

Mainline Presbyterianism and Reformed Piety — A Review of the book *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*

In the Reformed tradition, piety is very important, being a major focus of the Reformer John Calvin's concern.¹ A book by Ted V. Foote Jr. and P. Alex Thornburg attempts to portray Presbyterian piety for us.²

The book by Foote and P. Alex Thornburg, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*, is subtitled "A theological survival guide for youth, parents, and other confused Presbyterians." In their preface, they reveal that their goal is to write a book to "respond to 'outsiders,' to address the questions non-Presbyterians ask us."³ The authors therefore are attempting to help Presbyterians respond to the questions asked by those who come from "fundamentalist churches" and thus defend what they think is Presbyterian and Reformed piety against Neo-evangelical piety.⁴

How does this book measure up in terms of promoting Reformed piety? Does it truly promote Reformed piety, or is it misleading people in that aspect?⁵ Let us look into the book to find out.

Prolegomena

In reviewing this book, the first place to focus on is on the theological presuppositions underpinning the book. Piety and theology on piety does not take place in a vacuum, but rather is the outworking of what one believes. Calvin for example sees piety as founded on the

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.2.1. (translated by Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 40-1

² Ted V. Foote Jr. and P. Alex Thornburg, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Presbyterians* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000)

³ *Ibid.*, x

⁴ *Ibid.*, xii

⁵ "Reformed" is to be established by the Reformed Confessions, not by what those who professed themselves Reformed think. See R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confessions: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 3, 17-18.

knowledge of God.⁶ One's theology informs one's piety. Consequently, one's piety would be negatively affected by bad theology.

In the introduction of the book, the authors revealed in part their theological sentiment. Professing themselves Presbyterians in a confessing church, they however embrace many theological errors. Firstly, they claimed that "at heart, God is a mystery" and that the "mystery of God cannot be explained or wrapped up neatly in a package of words."⁷ That the entire sentence is a contradiction does not seem to bother them, for they have just explained something about God using words—that God cannot be explained using words. This irrationalism is far from what Reformed Orthodoxy has historically taught. Willem Van Asselt has shown through the writing of the Reformed theologian Franciscus Junius that God is known ectypically to us, not archotypically.⁸ Therefore, God is indeed mysterious, but this does not mean that God cannot be explained with words. We cannot know God as He is (archotypically) but as He has revealed Himself (ectypically). To claim that God is at heart a mystery leads to agnosticism about the person of God and everything related to Him. The Reformed tradition rather teaches that God is incomprehensible, yet He has condescended to reveal Himself to us, and that this revelation is true indeed (WCF 2.1, 1.1). To be sure, it is not archetypal truth – truth as God knows it, yet it is true ectypically, as we ought to know and treasure it. God *in se* is a mystery, but God as revealed is not.

On the issue of authority, the authors wrote against what they view as the errant view of Scripture. First, they claim with Neo-Orthodoxy that Scripture is merely a "unique and

⁶ Calvin, Institutes, 1.2.1. "For this sense of the divine perfections is the proper master to teach us piety, out of which religion springs"

⁷ Foote and Thornburg, xv. The statement of course can be interpreted in an orthodox fashion, but as we can see in context, it can be clearly seen that they are meant to deny that any truth statement about God can be objectively true.

⁸ Willem J. van Asselt, "The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought", *WTJ* 64 (2002):319-35

authoritative witness to God in Jesus Christ.”⁹ Next, they claim that Presbyterians do not “rest [their] faith in a *book*, but in *God’s living presence*.”¹⁰ The problem with this statement is that God’s living presence is mediated to us through the Scripture, apart from which there is no such presence (2 Peter 1:19-21). It is furthermore contrary to the teachings of the Westminster Confession that teaches that the whole counsel of God can only be found in it either explicitly or by good and necessary consequence (WCF 1.6). The authors continue denigrating what they deemed as literalism by raising various issues such as demon possession and the concept of 7-day [sic] Creation,¹¹ assuming that just because mainstream scientists have “disproven” these things therefore they are necessarily false, which shows their faulty views of what science actually is.¹² Since part of Jesus’ ministry involves exorcising demons, the authors are basically saying that Scripture and our Lord was in error at that point. All this is contrary to Reformed piety with its high view of the Scriptures as being the Word of God (WCF 1.1-2).¹³

The idea of Conversion

The authors are however justified in their opposition to the evangelical view of conversion, described as a person being “not actually saved unless [one is] able to cite the particular day and time when this acceptance occurred.”¹⁴ Not everyone will have a Damascus-Road experience just like Paul, but some like Timothy will grow up in the faith (c.f. 2 Tim. 1:5, 3:15).

⁹ Foote and Thornburg, xvi

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11. Their argument against the fact that epilepsy could be caused by demon possession has a logical fallacy. First of all, science as descriptive of natural processes cannot rule out that demons are behind the natural processes. Secondly, just because some cases of epilepsy can be explained by science does not mean that all cases can necessarily be explained likewise.

¹² See my unpublished paper on the Philosophy of Science, *Science as Paradigmatic: A Critical Analysis of Thomas S. Kuhn’s View of Normal Science*,

http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/Papers/ScienceAsParadigmatic.pdf (Accessed Feb 7th 2012). It is illuminating that the authors cannot even get the fact right that Creation in Genesis is described as taking part in 6 days, not 7.

¹³ The whole idea that there is a real difference of substance between Holy Scripture and the Word of God is foreign both to Scripture and the Confession.

¹⁴ Foote and Thornburg, 1

D.G. Hart has shown that this idea of conversion comes from Pietism with “its effort to define the Christian religion apart from its particularities and locates its essence in ‘the heart.’”¹⁵ Revisiting the Old Side-New Side controversy which occurred at the First Great Awakening, Hart cited an Old Side minister John Thomas whose critique of revivalist piety marks it as bordering “on vulgarity because it made experiences and emotions of a more intimate nature the norm of settings that were formal and public.”¹⁶ In Hart’s view, the problem with the idea of conversion in Evangelicalism at large stems from its transformation into an event that “could be detected mainly by the degree to which a believer emoted.”¹⁷ Moreover, this idea of conversion as a definitive event is contrary to the Reformed tradition of conversion as a process.¹⁸ Furthermore, in Pietism, the emotional and outward expressive has taken over the cognitive and private. While there is nothing wrong with having Damascus-Road experiences, the teaching of Scripture and of the Reformed tradition does not make this normative for all believers, neither must such experiences be manifest for all to see and judge.

That having been said, the authors of this book do not rightly portray Reformed piety in their objection to Pietism. According to them, experiencing God’s grace

is to experience God’s embrace where others preach only God’s condemnation. ... The world needs people less concerned with their own personal salvation and more concerned with sharing God’s grace.¹⁹

Elsewhere, the authors denied that “hell and brimstone” sermons are proper, and people should not be called to repentance.²⁰ While certainly there is an element of truth in their presentation that everyone is sinful, the Reformed tradition does teach the proclamation of both

¹⁵ D.G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 21

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁸ Canons of the Synod of Dordt (CD) 3/4.11

¹⁹ Foote and Thornburg, 8

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-63

Law and Gospel.²¹ People need to be confronted with their sins and see their need of the Savior. To object to Pietism does not mean that facing the wrath of God and the demands of the law, repenting of sins and having saving faith are not to be preached at all. Much less is the author's suggestion that "self-acceptance in the gospel" is what is prescribed since everyone knows the backdrop of the pervasive nature of sin in the world.²² While Pietism errs in its grounding at least in part in emotions, it is right in its teaching of sin, judgment and the necessity of repentance and faith. Opposing Pietism in its emotive idea of conversion does not mean that the Reformed tradition jettisons the entire biblical doctrine of the Gospel and the necessity of having saving faith. Contrary to the quote by Foote and Thornburg, personal salvation is indeed important in the Christian life, even as we jettison the Pietistic spin on it.

Salvation, heaven and hell

The authors' portrayal of Reformed piety goes south from here. They proclaim that Presbyterian piety is against the idea that we must be concerned over people going to hell. Rather, they paint the portrayal that exclusivism is "an arrogance ... that one group has the inside track into heaven while those immoral people 'out there' are doomed eternally."²³ Here, we see explicitly how bad doctrine creates bad practice. The authors further redefine hell as possibly "an assignment into God's presence when one hates being in the presence of the God of grace!"²⁴ The Reformed tradition however teaches that hell is a real place of eternal suffering (WCF 32.1) and we should seek to proclaim the free offer of the Gospel so that sinners may be saved from a real hell if they repent and turn to Christ (CD 3/4.8). Foote's and Thornburg's advice here is contrary to true Reformed piety.

²¹ E.g. Heidelberg Catechism (HC) Q2, Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) Q18-20

²² Foote and Thornburg, 64

²³ *Ibid.*, 20

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23

Likewise, the authors in their embrace of some form of universalism have rejected orthodoxy Christianity, nevermind the distinctives of the Reformed tradition.²⁵ In their answer to the question of whether Presbyterians have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord, the authors have re-interpreted the words in their theological mould that is foreign to Reformed thought. The idea of lordship in this instance is interpreted to “live as Jesus did.”²⁶ Here their version of piety is the diametric opposite of Reformed piety which focuses on right belief in the true God for salvation. As the Westminster Confession says,

By this [saving] faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace (WCF 14.2)

Reformed piety in this instance has to do with accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone, not on some form of the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) in ‘incarnational’ ministry and service. It is creeds, not deeds.

Chapter 6 of the book sees the authors deal with the Dispensational piety as it relates to some Dispensationalists’ belief in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture.²⁷ While Dispensational piety here is certainly in error, yet the piety the authors promote is again not Reformed at all. They are correct that we are not to have an escapist mentality and that the Kingdom of God is growing in this world.²⁸ However, they are wrong in thinking that the Kingdom of God is this-worldly, and then deny the concept of a Final Judgment.²⁹ Against both extremes, the Reformed tradition

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32 “... God’s call and life for [Jesus’ disciples] include others, all others, whether those others actually confess the same faith in Jesus or not.” See also Chapter 5 where the idea of “biblical universalism” is espoused (*Ibid.*, 35-40)

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-50

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-9

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49. “No, we don’t expect an Armageddon in which Jesus becomes a vindictive warrior-king killing the enemy.”

teaches that we are to do good works while we are on this world (WCF 16) and also that there will be a last judgment (WCF 33). Reformed piety therefore teaches that we are living in the reality of the already and not-yet, or rather between the inauguration and consummation of God's Kingdom, and we should order our lives accordingly in light of both realities.

The Holy Spirit and Charismatism

Foote and Thornburg next address the issue of experiential Charismatic worship and the criticism that Presbyterians are not Spirit-filled. They correctly pointed out the danger of perpetual mountain-top spirituality as being unbiblical.³⁰ The authors are however open to learn from other traditions with the embrace of "more feeling-rich elements in worship and music."³¹ Here, the form of piety they promote is not in line with Reformed piety.

As stated by Hart, Pietism defines "the Christian religion apart from its particularities and locates its essence in 'the heart.'"³² Foote and Thornburg do not look back at the Reformed tradition for Reformed piety in worship, but instead think that learning from Pietism is a virtue. The Reformed tradition however teaches the Regulative Principle of Worship whereby we adopt only elements that are commanded by Scripture (WCF 21.1), not whatever we think is good for worship.³³ The question to be asked is whether these "feeling-rich elements" are commanded in Scripture, a question which the authors did not.

The main aim of Foote and Thornburg here of course is to answer the charge that Presbyterians are the "frozen chosen" who do not believe in the Holy Spirit.³⁴ Even on this issue, their answer that "Presbyterians experience the Spirit every day ... we give thanks for the gift of

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55-7

³¹ *Ibid.*, 55

³² Hart, 21

³³ For one appeal for the recovery of Reformed worship, see Clark, 227-91

³⁴ Foote and Thornburg, 54-5

God's sustaining presence" is contrary to true Reformed piety.³⁵ The Westminster Confession for example teaches that the Holy Spirit speaks through Scripture (WCF 1.10) and lives in believers for their sanctification (WCF 13). The Spirit is not "experienced" by contemplating on Creation as the authors mistakenly said,³⁶ but in studying Scripture and living in light of our calling.

Authority and Liberty

The last section of this book deals with the issue of authority and liberty. Foote and Thornburg are adamant that Christian liberty should be maintained and that only God is the Lord of the conscience.³⁷

On this topic, the Reformed confession concurs. As the Westminster Confession states, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men..." (WCF 20.2). Yet however, Christian liberty is not total autonomy to do anything what think is right based upon the perceived voice of one's conscience. As the next paragraph states,

They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life. (WCF 20.3)

The example given by the authors of how to exercise Christian liberty involves the case of a Christian named Sarah dating Khalid, a non-Christian. According to the authors, the exercise of Christian liberty means that

If Sarah decides through study and discussions and prayer that Khalid need not be converted to Christianity for him to be worthy as her friend (or spouse) in the eyes of

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 57

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-8

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71

God, she can make that decision “on good authority” in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions.³⁸

Here, the authors’ version of Reformed piety is a perversion of true Reformed piety and of the principle of Christian liberty as mentioned in WCF 20.3. Christian liberty is freedom to obey God, not freedom to sin, which is no freedom at all (Rom. 6:16-19).

Summary remarks

We have examined Foote’s and Thornburg’s book which purport to present Presbyterian (and Reformed) piety, in contradistinction to Evangelical piety which has become the main form of Christian piety especially in the Bible Belt. On examination however, their version of Presbyterian piety is seen to be neither Presbyterian nor Reformed.

First, Reformed piety begins with Reformed foundations and Reformed theology. Foote’s and Thornburg’s view of God and Scripture is unbiblical and not Reformed. They thus do not promote the proper reverence for God and Scripture that belongs to Reformed piety. Second, while they are against the Pietistic idea of conversion, they destroy Presbyterian and Reformed piety by denying the need for true biblical conversion as defined by the Scriptures. The denial of the Gospel and the denial of heaven and hell means that the center of Presbyterian piety, Christ and His work, has been eviscerated and anything left is a mere shell.

With the center gone, the piety promoted by Foote and Thornburg has no basis to stand. Thus, we can see the embrace of some form of the utopianism of Liberalism in its view of Christian living in chapter 6, a distorted un-confessional view of being filled with the Spirit, no reflection on worship, and a serious distortion of the notion of Christian liberty. In summary, the piety promoted in this book is as Reformed as chalk is cheese, although in areas such as the idea of conversion there is surface similarity with Reformed piety.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73

In his book *Recovering Mother Kirk*, D.G. Hart briefly interacts with Foote's and Thornburg's book.³⁹ Hart argues that Foote and Thornburg render Presbyterians as really "ecumenical Protestants who think differently about the faith, in ways more complex and less definite than evangelicals."⁴⁰ He notes that the closest contrast they have made is "in their discussion of conversion", and they have "little to say about the church and worship."⁴¹

While all this is indeed true, it is this writer's contention that Foote and Thornburg do not even espouse a piety that is even remotely biblical and Reformed. If we go with Calvin in his linking of right knowledge about God with true piety,⁴² then we must say that the version of Reformed piety described by Foote and Thornburg is not Reformed at all, as with any version that denies Christ and the Gospel. In our opposition to Pietism, let us not swing to the other extreme and focus on the forms apart from the substance, but focus on them both equally.

In conclusion, the version of 'Presbyterian piety' promoted by Foote and Thornburg is not biblical, contrary to the Reformed Confessions, and thus not Reformed. Those of us interested in Reformed piety should look elsewhere for directions as to how to be Presbyterian and Reformed in the midst of a culture of Evangelical Pietism.

³⁹ D.G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), 248-9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 249

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 249

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.1.

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