

REFORMED PIETY

COVENANTAL AND EXPERIENTIAL

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INTRODUCTION

During the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, with all the articles, books, conferences, and tours it generated, the question was often asked: What was the Reformation all about? ¹ A good case was made by some for asserting that it was primarily about the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith alone. Others argued that its primary emphasis was on the doctrine of salvation in general. Still others planted their flag on the critical issue of biblical worship, or on biblical authority versus the claims of the papacy. A key concern of the Reformation that was often passed over is that of the great revival of *biblical piety*, particularly as it manifested itself in the theology and lives of the Reformers and later, the Puritans. No one set forth the nature of biblical piety so succinctly and frequently as the great Reformer, John Calvin (1509–1564).

In this little book, I aim to accomplish four things: First, to give you a bird's eye view of what Reformed *piety* is by looking at Calvin as one of its premier magisterial representatives. Second, to examine how we understand what Reformed piety should be in relation to the covenant of grace. I wish to thank

my colleague Dr. Stephen Myers (PhD), Associate Professor of Historical Studies at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, who did the heavy lifting on this chapter for me—hence the co-authorship of this book. Having done his doctoral dissertation on Ebenezer Erskine’s covenant theology, he is eminently qualified to write this chapter. Third, to consider what Reformed piety should be in the context of Christian experience. Finally, to present some conclusions that explore the interface between these three concepts in Reformed thought: piety, covenant, and experience.

Joel R. Beeke

CALVIN'S PIETY

John Calvin's *Institutes* earned him the reputation of being the preeminent systematician of the Protestant Reformation. His achievement as an intellectual, however, is often considered in isolation from the vital spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. For Calvin, theological understanding and practical piety, truth and usefulness, were inseparable. Theology first of all deals with knowledge—knowledge of God and of ourselves—but there is no true knowledge where there is no true piety.¹

Pietas (piety) is one of the major themes of Calvin's theology. His theology is, as John T. McNeill said, "his piety described at length."² He was determined to confine theology within the limits of piety.³ In his preface addressed to King Francis I, Calvin said that the purpose of writing the *Institutes* was "solely to transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness [*pietas*]."⁴

The Latin word *pietas* was important in ancient Roman religion and culture. With respect to the gods, it denoted piety or devotion, and especially conscientiousness or scrupulousness

in giving the gods their due; with respect to parents, benefactors, and one's nation or country, it denoted duty and dutifulness, affection and love, loyalty and patriotism, and many other virtues.⁵ So you can see how easy it was for Latin-speaking Christians to adopt this word to denote Christian faith and faithfulness, devotion to duty, and true godliness.

For Calvin, *pietas* designates the right attitude of man toward God, which includes true knowledge, heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love.⁶ Knowing who and what God is (theology) informs and leads to right attitudes toward Him and produces right conduct, or doing what pleases Him (piety). Calvin wrote, "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."⁷ This love and reverence for God is a necessary concomitant to any true or right knowledge of Him and extends to all of life. Calvin said, "The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness."⁸

The goal of piety, as well as the entire Christian life, is the glory of God—acknowledging and magnifying that glory that shines in God's attributes, in the structure of the universe, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁹ Glorifying God supersedes personal salvation for every truly pious person.¹⁰ 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."¹¹

But how do we glorify God? As Calvin wrote, "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 honor God, but rather to dishonor him."¹² 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.¹³ This response involves total surrender to God Himself, His Word, and His will. The motto inscribed on Calvin's seal said, "My heart I offer to Thee, O Lord, promptly and sincerely."¹⁴ That is the desire of all who are truly pious.

Thus, for Calvin, piety involves all truth and all of life. It is comprehensive, having theological, ecclesiological, and practical dimensions.

A Theological Piety

Theologically, piety can be realized only through union and communion with Christ and partaking of all His benefits, for outside of Christ even the most religious person lives for himself.¹⁵ Only in Christ can the pious live as willing servants of their Lord, faithful soldiers of their Commander, and obedient children of their Father.

Communion with Christ is always the result of Spirit-worked faith—a work that is more astonishing and experiential than comprehensible. Faith unites the believer to Christ by means of the Word and Spirit of God, enabling the believer to receive Christ as He is clothed in the gospel and graciously offered to us by the Father. By His Word and Spirit, God also dwells in the believer. Consequently, Calvin said, "We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him," but partake of Christ by faith, for this "revives us from death to make us a new creature."¹⁶

By faith, believers both belong to and possess Christ, and grow in Him. From Christ they receive by faith the "double grace" or "double cure" of justification and sanctification, which together provide a twofold cleansing from sin and uncleanness.¹⁷ Justification confers imputed purity, and sanctification produces actual purity.¹⁸