



Piety and Community

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What is an appropriate piety? Where is Christian community? When we inquire about *piety*, we are trying to find out what sinners saved by grace look like after they have been following Jesus for a while. Another way to ask the same question would be to ask, "What is the story of a person's Christian life?" When we inquire about Christian *community*, we are asking about how Christians spend time with one another and the quality of their shared experience. When we use the word "community," we inevitably, and appropriately, think of its relationship to the word "communion," as in Holy Communion or Communion of Saints.

We all have a piety of one kind or another. Some people do not want to be known as pious, and to be known as pietistic might make some people shudder. Many words are subject to distortion, and piety is one of them. Many people have negative memories of the word because they have felt manipulated or judged by people who have told them that they weren't really Christian unless they had a certain piety. This is unfortunate, but it should not surprise us. The history of the Christian church is full of examples of one group or another setting up its particular pattern of life as superior to others. This happens outside the religious sphere also, as in political systems, in competition between rival schools, or among nationalities. John Steinbeck once said that everybody needs somebody to look down their nose at. In a state hospital where I once worked the people in the mental health section prided themselves on not being sent to the chemical dependency unit, and the people in the chemical dependency unit took equal satisfaction in their position on the other side of the fence.

Anyone who has spent any time at all in the Christian church has been exposed to a number of different pieties. If we look only at the Lutheran Church in North America we can find enough pieties to occupy our curiosity for along time. The many nationalities represented in North American Lutheranism give us a place to start. We speak of a Swedish piety, a German piety, and a Finnish piety. Among those of Norwegian heritage some are from the Hauge group, others from the state church group, and so on. There are the so-called "happy Danes" and "sad Danes." Piety is also influenced by the region of the country in which one lives. Piety takes a different shape in the San Fernando Valley of

California than in the Red River Valley of Minnesota. Standing between two grain elevators in North Dakota gives one a different view of life than standing between two skyscrapers in Manhattan. Some pieties are connected to certain ways of living the Christian life; others are connected to certain aspects of Christian doctrine. So a person's piety may highlight a certain

theological or confessional emphasis, the gifts of the Spirit, or a certain interpretation of the Scriptures.

There are also diverse forms of community within the church. One congregation may have elaborate ceremonial in weekly worship. Another may have a simple order of service where the minister wears street clothes. One congregation may be accustomed to hearing Bach preludes on a pipe organ; another breaks into the clapping of hands to the beat of a guitar and synthesizer. Some worship in a celebrative atmosphere, while others have a more penitential mood. Some congregations have grape juice for communion, others have beer at church picnics, and some will have neither. For some people the regular association with other Christians is so important that they go to church as often as they can and are active in organizations which enable them to spend time with other Christians during the week. Others are more reserved and are embarrassed by too much friendliness in the narthex or the sharing of the peace in the service of Holy Communion.

As we look around the church at large, we see many expressions of piety and community. There are liturgical pieties, monastic spiritualities, evangelical fellowships, secular pieties, third world pieties, and pieties related to social justice, retreats, meditation, prayer groups, drama, academic institutions, evangelism, and so on.

Which of these is most correct, or which is most Christ-like? Do we need to make a choice? I think not. We need to recognize that throughout the history of the Christian church, beginning with the New Testament, there has been a variety of expressions of the Christian life. The apostle Paul said it was a small thing if he should be judged by others or by any human court (1 Cor 4:3). He said he did not even judge himself, because it is the Lord who does the judging. We are not called to be judges over each other's piety or community. It is a pleasure to spend time with friends who don't clutter their minds with judgments of other people. There are about as many different expressions of piety and community as there are types of people in the church. These differences usually have nothing to do with whether or not one is a Christian, but reflect differences in temperament, personality, taste, or experience. Some people like guitars better than organs; some people like religious bumper stickers; and some people are more gregarious than others.

One of the most helpful books on this subject is by Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Paths to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Mr. Foster, a Quaker, shows how Christian discipline ranges all the way from the inward to the outward to the corporate. Foster emphasizes that the Christian faith is for ordinary people and that there is a variety of ways in which we live out our Christian lives and maintain contact with God. This reminds me of the 11th step of the Alcoholics Anonymous program which says that we seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God. If

we bring these ideas into the discussion of Christian piety and community, it would mean that we could share the same goals of growing in the faith, becoming more Christ-like, becoming more aware of the presence of God in our everyday lives, without having to insist that all must be done in exactly the same way by every believer.

There are probably not too many people who think that the Christian life must be lived the same way by every believer. But the great diversity can sometimes cause confusion, especially to people on the outside who are trying to understand us. Are there any general

guidelines we can use to bring some unity within the diversity? We know there is always going to be diversity, but does that mean it is impossible to say anything about what a Christian community should look like? I don't think so.

The seventh article of the Augsburg Confession says that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary, it continues, that human traditions or rites or ceremonies should be everywhere alike. This article of the Augsburg Confession may be the source of some of the confusion caused by the variety of communities and pieties within the Lutheran Church. But Word and Sacrament could just as well provide common ground upon which we can walk, a theme around which we express our unity as Christians while retaining our individual, local, and regional uniquenesses. A Word and Sacrament piety may not only be the best way to understand ourselves as Christians, but may also be one of the most helpful contributions Lutherans can offer to the larger ecumenical church. Word and Sacrament is a common theme in many Christian churches, but Lutherans have been living with and trying to keep these in balance for over four centuries.

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A Lutheran congregation is a Word and Sacrament community. Is it not appropriate then to say also that the central piety of Lutherans throughout history has been a Word and Sacrament piety? We honor, love, and study the Word, but we have not separated the Scriptures from the church. We have insisted that the Word must be interpreted in the community of faith rather than in a closet. This community of faith is where the Word is preached and the sacraments administered. We are a liturgical church, and have retained an understanding of the sacraments which emphasizes mystery and the contemporary presence of Christ in the sacramental events, without losing our emphasis on preaching and study of the Bible. We have maintained a balance between Word and Sacrament about as well as could be expected among any group. We have kept the Word alive, and we have kept the sacraments close to the Word.

Word and Sacrament piety may present difficulties for some, especially if these words are connected only with doctrinal discussions or theological studies. It may help to remember that the emphasis on Word and Sacrament originated among some 16th century Christians who were trying to define what it means to be a Christian and to live the Christian life. If we have to lighten our load in order to follow Jesus, are not Word and Sacrament the essentials we would keep for the journey?

The Scriptures introduce us to the Word become flesh, Jesus. The Bible tells us who created the world, who we are, what life is all about, and where we are going. It is where we are introduced to the sacraments. Then the sacraments administered through the church keep us from becoming nostalgic, sentimental, or isolated in our faith. When we go to the community of faith, we meet God who created the world, restored it through Jesus Christ, and is alive among us today. We receive new life through Baptism and have our lives sustained and joined to others through Holy Communion. Why do we keep adding rules about piety and community? Perhaps we are doing what Luther accused the monasteries of doing in his day—inventing spiritualities.

Word and Sacrament piety lived in a Word and Sacrament community gives us a solid foundation and ample room to grow. Word and Sacrament connects us to the source of life and gives us more energy and vision than we will be able to exhaust in a lifetime on this earth. Let it

be sufficient for us. It gives us a place to come together and room to be ourselves as unique children of God, sisters and brothers in Christ. We are family, but the joy of belonging should not be crushed by the burden of conformity.