
Pastoral Theology

John Calvin on Piety

John Calvin (1509-1564), who wrote the Institutes of the Christian Religion as a young man, has earned the reputation of being the leading theological mind of the Protestant Reformation. His reputation as an intellectual, however, should be seen in the spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. For Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety are inseparable.

Calvin's concept of piety (which means "godliness" or "holiness") is rooted in the knowledge of God. It is evident in people who recognize that they have been accepted in Christ, engrafted into His body, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For Calvin, the idea of piety is fundamentally biblical, with an emphasis on the heart (affection) more than the mind (intellect). Head and heart must work together, but the heart is more

important. Piety is one of the major themes of Calvin's theology.

For Calvin, piety designates the right attitude of man towards God. It is an attitude that includes true knowledge, heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love.

Knowing who and what God is (theology) embraces right attitudes toward Him and doing what He wants (piety). In his first catechism, Calvin writes, "True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death." In the Institutes, Calvin is more succinct: "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces." He says, "The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness."

Calvin's commentaries also reflect the importance of piety. For example, he writes on 1 Timothy 4:7-8, "You will do the thing of greatest value, if with all your zeal and ability you devote yourself to godliness ["piety"] alone. Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking."

Calvin continues, "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." Commenting on 2 Peter 1:3, he says, "As soon as he [Peter] has made mention of life he immediately adds godliness ["piety"] as if it were the soul of life."

The Goal of Piety

The goal of piety, as well as the entire Christian life, is the glory of God. Glorifying God supersedes personal salvation for every truly pious person. The goal of piety—that God may be glorified in us—is that for which we were created. The pious man, according to Calvin, confesses, "We are God's: let us, therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal."

God redeems, adopts, and sanctifies His people that His glory might shine in them and deliver them from impious self-seeking. The pious man's deepest concern, therefore, is God Himself and the things of God—God's Word, God's authority, God's gospel, God's truth. He yearns to know more of God and to commune more with Him.

But how do we glorify God? As 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 honour God, but rather to

dishonour him." Obedience to God's Word means taking refuge in Christ for forgiveness of our sins, knowing Him through His Word, serving Him with a loving heart, doing good works in gratitude for His goodness, and exercising self-denial to the point of loving our enemies. This response involves total surrender to God Himself, His Word, and His will.

Calvin says, "I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely." That is the desire of all who are truly pious. However, that desire can only be realized through communion with Christ and participation in Him, for outside of Christ even the most religious person lives for himself. Only in Christ can the pious live as willing servants of their Lord, faithful soldiers of their Commander, and obedient children of their Father.

*Joel R. Beeke is a minister of the
Heritage Reformed Church in Grand
Rapids, Michigan (USA), and
President of the Puritan Reformed*

Theological Seminary, where he is also the professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics. He is the author of many books.