What Is Reformed Spirituality?

By Hughes Oliphant Old

The Reformation was a reform of spirituality as much as it was a reform of theology. For millions of Christians at the end of the Middle Ages, the old spirituality had broken down. For centuries spirituality had been cloistered behind monastery walls. To be serious about living the Christian life had meant to separate oneself from the world and enter a religious community. It was there, in the convent or monastery, that medieval spirituality flourished. It was at its very heart a celibate, ascetic, and penitential devotion. With the Reformation the whole focus of the Christian life changed. Rather than separating themselves from human society, Christians began to think of devotion in terms of living out everyday life according to God's will (Rom. 12:1–2). For Protestants spirituality became a matter of how one lived the Christian life with the family, out in the fields, in the workshop, in the kitchen, or at one's trade.

A number of years ago an attempt was made (by Paulist Press) to collect the classics of western spirituality. Some of us were surprised that only a few token Protestants were included. And a number of these were rather offbeat. The classics of an obviously Reformed spirituality such as Samuel Rutherford's letters of spiritual counsel; Jonathan Edwards' *A Faithful Narrative;* the hymns of Gerhardt Tersteegen, so rich in their sense of God's holiness; the missionary journal of David Brainerd, who gave his life preaching to the Indians in the backwoods of colonial New Jersey; Thomas Shepard's sermons on the wise and foolish virgins, preached in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; and even Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* were all overlooked. This led many to ask if there is any such thing as a Reformed spirituality. I have been asked this question a number of times. But I have to insist that the question would hardly arise if we became a bit clearer about our terminology. Calvinists have usually preferred the term *piety* to the term *spirituality.* Reformed theologians have usually spoken of the doctrine of the Christian life when they have wanted to speak about what Roman Catholics call "spiritual theology." None of us would ever think of questioning whether there is any such thing as a Reformed piety or a Calvinist doctrine of the Christian life. I have no objection to using the term "spirituality," especially in the ecumenical discussion, as long as we realize that in Protestant circles other terms are more frequently used.

Something else also somewhat beclouds the question of a Reformed spirituality. Many Calvinists have labored under the impression that once Calvin put down his pen nothing produced by his successors was worth much attention. Only recently have we begun to realize that seventeenth-century Protestantism produced some masterpieces as well. In fact, it was in its second and third centuries, as Protestantism was becoming more and more mature, that it produced its best works on the Christian life, on prayer, and on worship. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made increasingly clear that there was a Protestant culture, that it was a very devout culture, and that it had its own way of expressing its faith—that is, it had its own spirituality, its own piety. Let us look at some of its central characteristics.

Christianity was from the beginning a religion of the Book, and its piety was a piety of the Book.

The first thing I would like to suggest is that a Reformed spirituality is a spirituality of the Word. A spirituality of the Word is nothing new to Christianity. Already in the Gospel of John we find a highly developed spirituality of the Word. The prologue to John sets the theme of this spirituality, and through the whole rest of the Gospel it is developed. One often speaks of the logos Christology in the Gospel of John, and of course this Christology is the foundation of the spirituality of the Word. The Gospel of John has such a strong theology because it is the heir of the Old Testament wisdom theology. The wisdom writers of Israel, quite different from the priestly writers or the prophets, developed a particular kind of piety. It was the piety of those whose lives centered on the Bible, who were charged with the care of the sacred book and the teaching of its precepts. It was a scholar's piety that gave great attention to studying the Bible, to copying its manuscripts, to preserving the history of its interpretation, and finally to the preparation and delivery of sermons. The Old Testament Wisdom School fostered a preaching piety. The foundation of its educational system was the memorization of the text of Scripture. The rabbis of Jesus' day kept alive this book-

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ish piety, as did the earliest Christian church. It is this sort of thing that Luke undoubtedly has in mind when he tells us that the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Christianity was from the beginning a religion of the Book, and its piety was a piety of the Book. During the patristic age the wisdom piety was very prominent. It strongly influenced Christians like Origen, the second-century biblical scholar, as well as Jerome, that most literate of ancient Christians. John Chrysostom, the preeminent preacher of Antioch and Patriarch of Constantinople, was another whose spirituality was profoundly a spirituality of the Word. This Wisdom spirituality has always been very strong in Protestantism.

The second thing I would like to suggest is that a Reformed spirituality is a spirituality of the Psalter. The piety of which we are heirs was nourished by praying the psalms, singing and meditating on them, not only at church but at family prayers every day of the week. The whole point of singing the psalms of course is that the psalms are the fundamental prayers of the church. We know that Jesus constantly prayed the psalms as every good Jew in his day did. The church continued the practice in ancient times, rejoicing in the way the psalms had been fulfilled in Christ. The earliest Christians understood the psalms as the prayers of the Holy Spirit, and therefore the psalms were honored as a primary component of the prayers of the church. One of Calvin's greatest contributions to the reform of worship in the sixteenth century was his commentary on the psalms. The Genevan reformer had a profound sense of the psalms as Christian prayer. Today, once again, biblical scholars are throwing new light on the psalms and how they have been prayed through the centuries. What an exciting field of study! It is my firm conviction that nothing would help us recover the life of prayer more than rediscovering psalm prayer. One is certainly encouraged to observe that the *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church (which in its new edition continues to give great prominence to the psalms), several other recent hymnals such as *Rejoice in the Lord*, edited by Erik Routley for the Reformed Church in America, and the new Presbyterian hymnal have generous selections of psalmody. No question about it—any kind of Protestant spirituality is going to be a singing spirituality. For Reformed Protestantism a good part of that singing is going to be psalm-singing.

The spirituality of the Lord's Day is another cardinal feature of Reformed piety. While the beauty of the Christian understanding of the Lord's Day has often been obscured by a Sabbatarian legalism, there is something very profound about the biblical sign of the eighth day, the first day of the New Creation. It was Jesus himself who reinterpreted the old Sabbath and established the Lord's Day by meeting with his disciples for worship on the first day of the week. A few years ago I discovered a work of John Willison, minister in Dundee, Scotland, with the title, *Treatise concerning the Sanctification of the Lord's Day.* From this work I began to sense the spiritual vitality of the observance of the Lord's Day as our spiritual ancestors understood it. More recently, the High Church Movement has tried to convince us that we should replace our emphasis on the Lord's Day with a spirituality of the liturgical calendar. Actually, the observance of Lent and Advent that has become so much in vogue in our day is quite antithetical to a Reformed piety. It puts the emphasis on seasons of fasting rather than on the weekly observance of the resurrection of Christ. Lent and Advent become the "religious" seasons of the year while the observance of the fifty days of Easter and the twelve days of Christmas become anticlimactic. A true Reformed piety could never drape any Lord's Day with penitential purple! Quite to the contrary, it sees the service of the Lord's Day as a foretaste of the worship of heaven. The fact that our worship is on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, puts our worship in a unique light. It casts it in a joyful, festive mood. The Reformed manuals of devotion always tell us of the humanitarian dimension of the Lord's Day observance. They speak of how Jesus made a point of healing on the sabbath. It was a day of releasing people from their burdens. It was a day for relieving the poor.

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A Reformed spirituality is inevitably diaconal. One of the unique features of the Reformed doctrine of the ministry is its interpretation of the office of deacon. Rather than understanding the diaconate as a first step on the hierarchical ladder, the Reformed churches understand the ministry of the deacons as a ministry of mercy (Acts 6:1–6). It is the responsibility of the deacons to lead the church in its care of the poor, in its care of widows and orphans, and in its ministry to the sick and the afflicted. During the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, devout Christians gave a great deal of time and money to establishing hospices. These privately endowed foundations took the responsibility of providing care for orphans, widows, the disabled, and others in need. Every Dutch town had a full complement of these foundations of Christian charity. It was the German Reformed pastor Theodore Fliegner who in the last century organized deaconesses into religious communities to carry on the works of mercy that have traditionally been fundamental to the Christian life. In nineteenth-century America, it was the same diaconal concern that led to building what has often been called the "benevolent empire."

A Reformed spirituality finds in the celebration of the Lord's Supper a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Participation in the sacred meal seals the covenantal union between us and our God. It restores and strengthens that

covenantal relationship. Not only does the sacrament bring us into communion with God, it brings us into the Christian community. It is for this reason that Calvin did his evangelistic preaching in preparation for the Lord's Supper. Preparatory services have been an important element in Reformed sacramental piety. In Scotland it was the practice to hold a week of preparatory services before observing the sacrament and to follow it with several thanksgiving services. These communion seasons were the mountaintop experiences of the Christian life. As we discover from the communion meditations of Matthew Henry, preparation for the Lord's Supper was a time for the most serious devotional meditation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was common to approach communion as the wedding feast of the Lamb. The theme of God's redemptive love is very strong in Reformed sacramental piety. The communion sermon would often take a text from the Song of Solomon. A beautiful example of this is a communion sermon by Jodocus van Lodenstein, who was minister in the Dutch city of Utrecht from 1653 to 1677. In New Jersey in the late 1730s we find Jacobus Theodorus Freylinghuysen and Gilbert Tennent preaching the same kind of eucharistic piety as they led the Great Awakening. They invited their congregations to the Lord's Table to experience the consummate love of Christ and to pledge their love to him in return.

Stewardship is yet another major theme of a Reformed spirituality. Reacting against the asceticism of the Middle Ages, the reformers took the parables of Jesus concerning the good stewards and their care of the talents entrusted to them as the basis for a new Christian understanding of the use of wealth (Luke 12:42–48 and Matt. 25:14–30). In the centuries that followed, Christian merchants, craftsmen, housewives, farmers, and bankers began to discover positive spiritual value in their work. More and more they found in their industry, in their labor, and in their professions a true vocation. Family life, the raising of children, the support of the elderly, and the care of a home were more and more regarded as sacred trusts. This new approach to life was beautifully expressed by the seventeenth-century Dutch painters. The Puritans in both England and America gave family life a new dignity by making daily family prayer a primary spiritual discipline. Every Christian home is a little church, as Richard Baxter put it. In such classics as Baxter's *Christian Directory,* we find a great deal on the subject of Reformed spirituality and especially on how it is to function in the life of the family.

Part of the Reformed understanding of stewardship is what some have called the Protestant work ethic. As maligned as it was back in the 1960s, this Protestant work ethic was an essential part of the spirituality that has time and again delivered Protestants from poverty. Now that the sixties are long past, we must take another look at how a Calvinist spirituality contributed to the rise of capitalism. It may well be more positive than the Marxists wanted us to believe. Today, one is amazed at how the Protestant understanding of stewardship has blossomed in some of the younger churches. Recently, I visited Korea and saw firsthand how much the Christians of Korea have been able to accomplish because of their keen sense of stewardship.

Finally, we need to consider the place of meditation on the mystery of divine Providence. Surely this is another cardinal dimension of a Reformed spirituality. John Flavel, the English Puritan, wrote the classic on this subject. He tells us how the Christian, confident that God's providence embraces all the events of our lives, gains understanding by thinking about how God is speaking to us, warning us, encouraging us, leading us through life, guiding us in his service, and finally bringing us to himself. The thoughtful Christian thinks over what Providence has brought and, listening carefully to the Word of God, tries to discern God's leading. We are all well aware that in his theology John Calvin gave great attention to both the doctrine of providence and the doctrine of election. We are probably not as aware of how he read this out of the Scriptures. Calvin's sermons are rich in the application of these classic doctrines to the living of the Christian life. The lives of Abraham, Joseph, and David give us constant examples of how God shapes our lives. The life of Christ, even his passion and resurrection, was part of God's plan for our salvation. One of the greatest sermons ever preached on the spiritual application of the doctrine of predestination is Charles Haddon Spurgeon's sermon on Queen Esther. To believe in predestination is to believe that each one of us has a divinely appointed destiny. Each one of us has a purpose in life. The devout life is one dedicated to fulfilling that purpose.

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The spirituality of election has often led to an evangelistic, missionary spirituality. That was basic to the covenantal relationship from the very beginning (Gen. 12:1–3). We are called to blessedness that we might be a blessing. The last words of Jesus to his disciples were the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18–20). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the spirituality of many circles in the Reformed church was centered in evangelism at home and missionary work abroad. This was particularly true of Congregationalists and New School Presbyterians. A tremendous amount of the best spiritual energy of our grandparents was invested in the missionary movement, a movement that today is reaping a plentiful harvest. ❖