



Toward a Viable Piety

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Piety! What is piety? We turn up our noses and wrinkle our brows when we hear this strange little word. Piety is connected with pietism which has an almost entirely negative cast for most of us. Being pious for us means being religiously pompous, or religiously narrow, or perhaps even religiously insincere. We can sense something of how difficult and awkward the whole subject of piety is for us today from the fact that we really don't have a good, commonly understood word to use in talking about it. Piety is at best an antique word, something that had a place in the "olden days," but which really has no relation to the present time. If we use the term spirituality instead, that doesn't really help matters very much. Being spiritual is only a little bit better than being pious. If we use the term devotion, it is still too narrow to encompass all of what we mean. And yet, there must be a word.

Even in our "unpious" age, there are always a few people who are ready to tell us about the piety that should characterize our Christian lives, but their answers vary widely: being a real Christian means giving 10% of your income, or it means voting for this person or against that bill, or it means giving your time to this project or that. Being a real Christian means serving God at your job, through your work. Or you may be told that you can *never* serve God through *your* work. Perhaps someone will even suggest that real Christianity has to do with prayer and Bible reading. Some of these solutions may be helpful to some of us, while others may wonder whether any of them is true, and how we might fit in.

What is piety? A good, simple, working definition is that piety is Christian faith in practice. If theology is Christian faith in theory, then piety is Christian faith as it is lived out in the concreteness of everyday human life. Now, that doesn't sound so bad. None of us would want to recommend a Christian faith that was all theory and no practice. Yet, when it comes to thinking about what specific shape Christian faith in practice might take, most of us are a bit awkward, hesitant, unsure of ourselves, and afraid of being made fun of.

In this essay we shall try to consider three issues: first, how Christians across the centuries have found ways to express their faith in daily life; second, how we have come to our present state of awkwardness about piety, or Christian faith in practice; and finally, how we can begin to move beyond this awkwardness into an approach that is more helpful for all of us.

I. PAST FORMS OF PIETY

If we could look at Christian faith as it has been lived around the world and across the centuries, we would find that our history includes an enormous range of religious experience and

a great variety of piety. While from the start, Christian tradition has always excluded a few forms of human piety such as sacred prostitution and human sacrifice, at the same time Christians have found an almost endless number of ways to live out their faith in Christ.

Christians have expressed their faith through family life and the raising of children since New Testament times, and this form of piety was revived and given emphasis by the Reformers, especially Luther. Christians have expressed their faith by becoming hermits, like Anthony, and living a life of ascetic solitude. Christians have joined together, sometimes as monastics and sometimes as families, to live in community as an expression of their faith. Even a brief survey of these communities reveals a marvelous variety: Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, Jesuits, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Moravian Brethren, the Iona Community, the Taize Community, the Ecumenical Sisterhood of Mary, and many more. Each embodies a particular way that Christians felt called to express their faith.

Christians have given their lives to prayer, contemplation, and the study of the Scriptures, or to manual work, teaching, or the care of the sick as expressions of their piety. Christians have held public office and served as soldiers, and Christians have refused to hold public office or to serve as soldiers, all as expressions of their one Christian faith. The history of Christian piety includes all manner of mystics and pragmatists, dreamers and skeptics. The awareness of these different forms of piety, different ways of being a Christian, was kept alive through the church's remembrance of the lives of the saints.

All of this variety has enriched the church immeasurably. It has provided a flexibility which has helped Christians adapt to changing circumstances and respond to new needs and challenges. At their best, Christians have recognized the value of this diversity and have respected and supported each other in their different ways of life.

II. THE ERODING OF PIETY

But if this were the whole story, then we would hardly have the awkwardness that we do about this whole subject of piety. What went wrong? What has made the living out of Christian faith such a problem for us today? I think the awkwardness that surrounds piety for us today stems from the fact that our ideas about piety have been narrowed down to single models.

In all fairness to our present age, this tendency has been found among

Christians since the very beginning of the church. Apparently one of the most common ways that trouble began in the New Testament church was that one group would label the piety of another group as inferior, or set up its own piety as a "higher way." Those who came to cause trouble in Galatia did so by suggesting that the piety of the Galatians was not all it should be. In I Corinthians 8, Paul attempts to restrain the "knowledgeable," sophisticated Christians, who know that idols have no real existence, from leading "weaker" Christians to violate their consciences. Later, in the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of the same letter, Paul deals with those who would make the gift of speaking in tongues the test of real Christianity by emphasizing the variety of gifts, service, and working which are all inspired by the same Spirit, all just as Christian. Also in Romans 14 Paul argues for variety in piety and against setting up one's own practice as a norm or standard.

In spite of this clear counsel of Scripture, we can trace the tendency to narrow the

available models for Christian life through the entire history of the church. In the church before the Reformation the various monastic orders provided a diversity of models as did the remembrance of the saints, though monasticism came to be considered a “higher way” of its own. The Reformation was in part a protest against this narrowing of the possibilities for Christian life. But the Reformation took its own toll.

One consequence of the Reformation was the virtual end of the monastic alternative within Protestantism. The attempt to say that monasticism was not a higher way was gradually interpreted to mean that monasticism was not a legitimate way to be a Christian. Since there was a great variety of styles of Christian life among the orders, this cut Protestantism off from not one but many alternatives. A second consequence of the Reformation was the near loss of the remembrance of the saints, a source of strength and inspiration for the church since the earliest centuries. The attempt to discourage worship of the saints succeeded in discouraging even the memory of those whose lives served to provide a great variety of illustrations of how one might live a Christian life.

In post-Reformation Protestantism various deep pieties persisted, but among continental Protestants, particularly, these pieties tended to be woven closely into the ethnic traditions and cultures of the people. The Lutheran churches in the United States have long been sustained by this great reservoir. With Americanization, however, this source is quickly going dry. On the whole, the existence and function of these pieties has hardly been noticed, and when they have been noticed, they have been often regarded as something problematic, or even unhealthy. The memory of such piety still lingers, but the piety itself is about gone. The children today have no clear picture of what it is to live as a good German (or Norwegian or Swedish, etc.) Lutheran. In addition, a growing number of Lutherans are coming from different ethnic backgrounds and have no experience of the piety which was once built into the ethnic churches.

While the ethnic pieties eroded, theological differences blocked the adoption of the traditional pieties of the more Americanized denominations. At the same time the piety of the more Americanized churches was undergoing erosion for some different reasons. As a result, Lutherans have come in recent years to

have fairly narrow, single models for piety, not unlike some of the mainline American churches, based in some degree on the watered-down material available in popular culture.

Up until the 1960s the officially endorsed model focused on church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, and family devotions. (Remember “the family that prays together stays together”?) Christian life was to be lived in a nuclear family-period. For me, the model is slickly, but too simply, summed up by the popular bulletin cover of that era showing neatly dressed mother, father, son, and daughter standing proudly in church, father and son in suits, daughter and mother complete with hats and gloves. The power of this model lasts down to today, for we find that many people who do not fit this model—single people, people whose spouses do not come to church, blended families, people who have been divorced, people whose income or inclination dictates that they live and dress very simply—feel that there is really no place in the church for them. Yet we must also say that this model surely had its positive value in encouraging family stability and attention to worship, Scripture, and prayer which have sustained Christians over the centuries. The problem is not that this model is corrupt, but that it is just that—*one* model.

In the 1960s a shift began in the shape of the official model, and by the 1970s the change was nearly complete. In a world absorbed with the war on poverty, the war on war, and the war on environmental destruction, the “old” piety of prayer, Bible reading, worship, and family devotions seemed silly and irrelevant, a religious way of escaping from the problems and pains of the world and “doing nothing.” Political involvement on behalf of peace and social justice looked like a much more constructive way of being a Christian. Critique of the “old” model by proponents of the new was savage, and so the result was not a second model of piety to provide an alternative to the first, but a new single model: activism. Activism is generally not recognized as a form of piety, however, because piety is a word which seems closely identified with the “old” model for Christian life. Yet, in fact, that is what activism among Christians is all about—Christian faith in practice. Activism is the prevailing form of officially endorsed piety. We see this reflected in church literature, in the resolutions which come to convention floors, and in all manner of church school materials and Bible studies which compulsively search for the message about what we must *do*, no matter what the text. This activist emphasis has made some important contributions and enlivened our understanding of the total meaning of faith in Christ. But, as with the “old” piety, activism also has its limits—it is still a single model.

What is wrong with single models? First, the single model tries to force everyone to express his or her Christian faith in the same or similar ways. We know, however, from the diversity of people and the variety of ways that Christians have expressed their faith in the past, that everyone cannot use the same model with equal success. Different people have different temperaments, abilities, and life experiences which demand different pieties or models for piety. With only a single model, much or even all that a person is and what he or she experiences may seem to have no connection at all with faith in Christ. The inevitable result of a single official model is that people, finding that they do not

fit the model or feel comfortable with it, decide that they are “not religious” or that there is really no place in the church for a person like them. Perhaps they go “underground” with their piety and look for auxiliary groups where it can be expressed. A single model basically teaches that all other models are wrong or suspect ways of expressing Christian faith, and this can hold people back from using other forms of piety which might work very well for them.

Ultimately, though, what is wrong with a single model of piety is that it encourages and nourishes judgement of others. Once I know what the right form of piety is, I can tell where you and your congregation stand, and whether that’s ahead of or behind where I and my congregation stand. This tendency toward judgement of others is, after all, what is potentially problematic about any and all piety. Whether it is the visitors to Galatia looking down on those who do not obey the whole Law, or the Corinthians who speak in tongues looking down on those who have not received this gift, the spiritually strong looking down on “baby Christians,” or the socially concerned looking down on those for whom the struggle against nuclear war is not the top priority in their Christian lives, no matter what the single model is, a single model encourages a spirit of judgment and criticism which undercuts the very Christian faith that it would express.

III. RETHINKING PIETY AND ITS EXPRESSIONS

How can we do better? First, and most important, it would seem that any piety which

would express faith in Jesus Christ must necessarily be a piety that renounces judgement and criticism of those who express their Christian faith in other, quite different ways. This sounds so terribly simple, so easy, but it has proved to be one of the most difficult things that Christians are called to do. No matter whether you or I choose to pray or to picket, to contemplate or to activate, the most important thing about each one of us is that we are forgiven sinners, bought with the blood of Christ, “unworthy servants” who have “only done what was our duty” (Luke 17:10). Whatever our piety, it will never give us more to stand on than we already have in Jesus. Until we understand this, until we accept the fact that Christian faith in practice really requires us to renounce any hope of being “first in the kingdom of heaven,” we can never move toward a more viable piety.

Second, moving directly out of this first point, we need as pastors and people, as church bodies and individuals, to become comfortable with the idea that there can be a wide range of ways to express our Christian faith in life, and that all of these ways contribute ultimately to the health and wholeness of the whole church and the whole world. We need to encourage very different kinds of pieties. We need to make people aware of the great variety of ways there are to be “good Christian people.” We need to recover the memory of the saints, not in idealized form, but in all their individuality and peculiarity, as suggestions of alternative models for Christian life. Perhaps Protestants even need to think about recovering the great resource of monasticism on more than an experimental scale. This breadth of possibility needs to be reflected in official policy and in education materials and opportunities for all ages, as well as in the practice and conviction of congregations and individuals.

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Finally, we need to provide concrete help to pastors in learning to encourage and to live with a diversity of piety within the congregation. As often as not, piety comes out as the enemy in seminary education, and pastors in turn encourage one another and, to some extent, their congregations in this attitude. Piety is what keeps people from reading the Bible with an open mind; piety is what locks people into inadequate theology; piety is what keeps people asking for the “old, familiar hymns;” and it is what keeps them from accepting the latest liturgical innovations. Though the total impact is unintentional, it is easy for a person to absorb the message that piety is what fouls things up in the church. How disturbing it is, then, to find that there is a charismatic prayer group, a non-denominational Bible study, or a coalition to shut down the local nuclear power plant operating right there among our own members. And, in fact, if our common need for forgiveness is forgotten and a spirit of judgement prevails, nothing can tear a congregation apart faster than such a small group of very pious people. To tell a pastor to encourage a diversity of piety may well seem like advising that person to stick his or her head in the lion’s mouth. But a Christian faith which has no shape in daily life seems to say that in Jesus nothing has really changed, and a Christian faith which can only be expressed in the narrow range of a single model of piety is hardly adequate to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If all this sounds impractical and utopian, let me tell about one place where I have experienced the reality of this openness to various styles of being a Christian. It is a small example, but it has given me the conviction that such things can happen, even in this world. I once belonged to an evangelism committee composed of the wildest variety of people a local congregation can provide. There were born-again Christians, staunch activists, charismatics, and

traditional church-goers. Their styles in calling ranged from carefully planned witnessing, using tracts and personal testimonials, to a pleasant, friendly visit in which the church might just be mentioned. The understood policy of the group was that there was no one right way, that each style was just as legitimate, and each person was supported in being just exactly who he or she was. Never once did I hear anyone put another down publicly or privately because of the other's style of bearing witness to Christ. In fact, the group tried consciously to use the different style of each person to reach the different needs of the people on whom they were calling. In order for piety to be viable in our world today, we must encourage this kind of diversity and this kind of mutual respect for the various ways of being a Christian.