

A Tale of Two Pieties

By Rev. Andy Wilson

The term ‘piety’ can be used to refer to the set of practices in which Christian faith is expressed, cultivated, and passed on. Christian piety is the way we give expression to our claim to have given ourselves, truly and sincerely, to our Savior. It is the heartbeat of biblical Christianity.

One of the unfortunate aspects of American Christianity is that many Christians approach the practice of their faith in a highly individualistic manner, with minimal guidance from the church. In the words of theologian David Wells, American religion is characterized by “self-piety.”¹ This is a central theme in the monumental sociological study *Habits of the Heart*, in which a team of researchers led by Robert Bellah discovered that for many Americans, the ultimate authority for the life of faith resides in one’s own private and inner experiences. The study reports:

“For Americans, the traditional relationship between the individual and the religious community is to some degree reversed... a 1978 Gallup poll found that 80 percent of Americans agreed that an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue.”²

The beliefs of a woman named Nan Pfautz stand out as a perfect illustration of this mindset:

“Nan Pfautz, raised in a strict Baptist church, is now an active member of a Presbyterian congregation near San Jose... Yet, like many Americans, she feels that her personal relationship to God transcends her involvement in any particular church... She says, ‘I believe I have a commitment to God which is beyond church. I felt my relationship with God was O.K. when I wasn’t with the church.’”³

According to the Gallup poll and Bellah’s study, this sentiment is representative of the vast majority of Americans, regardless of their religious convictions. For the most part, we see church as an optional component in an individual’s relationship with God. We believe that a person’s relationship with God is fundamentally a private matter.

¹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 137-186.

² Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, p. 228.

³ Bellah, p. 228.

This mindset is deeply ingrained in the American psyche; so much so that many Christians assume that the church has no business instructing them in how to practice their faith in their daily lives. Many Christians would take offense if their pastor were to suggest that certain ways of living out the faith might cause more harm than good, or that other ways of living out the faith might be more consistent with Scripture. Of course, this mindset is not consistent with the biblical picture of discipleship, in which church leaders, not private Christians, are charged with the care of Christian souls: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” (Hebrews 13:17a)

It is important for pastors in the Reformed tradition to be able to recognize the problematic aspects of mainstream evangelical piety, and to cultivate an understanding of piety that is more consistent with Reformed theology and practice. This paper is intended to encourage such reflection by briefly contrasting two main approaches to piety within American evangelicalism: populist and confessional.⁴ While populist piety is by far the predominant piety within contemporary evangelicalism, confessional piety has roots that can be traced through the Reformation, the apostolic age, and all the way back to the time of the Old Testament. Some of the most fundamental distinctions between these two types of piety are that the populist version is characterized by fluidity, a perception of strength, and a quest for immediate results, while confessional piety is characterized by constancy, a sense of weakness, and the patience to wait for results.

Populistic piety is the piety of mainstream contemporary evangelicalism. It is based upon the idea that the Christian faith should be expressed, cultivated, and passed on by developing practices and programs that demonstrate the relevance of the Christian faith, appealing to popular desires, tastes, and felt needs. Examples of this piety include: Saddleback Community Church’s “Celebrate Recovery” program; the film ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church of Albany, Georgia, which produced the popular 2006 film “Facing the Giants”; VeggieTales; the Christian pop music industry; the use of dramatic skits in worship services; the “Left Behind” books; etc. It is an approach to living out the Christian faith that emphasizes the importance of innovation, technique, and contemporary relevance. It says that the church should always be adapting its practices in order to meet the changing demands and passing tastes of the restless world in which we live. As a result, it has a tendency to follow the latest trend or fad.

Populistic piety is consistent with the mindset of modern popular culture, which is grounded upon the assumption that each generation needs to define itself anew by choosing from the various cultural products, styles, and lifestyles that are offered through the media and marketplace. This consumerist approach to identity formation stands in sharp contrast to that which is found in traditional cultures, in which personal identity is

⁴ These categories are adapted from D.G. Hart’s book *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, in which he describes American Protestants in the categories of pietist and confessional.

shaped as beliefs and practices are passed down from one generation to the next. In this sense, popular culture is not really a culture at all.

Nevertheless, the anti-traditional approach of populist piety meets with a large degree of success in our culture. This is challenging because, as David Wells observes,

“In America, it has always been hard to quarrel with success; it is even more futile when there are those who are convinced that the success has been divinely produced. Yet, if one understands modernity, it is not difficult to imagine that much of what is vaunted as the Spirit’s work may have causes that are rather more natural. Nor is it difficult to understand that where a religion is busy accommodating itself to culture there will be a period of success before the disillusionment sets in. In the end, those who promote the sort of Christianity that accommodates the culture always have to answer the question as to what they are offering in Christ that cannot be had from purely secular sources.”⁵

In other words, the perceived strength of populist piety (its relevance) proves to be its Achilles heel. Populistic piety fails to realize that Christian faith is not merely a set of ideas that can be wrapped in whatever garment meets the fashion standards of a given moment. Instead, our faith is a way of life that needs to be passed on from one generation to the next.

Confessional piety is the piety of historic Reformed Protestantism. Confessional piety asserts that the Christian faith should be expressed, cultivated, and passed on through practices that have been shaped as a result of careful and sustained reflection on biblical doctrine. Examples include: the centrality of corporate worship for the Christian life; hymnody that reflects and instills the teaching of our confessions; family worship and private devotions; catechetical instruction; Sabbath observance; pastoral visitation; and Christian witness that focuses upon the objective truth of the Christian faith and the call for Christians to live holy lives in this world, as opposed to approaches to witness that focus upon making the gospel appear relevant to non-believers. In the words of D.G. Hart:

“Confessional Protestantism invites another way of evaluating the making of believers. Its history demonstrates the importance of inheritance and the way that believers appropriate faith over a lifetime through the sustained ministry and counsel of pastors as opposed to the momentary crisis induced by the itinerant evangelist or the pressures of sitting around a fire at summer camp. In other words, confessional Protestantism raises important considerations about how people get religion, how they remain devout, whether formal religious activities

⁵ David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, pp. 174-5.

make a difference in such processes, and the degree to which institutional bodies control the meaning of what it means to be religious in a particular tradition.”⁶

In contrast to populist piety’s emphasis upon adaptation and innovation, confessional piety emphasizes the importance of heritage and tradition.

For this reason, confessional piety is more consistent with the manner in which beliefs, practices, and patterns of life are transmitted in traditional cultures. In such cultures, it is assumed that a significant degree of intergenerational continuity is necessary if the community hopes to maintain its distinctive identity. Sociologist Lee Harris describes the process of cultural transmission in traditional cultures by using a culinary analogy:

“It is not enough to pass on the good china; you must also pass on the family recipe for making the pot roast. Yet even that is not enough; you must also find a way to pass along the culinary skills needed to transform a recipe written in words into an actual plate of pot roast. Figuratively speaking, a civilization must pass on the china, the recipe and the cook. But even this is not quite enough. You must also make the cook realize that in addition to cooking, he must know how to replace himself, and most critically, he must feel that he has a duty to replace himself. Not only must he teach his children to cook, but he must also teach them how to teach their children to cook.”⁷

This is exactly what we see in Scripture, where the people of Israel were instructed with words such as: “[T]ell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done... that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children.” (Ps. 78:4, 6) The Bible is not just concerned with transmitting the faith to the next generation, but also with teaching and equipping that generation to pass on the faith to the generation after them. This process is hindered when we foster an approach to piety that presumes that each new generation needs to find its own way of living out the faith. Christian faith needs to be treated as a foundation that has already been laid; a deposit to be guarded and passed on. And this is done by passing on practices and patterns of life in which this faith is embodied, not merely by passing on a set of ideas and expecting each new generation to create its own way of living out the faith.

Populistic piety is built upon the assumption that the church needs to be constantly adapting its methods and practices to be more culturally relevant if it hopes to

⁶ Hart, p. 184.

⁷ Cited in Ken Myers, “The Necessity of Tradition”, posted at www.marshillaudio.org.

successfully promote the gospel in our contemporary context.⁸ As noted earlier, it is characterized by fluidity. In contrast, confessional piety is characterized by a general sense of constancy and continuity. One of the main reasons for this distinction is because of confessionalism's refusal to sever the practical aspects of the faith from the sound doctrine that we confess. A confessional church believes that the Scriptures must govern both our beliefs and our practices, and it has reached a consensus on what Scripture teaches, a consensus that is expressed in a set of confessional documents. The biblical doctrine set forth in those documents governs not only what we believe, but how we practice our faith as well.

In confessional piety, belief is central to religious identity. Objective truth is the focus of religion, as opposed to populism's tendency to make cultural relevance, inner experience, or intuition the shaping factors for our religious practices. Furthermore, confessionalism insists that the objective truth that we confess must be drawn from the whole of Scripture, not merely from "essential" theological commitments established by popular consensus. Confessionalism's commitment to the whole counsel of God in the Scriptures stands in contrast to the populist tendency to forge ahead with innovative practices and techniques on the basis of a handful of Bible verses that speak of the church's evangelistic task without giving careful consideration to how those passages fit into the whole message of Scripture.

Finally, the confessional approach to piety is more capable of sustaining believers in the life of faith over the course of an entire lifetime. Its sense of constancy helps cultivate an affinity with the people of God in all ages, which makes us less likely to forget God's covenant faithfulness across history. While populist piety may seem highly effective in the short term, confessional piety is a piety for pilgrims. In the words of D.G. Hart,

"For confessionalism a good bit of the Christian life includes a recognition of the spiritual dangers that still afflict believers and their consequent need for spiritual help and sustenance that the ministry of the church is designed to provide. Being a Christian, then, means participating in churchly rites and ceremonies, not simply as a means of inspiration for evangelism and social activism, but primarily to learn dependence on grace and to persevere through life's doubts and temptations. Pietists have typically complained that the confessional Protestant conception of Christian devotion is too passive if not selfish because it is so oriented to believers rather than those outside the faith. Confessionalism, it is said, exhibits a ghetto mentality. But this complaint is based on an assumption about the nature of Christian devotion that confessionalism rejects – namely, that conversion results in strong believers who are so powerful that the true measure of spiritual zeal is what they accomplish either by winning new converts or by performing moral

⁸ As Hart's book points out, this is surprisingly similar to the mindset of liberal Protestantism, which is aptly summarized in the title of a book by Bishop John Shelby Spong: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.

deeds. Confessionalism's understanding of the Christian life as a pilgrimage, however, assumes the weakness and frailty of believers and measures success by the degree to which they continue to trust in God and hope for the world to come despite the trials and suffering of this life."⁹

⁹ Hart, p. 172.