented as the Word, the revelation of the Wisdom of God. The Christian life is a matter of hearing this Word and receiving it by faith. The Gospel of John is picking up on a very important theme of biblical literature, the Wisdom theme. This Wisdom theme is particularly strong in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and many of the psalms. The Wisdom writers of Israel, quite different from the priestly writers or the prophets, developed a particular kind of piety. It was the piety of those whose lives centered around the bible, who were charged with the care of the sacred book and the teaching of its precepts. It was a scholar's piety which gave great attention to studying the bible, copying its manuscripts, preserving the history of its interpretation, and finally to the preparation and delivery of sermons. The Old Testament Wisdom School fostered a preaching piety. The foundation of its educational system was the memorization of the text of Scripture. The rabbis of Jesus' day kept alive this bookish kind of piety, as did the earliest Christian Church. It was this sort of thing which Luke undoubtedly had in mind when he tells us that the Apostles devoted themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The study of the Word of God was at the center of the apostolic ministry. Christianity was from the beginning a religion of the Book and its piety was a piety of the Book. (In my recent book, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* I have gone into the nature of this wisdom piety at some length.)

During the first five centuries of Christian history the Wisdom piety was very prominent. It strongly influenced Christians like Origen, the second century biblical scholar, as well as Jerome, the most literate of ancient Christians. One might also mention Augustine, the North African preacher, who left us a whole library of biblical interpretation. At the end of the fourth century John Chrysostom, the preeminent preacher of Antioch and Patriarch of

Constantinople, was another example of a man whose spirituality was profoundly a spirituality of the Word.

At the time of the Reformation this spirituality of the Word gave a prominent place to the public preaching of the Word as well as to personal study and meditation on the Word. Early in the Reformation many preachers such as Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, and Knox rejected the lectionary and began to preach through books of the Bible one at a time. This was called preaching the *lectio continua*. It was a systematic approach to the interpretation of Scripture in worship. It aimed at explaining the text of Scripture as the authoritative Word of God rather than giving the preacher's view on a variety of religious subjects. Every serious Christian was expected to study the Scriptures systematically at home. It was a common thing for individual Christians to read through the whole Bible once each year. A good deal of time was given to this, especially on the Lord's Day. At family prayers the favorite books — the Gospels, Acts, Genesis, Exodus, I and II Samuel — were read through again and again.

A spirituality of the Word entails a number of devotional practices. My grandmother, a very proper Presbyterian lady who did her finishing school at Moravian Female Seminary well over a hundred years ago, could recite by heart the Sermon on the Mount, several chapters from the Gospel of John, some forty different psalms, and much more. Her father, although he was not a minister, had a large library of the published sermons of prominent preachers. Again and again he read the pulpit masterpieces of Thomas Manton, one of the fathers of the Westminster Assembly, Alexander Maclaren, the Scottish Baptist, and Samuel Davies, the Virginia Presbyterian who later became president of Princeton. At the dinner table on Sundays the discussion of the sermon was an art. Sunday dinner was always a leisurely meal served in a number of courses to encourage the savoring of the sermon. Discussing sermons, reading sermons, and memorizing Scripture were the duties of piety. As my grandmother reported it, that was the Presbyterian piety in which she was raised. It was clearly a piety of the Book.

The second thing I would like to suggest is that a Reformed spirituality is a spirituality of the Psalter. The piety of which we are heirs was nourished by praying the psalms, singing and meditating on them, not only at Church but at family prayers every day of the week. The whole point of singing the psalms of course is that the psalms are the fundamental prayers of the Church. We know that Jesus constantly prayed the psalms as every good Jew in his day did. The Church continued the practice in ancient times, rejoicing in the way the psalms had been fulfilled in Christ. The earliest Christians understood the psalms as the prayers of the Holy Spirit and therefore the psalms were honored as a primary component of the prayer of the Church (Acts 4:23-31). John Calvin wrote into the preface of the *Genevan Psalter* of 1542 that the psalms are of value for Christian prayer, because being the prayers of the Spirit they teach us to pray as we ought even when we are not sure how to pray (Romans 8:26). It was not that he thought there was something wrong with singing other hymns. It was just that if one had the Psalms one could hardly find anything else to compare with them. One of Calvin's greatest contributions to the reform of worship in the sixteenth century was his commentary on the Psalms. The Genevan Reformer had a very profound sense of the psalms as Christian prayer. Isaac Watts, the English Congregationalist, wrote many hymns based on the psalms which are still popular today. Charles Wesley produced a particularly fine

collection of metrical psalms. Today, a number of Christian poets are producing very singable psalm versions. There is no question about it — any kind of Protestant spirituality is going to be a singing spirituality. For Reformed Protestantism a good part of that singing is going to be psalm singing.

The spirituality of the Lord's Day is another cardinal feature of Reformed piety. While the beauty of the Christian understanding of the Lord's Day has often been obscured by a sort of Sabbatarian legalism, there is something very profound about the biblical sign of the eighth day, the first day of the New Creation (John 20:1, 19, and 26). It was Jesus himself who reinterpreted the old Sabbath and established the Lord's Day by meeting with his disciples for worship on the first day of the week (John 20:19 and 26). A few years ago I discovered a work of John Willison, minister in Dundee, Scotland, with the title, *Treatise concerning the Sanctification of the Lord's Day*. From this work I began to sense the spiritual vitality of the observance of the Lord's Day as our spiritual ancestors understood it. Willison was obviously much more concerned with what one should do on the Lord's Day than what one should not do. It was a day blessed with a benediction of peace and rest and quiet. It was a day devoted to prayer and works of charity.

More recently the High Church Movement has tried to convince us that we should replace our emphasis on the Lord's Day with a spirituality of the liturgical calendar. Actually, the observance of Lent and Advent which has become so much in vogue in our day is quite antithetical to a Reformed piety. The whole working out of the liturgical calendar is based on asceticism. It puts the emphasis on seasons of fasting rather than the weekly observance of the Resurrection of Christ. Lent and Advent become the "religious" seasons of the year while the observance of the fifty days of Easter and the twelve days of Christmas become anticlimactic. A true Reformed piety could never drape any Lord's Day with penitential purple!

Lent and Advent were rejected because the Reformers regarded the devotional exercises of these seasons as thoroughly Pelagian. These disciplines implied asceticism was the way to godliness, as though by giving things up one could attain holiness. In their penitential disciplines Lent and Advent enshrined the old concept of penance which the Reformers were eager to leave behind them. They figured the Apostle Paul nailed that sort of spirituality when he warned against those who kept insisting, "Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch" (Colossians 2:21), and "Who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods" (I Timothy 4:1-5).

The asceticism so popular in the Hellenistic world was based on Neo-platonism, not the teaching of Jesus. Unlike John the Baptist Jesus was not an ascetic (Matthew 11:18-19). Asceticism made a strong connection between dietary laws and the calendar, but the Reformed churches have usually felt about this pretty much as the Apostle Paul, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:23).

Rigorism has always been a temptation to the devout, no matter what their denominational allegiance. The rigorism sometimes associated with Lenten fasting is well known. In our own Church rigorism in regard to Sabbath observance has often deformed one of the best reforms of the sixteenth century. The trick now is to free that insight from the rigorism with which it has so often been afflicted.

Quite to the contrary to the ascetic orientation of the liturgical calendar the Reformed tradition puts the emphasis on the observance of the Lord's Day. It sees the service as a foretaste of the worship of heaven (Hebrews 4:9 and Revelation 1:10). The fact that our worship is on the first day of the week, the day of Resurrection, puts our worship in a unique light. It casts it in a joyful, festive mood. There is another very important point to be noticed here. The Reformed manuals of devotion always tell us of the humanitarian dimension of the Lord's Day observance. They speak of how Jesus took the initiative of healing on the Sabbath. It was a day of releasing people from their burdens (Luke 13:16). It was a day for relieving the poor (I Corinthians 16:2). This brings us to another essential characteristic of our devotional life.

A Reformed spirituality puts a strong emphasis on works of mercy. One of the unique features of the Reformed doctrine of the ministry is its interpretation of the office of deacon. Rather than understanding the office as the first step on the hierarchical ladder as it had been understood by Medieval Catholicism, the Reformed Church understands the ministry of the deacons as a ministry of mercy (Acts 6:1-6). Particularly in modern Presbyterian churches, it is the responsibility of the deacons to lead the Church in its care of the poor, in the care of widows and orphans, and in its ministry to the sick and the afflicted. During the seventeenth century in the Netherlands devout Christians gave a great deal of time and money to the establishment of hospices. These privately endowed foundations took the responsibility of providing for the care of orphans, widows, the disabled, and others who were in need. Every Dutch town had a full complement of these foundations of Christian charity. It was the German Reformed pastor Theodore Fliegner who in the last century organized deaconesses into religious communities to carry on the works of mercy which have traditionally been so fundamental to the Christian life. In nineteenth century America it was the same concern which led to the building of what has often been called the benevolent empire.

A Reformed spirituality finds in the celebration of the Lord's Supper a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Participation in the sacred meal seals the covenantal union between us and our God. It restores and strengthens that covenantal relationship. Not only does the sacrament bring us into communion with God, it brings us into the Christian community. The covenantal dimension of Reformed sacramental piety is one of its most prominent characteristics. (See the chapter I have devoted to this subject in *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology*.) A covenantal approach to the sacraments is very old. One finds it particularly in Tertullian who coined our word sacrament from the Latin word used for the oath of allegiance made by soldiers entering military service. This was an obvious recognition of the covenantal dimension of the sacraments. Augustine perpetuated this line of thought, but perhaps even more interesting is the covenantal theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Theodore was the great exegete of the school of Antioch, a friend and contemporary of John Chrysostom. He made clear the covenantal dimension of both baptism and the Lord's

Supper. When the Protestant Reformers began to understand the sacraments as covenant signs which sealed the covenant of Grace they were by no means introducing a novelty. They were reviving a very biblical concept, and it was a biblical concept which had often been recognized down through the history of Christian doctrine. From this covenantal understanding of the sacraments developed a very rich eucharistic piety.

Communion may only be celebrated a few times a year in most Reformed churches, but traditionally when it was celebrated a great amount of time was given to its celebration. Preparatory services have been an important element in Reformed sacramental piety. In eighteenth century Scotland it was the practice to hold a week of preparatory services before the observance of the sacrament and to follow it with several thanksgiving services. These Communion seasons were the mountaintop experiences of the Christian life. As we discover from the communion meditations of Matthew Henry (1662-1712), minister of the Presbyterian Church in Chester, England, preparation for the Lord's Supper was a time for the most serious devotional meditation. In those days it was very common to approach Communion as the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The theme of God's redemptive love is very strong in Reformed sacramental piety. The communion sermon would often take a text from the Song of Solomon. A beautiful example of this is a communion sermon by Jodocus van Lodenstein who was minister in the Dutch city of Utrecht from 1653-1677. (The text of this sermon was published by Iain S. Maclean in *Calvin Studies* VI.) In New Jersey in the late 1730s we find Jacobus Theodorus Freylinghuysen and Gilbert Tennent preaching the same kind of sacramental piety as they led the Great Awakening. They invited their congregations to the Lord's Table to experience the consummate love of Christ and to pledge their love to him in return. (See my article, "Gilbert Tennent and the Preaching of Piety in Colonial America" in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, July, 1989.)

Stewardship is yet another major theme of a Reformed spirituality. Reacting against the asceticism of the Middle Ages the Reformers took the parables of Jesus concerning the good stewards and their care of the talents entrusted to them as the basis for a new Christian understanding of the use of wealth (Luke 12:42-48 and Matthew 25:14-30). In the centuries that followed, Christian merchants, craftsmen, housewives, farmers, and bankers began to discover positive spiritual value in their work. More and more they found in their industry, in their labor, and in their professions a true vocation. Family life, the raising of children, the support of the elderly, and the care of a home were more and more regarded as sacred trusts. This new approach to life was beautifully expressed by the seventeenth century Dutch painters. Vermeer, de Hooch, Hobbema, and Rembrandt eloquently showed us the sacredness of every day life as they painted the kitchens, the courtyards, and the country lanes in which Dutchmen lived out their Christian lives. The Puritans in both England and America gave family life a new dignity by making daily family prayer a primary spiritual discipline. Every Christian home is a little Church, as Richard Baxter put it. In such classics as Baxter's *Christian Directory* we find a great deal on the subject of Reformed spirituality and especially of how it functioned in the life of the family.

Part of the Reformed understanding of stewardship is what some have called the Protestant work ethic. As maligned as it was back in the Sixties it was an essential part of the spirituality which has time and time again delivered Protestants from poverty. Now that the

Sixties are long past it is time to take another look at how a Reformed spirituality contributed to the rise of capitalism. It may well be more positive than the Marxists wanted us to believe. Today one is amazed at how the Protestant understanding of stewardship has blossomed in some of the younger churches. Recently I visited Korea and saw how much the Christians of Korea had been able to accomplish because of their keen sense of stewardship. A particularly inspiring story which was told me by the Reverend Dr. Sang-Bok Kim concerns Soon Young Choi, a Christian, one of Seoul's financial geniuses, and his wife, Dr. Hyung Cha Lee. Mrs. Lee having had a vision for world missions for many years has organized the Torch Center for World Missions. Not only has this institution supported Korean Christian missionary work in Asia, but it has taken a lead in encouraging a Christian culture in Korea. To these ends this couple has devoted a sizable portion of their fortune.

As the story of the widow's mite shows (Mark 12:42 and Luke 21:2), the faithful stewardship of even the most humble can be a mighty force in the kingdom of God. Good stewardship implies that we owe all that we have and all that we are to God. It is certainly not just a question of giving alms. How one makes one's money and how one spends one's money is a major question of the devotional life. For today's Christian the working out of the family budget is a religious act. The setting apart of a tithe for the support of the Church and other charitable causes is only the beginning. One needs to consider carefully what causes should be supported. One needs to consider what sort of expenses are appropriate for a Christian. How much can one spend on articles of fashion or luxury? In regard to one's savings and investments, what sort of corporations are worthy of one's support? This whole matter of the devout use of money might be called the theology of stewardship. It is one of the most creative developments of the contemporary church.

Today more and more the choice of a vocation is a matter of stewardship. For a young Christian particularly it is important to ask how one is going to spend one's life. So many different possibilities for serving God as research scientists, agronomists, engineers, financial managers, teachers of handicapped children, and all kinds of other things are opening up to young people! More and more Christians want to spend their lives in a significant way. This concern about vocation goes back to Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers, of course, yet modern technology has given it possibilities Luther never dreamed of. This concern for finding one's vocation has always been at the heart of a true Protestant piety.

Finally we need to consider the place of meditation on the mystery of divine Providence. Surely this is another cardinal dimension of a Reformed spirituality. John Flavel, the English Puritan, wrote the classic on this subject. He tells us how the Christian, confident that God's providence embraces all the events of our lives, gains understanding by thinking about how God is speaking to us, warning us, encouraging us, leading us through life, guiding us in his service, and finally bringing us to himself. The thoughtful Christian thinks over what Providence has brought about and listening carefully to the Word of God tries to discern God's leading. John Calvin, famous for his doctrine of predestination, gave a great deal of attention to preaching about what that doctrine means for the living of the Christian life. The lives of Abraham, Joseph, and David give us constant examples of how God shapes our lives. Abraham was called to a land which is described simply as a land which God would show him

(Genesis 12:1). Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt and yet the Bible is very clear that God had led him through those difficult days that he might be a blessing not only to the Egyptians but to his own family as well (Genesis 45:7). David was anointed by Samuel to be king over Israel while he was still a boy. God alone could have ordered his life so that eventually he would ascend the throne and fulfill God's purpose for his life (Psalm 138:8). God revealed to Jeremiah that even before he had been born he had been called to be a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5). The life of Christ, even his passion and resurrection, were all part of God's plan for our salvation (Acts 2:23-24). The Apostles saw even their own ministry as the unfolding of God's plan (I Peter 2:4-10). One of the greatest sermons ever preached on the spiritual application of the doctrine of Providence was a sermon by the English Baptist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. His sermon on Queen Esther shows that each one of us has a divinely appointed destiny. Each one of us has a purpose in life. The devout life is one dedicated to fulfilling that purpose.

The spirituality of God's eternal purposes has often led to an evangelistic, missionary spirituality (Ephesians 1:3-23). That was basic to the covenantal relationship from the very beginning (Genesis 12:1-3). We are called to blessedness that we might be a blessing. The last words of Jesus to his disciples was the Great Commission, "Go make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-20). It is often the case that the heroic spirits of Reformed piety have been missionaries. In 1744 the Presbytery of Newark sent young David Brainerd out into the New Jersey woodlands as a missionary to the Indians. His ministry was short lived because he contracted tuberculosis and died in 1747, and yet the journal he kept during that short ministry certainly ranks as one of the classics of American Protestant spirituality. It shows him to have had a very rich awareness of God's presence. He knew the dark night of the soul as well as the ecstasies of praise. Somehow that missionary journal is one of the first fruits, one of the prototypes, of the whole of American Protestantism. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the spirituality of many circles in the Reformed Church was centered in evangelism at home and missionary work abroad. This was particularly true of Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians. A tremendous amount of the best spiritual energy of our grandparents was invested in the missionary movement, a movement which today is reaping a plentiful harvest.