The Shaping Influence of the Heidelberg Catechism on the Pastoral Care of the Church

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Christian piety, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, does not consist of acts of devotion, spiritual disciplines, or the contemplative life. Rather, true piety is loving obedience to all of God's commandments. This piety of good works, born out of love and obedience, shaped the public and private life of Christians in the Reformation and redefined the nature of pastoral care.

We begin, therefore, with piety. Calvinists have usually preferred the term piety rather than spirituality. While Roman Catholics speak of "spiritual theology," Reformed Christians speak of the doctrine of the Christian life. Piety is the answer to the question, how does one live in response to God's great gift of salvation? Hughes Oliphant Old aptly describes the shift in spirituality or piety that occurred in the Reformation:

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.  

For Reformed Christians piety was defined by the Apostle Paul in the twelfth chapter of Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may

133
discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (vss. 1, 2).

Although medieval spirituality focused on the cloistered life, there was also a spirituality for lay people. It consisted largely of two devotional practices: veneration and penance. The laity were instructed to venerate the Mass, the Virgin Mary, saints, icons, and relics. Penance consisted of a review of one's life to identify sins, weigh their gravity, and then confess them to the priest in order to receive forgiveness. Penitential books were written to help parish priests identify and classify all the possible sins of mankind. These books of moral casuistry were the guides for pastoral care in the Middle Ages. The highest form of pre-Reformation piety, however, consisted of withdrawal from the world to a life of contemplation, prayer, and abstinence: abstinence from sex, family life, normal social life, and even speech. True spirituality was rooted in asceticism.

The Reformation produced two landmark changes in the faith-life of Christians that changed the medieval forms of piety. The bedrock change was in the doctrine of salvation. The rallying cry became "salvation by faith alone." Salvation was understood as a gift of divine grace, apart from works. Secondly, salvation was understood as coming by a faith that produces good works. Saving faith alters the disposition, attitudes, values, and behavior of men and women. The faith that saves is not sterile. It produces a transformed life. The core or taproot of Reformed spirituality, writes Richard D. Adams, "is twofold: divine grace and human gratitude." That core anchors and nourishes Reformed spirituality and provides its potential for growth.

This Reformed piety with its new understanding of the role of good works in salvation had several parts:

1. The new piety began with a personal, informed faith that consisted both of knowing and trusting. Knowledge of the promises of God in the Scriptures and a believing acceptance of them was the foundation of Reformed piety.

2. Reformed piety required conversion, a turning away from sin and a turning to God. John T. McNeill describes the significance of the shift from penance to conversion. The difference centered in Calvin's understanding of repentance, which differed significantly from the Catholic doctrine of penance. For Calvin repentance becomes a spiritual regeneration, a process of moral renewal, of moral transformation. "It embraces the soul's progressive appropriation of the obedience, holiness and goodness that mark the restoration of man's lost or obscured image of God."

3. Reformed piety centered on public worship, the hearing of God's word, prayers, and the singing of the psalms. Corporate public worship consisting of the exposition of Holy Scripture and the grateful response of praise was the central activity that nurtured this piety.

4. Reformed piety took shape in obedience to the whole law of God, an obedience born out of gratitude. This third function of the law came to expression in the liturgy in which the law was read as an act of thanksgiving after the announcement of forgiveness. Reformed piety was expressed in
attitudinal and behavioral changes. Howard Rice summarized it this way. "Piety is nothing more than the pattern by which we shape our lives before God in grateful obedience to what God has done for us." A spiritual life that does not issue forth in works of love to those close and distant, and in social justice, is not true spirituality.

This new piety had four defining characteristics. First, this piety, consisting of obedience to God, does not lead to otherworldliness but to the practice of piety in public as well as in private life. Note, for example, Lord's Day 42 on the eighth commandment. Not only outright theft and robbery are forbidden, but also

all wicked tricks and schemes by which we seek to get for ourselves our neighbor's goods, whether by force or under the pretext of right, such as false weights and measures, deceptive advertising or merchandising, counterfeit money, exorbitant interest, or any other means forbidden by God. In addition God forbids all greed and pointless squandering of [his] gifts (Q/A 110).

This new piety of the obedient life engaged Christians in the world, in all of it: from commerce to government, from marriage and family life to labor relations, from the marketplace to the care of the poor. This piety brought about a reformation of culture as well as a reformation of the person. Alfen Verhey makes the case for the social implications of the catechism. History demonstrates the impact of the Reformed faith on government, business, and science. The Reformed creeds, including the Heidelberg Catechism, shaped this faith.

Second, for Reformed Christians, "The key to right understanding of all spiritual experience is our obedience. Any other standard of evaluation of religious experience can be distorted or used for selfish purposes." Not how one feels or what one experiences, but rather how these experiences and feelings change attitudes, relationships, and behavior is the true measure of piety.

Third, all right knowledge of God is born of obedience. Thus not only does the genuine experience of God ("knowledge" as Calvin uses the word) produce obedience, but obedience also produces a right knowledge of God. One cannot truly know God unless one also obeys him. One knows Jesus by following him.

Fourth, obedience is more than man's response to God's grace. Obedience is the life of God in the soul of man. It arises out of the mystical union of Christ and the believer. It is the fruit of belonging in body and in soul, in life and in death to one's faithful Savior Jesus Christ. In part, Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, "Because I belong to him, Christ . . . makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him" (Q/A 1). The heart of Reformed piety is the continued presence of God in the believer which produces the changed life.
This new understanding of piety came about through teaching and through a weekly and even daily preaching of God's Word. However, as in the Palatinate, catechetical instruction ordered both teaching and preaching. Daniel Meeter gives an account of how the Reformation spread throughout the Palatinate and later Europe. When the Palatinate was reformed by order of the elector, a church order and a catechism were produced. The Palatinate Church Order was detailed in its directives. It spoke of how to dress, when and how to hold divine services, how to do pastoral care, and how to perform weddings and funerals. This church order, however, also included a catechism and a liturgy. The catechism was published as a curriculum for pastors. The liturgy was for use at the morning service and the catechism for teaching at the afternoon service. This catechism was the summary of Christian doctrine to be known, understood, and believed by Christians everywhere. The three guides for reforming the churches, says Meeter, were the psalter, the catechism, and the liturgy.7

These changes in doctrine and piety had a direct and reforming effect on pastoral care. Pastoral care in the early Reformed tradition continued to provide consolation and comfort, prayers for healing, a ministry of reconciliation both to neighbors and to God, visitation of the sick, funerals and weddings. These traditional forms of pastoral care continued although in new ways and with new understandings. The liturgical forms and prayers for these forms of pastoral care usually included a sometimes-extensive educational or hortatory element in order to combat false teachings in the past.

It was guidance, however, that formed the heart of pastoral care in the Reformed tradition. Spiritual guidance, the communication of what the Scripture has to say about marital problems, about persecution, about how to do business with one's neighbor, about good government, about the duty of citizens and the sinfulness of kings—such guidance was the primary form of pastoral care in the Calvinist churches of the Reformation. This guidance was summarized in the catechism's exposition of the Ten Commandments (Lord's Days 34-44).

Howard Rice's description of four characteristics of this guidance in the Reformed tradition8 may be summarized as follows:

1. Reformed spiritual guidance is modest in its claims and very conscious of all human limitations. The guide is always deeply aware that sin clouds his judgment. He knows that weakness and woundedness in his own self affect his perceptions and his prescriptions. Therefore the nature of guidance in the Reformed tradition is more consultation than direction.

2. Reformed spiritual guidance is egalitarian in spirit. The term "spiritual direction" is foreign to Reformed pastors, since it suggests an authoritarian style. Also, although Reformed Christians most often turn to their pastors, lay guides—elders, deacons, and other mature Christians—also provide such guidance. Although Calvin wrote many letters of guidance, he did not see the pastor as the sole or permanent guide.

3. Reformed guidance seeks to cooperate with God's will and therefore expects God to bless the common effort. Even when the situation offers little reason
to expect a good outcome, God's providence is a source of hope. As the catechism says, "He will avert all evil or turn it to our good."

4. Finally, Reformed guidance deals with the whole of life. Since every part of life is spiritual, pastoral care in the Reformed tradition explores sexuality, finances, parental relationships, marriage, employment, educational goals, and business conflicts. Together, the guide and the one seeking guidance explore what direction or decisions will glorify God, which will be obedient to God's will, and which will be motivated by love of God and of others. Pastoral counseling has dominated pastoral care in the Western world for the pasty fifty years. It is no accident that the modern movement of pastoral counseling has its roots and much of its development in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition.

Finally, a few comments on two forms of pastoral care that are distinctive, though not unique, of Reformed churches: the home visit and church discipline. Both of these have been shaped by the piety taught in the Heidelberg Catechism, the behavioral piety of obedience.

The home visit differs from other pastoral visits in that it is not crisis oriented. There is no occasion for the visit such as illness, death, unemployment, marital distress, or the birth of a child. From its beginnings, one of the chief purposes of such visits was guidance in the ordinary activities of home and society. That is, this visit was made to help people live the full Christian life, to help them experience the promise that the law of God is good and in its keeping comes great blessing. This purpose was often named "supervision." Unfortunately the term "supervision" sometimes conveyed the impression of spiritual policing. In the early Reformed tradition, however, the home visit was seen as the extension of the pulpit. In it Christians were invited to apply the Word that had been proclaimed the previous Sunday to their own lives and therefore experience the blessing that it affords. Although John Calvin thought that home visits should be weekly, such a schedule proved to be impossible even in Geneva. The primary purpose of the home visit, however, was the full reformation of life and therefore, the full blessedness of belonging to Christ in body and soul.

The exercise of Christian discipline was also a distinctive element of pastoral care in the Reformed tradition. In the Reformed churches Christians were mutually accountable for their walk of life. Discipline provided training and correction in living the Christian life and therefore part of guidance. William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle mistakenly see discipline as part of the pastoral ministry of reconciliation. Yet the very passage of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion that they quote (IV.12.2) describes church discipline as a means to help people live the disciplined life, to live in accordance with the doctrines of the church, including the commandments of the Scripture. Discipline was part of guidance, and it included a call to repentance only for the sake of living the full Christian life.

Discipline aimed to fulfill the promise of Psalm 1:1-3:
Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Thus, to end as we began: Christian piety, according to the Heidelberg Catechism, does not consist of acts of devotion, spiritual disciplines, or the contemplative life. Rather, true piety is loving obedience to all of God's commandments. This piety of good works, born out of love and obedience, shaped the public and private life of Christians in the Reformation and redefined the nature of pastoral care.

ENDNOTES

6 Rice, Reformed Spirituality, 38.
8 Rice, Reformed Spirituality, 141-44.
9 Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 57.