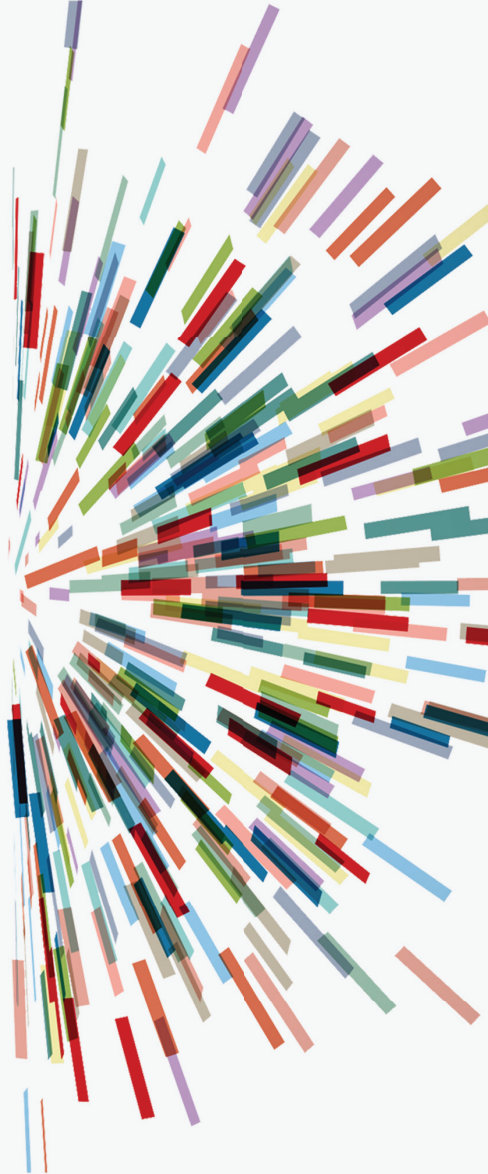


PIETY

The Heartbeat of  
Reformed Theology

**JOEL R. BEEKE**





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PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

**R&R**  
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P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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This work is a co-publication between P&R Publishing and Westminster Seminary Press, LLC.

Scripture references are from the King James Version.

*Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.*

ISBN: 978-1-59638-958-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-959-5 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-960-1 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014936847

THE WORD *PIETY* has become a pejorative term today. Classifying someone as “pietistic” most often connotes excessive religiosity, self-righteousness, or a holier-than-thou attitude.

The etymology of the word *piety*, however, is more upbeat. The Old Testament term for this word means “the fear of the Lord,” and its equivalent in the New Testament, *eusebia*, means “reverence for God” and “godliness.” The Latin term for piety (*pietas*) indicates a childlike affection for God and his family. The German word (*fromm*) signifies “godly and devout” or “gentle, harmless, and simple.” The English word implies pity and compassion.<sup>1</sup>

The sixteenth-century Reformers, most notably John Calvin (1509–64), would be shocked to see how poorly piety is regarded today, even among those who profess to be Reformed. For Calvin and his successors—the Protestant scholastics, the English Puritans, the Dutch Further Reformation divines, and, to some extent, the German Pietists—theology and practice were inseparably wed. Reformed theologians viewed piety as the heartbeat of their theology and of godly living.

Let us examine the importance of piety in Reformed theology, specifically in the work of Calvin, William Ames, and Gisbertus Voetius. We then will look at various definitions of Pietism, and conclude by offering some practical ways in which we may cultivate true piety in our daily lives.

1. This paragraph is adapted from Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.

## PIETY IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

### *John Calvin*

Piety (*pietas*) is one of the major themes of Calvin's theology. While Calvin is known for his systematization of Reformed theology, his intellectual and doctrinal concerns must not be viewed apart from the spiritual and pastoral context in which he wrote his theology. As John T. McNeill rightly remarks, Calvin's theology is "his piety described at length."<sup>2</sup>

Calvin's concept of piety is rooted in the knowledge of God and includes attitudes and actions that are directed to the adoration and service of God. For Calvin, piety flows out of theology and includes heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission, and reverential love.<sup>3</sup> Knowing who and what God is (theology proper) includes right attitudes toward God and doing what he wants (piety). Calvin connects theology and piety in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, stating, "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."<sup>4</sup> According to Calvin, love and reverence for God are the necessary corollaries to true knowledge of him.

2. Quoted in John Hesselink, "The Development and Purpose of Calvin's Institutes," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, vol. 4, *Influences upon Calvin and Discussion of the 1559 Institutes* (New York: Garland, 1992), 215–16.

3. Part of the first section of this essay has been adapted from Joel R. Beeke, "Calvin on Piety," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald C. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125–52, and from Joel R. Beeke, ed., "*The Soul of Life*": *The Piety of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009). See also Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 100–101; Sou-Young Lee, "Calvin's Understanding of *Pietas*," in *Calvinus sincerioris religionis vindex*, eds. W. H. Neuser and B. G. Armstrong (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Studies, 1997), 226–33; H. W. Simpson, "*Pietas* in the *Institutes* of Calvin," in *Our Reformational Tradition: A Rich Heritage and Lasting Vocation*, ed. T. Van der Walt (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1984), 179–91.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.9 (hereafter *Inst.*).



Calvin says piety embraces every aspect of one's life. He writes, "The *whole* life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness."<sup>5</sup> This same concern for pious living is reflected in the subtitle of Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes*: "Embracing almost the whole sum of piety, & whatever is necessary to know of the doctrine of salvation: A work most worthy to be read by all persons zealous for piety."<sup>6</sup> Calvin's comments on 1 Timothy 4:7–8 also reflect the importance of *pietas*: "You will do the thing of greatest value, if with all your zeal and ability you devote yourself to godliness [*pietas*] alone. Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living. Where it is complete, there is nothing lacking. . . . 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."<sup>7</sup>

The supreme goal of this full-orbed piety is the glory of God. The primary desire of every regenerate person is to live according to the original purpose of creation—namely, that God may be glorified. Personal salvation, though critical, is therefore secondary for the pious person. So Calvin writes to Cardinal Sadolet:

5. *Inst.* 3.19.2 (italics added).

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). The original Latin title reads: *Christianae religionis institutio totali fere pietatis summam et quidquid est in doctrina salutis cognitu necessarium complectens, omnibus pietatis studiosis lectu dignissimum opus ac recens editum* [Joannis Calvini opera selecta, eds. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Dora Scheuner, 5 vols. (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1926–52), 1:19 (hereafter OS)]. From 1539 on, the title was simply *Institutio Christianae religionis*, but "zeal for piety" continued to be a primary goal of Calvin's work. See Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 106–7.

7. Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–72), *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, trans. Thomas A. Smail (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 243–44 (hereafter, *Commentary* [on text]).

It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thought so much to himself, and not to set before him, as *the prime motive for his existence*, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. . . . I am persuaded that there is no man imbued with true piety who will not consider as insipid that long and labored exhortation to zeal for heavenly life, a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.<sup>8</sup>

The pious person's deepest concern is God: God's Word, God's authority, God's gospel, God's truth. Glorifying God—which is synonymous with pious living—means taking refuge in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and living within the bounds God has revealed.<sup>9</sup> The pious person's response to the gracious declaration of the gospel is complete surrender to the revealed will of God. In short, the comprehensive desire of the pious person is Calvin's oft-quoted vow: "I offer thee my heart, Lord, promptly and sincerely."

### **William Ames**

William Ames (1576–1633), a renowned Puritan who authored a classic titled *The Marrow of Theology*, defines theology as "the doctrine or teaching [*doctrina*] of living to God."<sup>10</sup> For

8. OS 1:363–64 (emphasis added).

9. 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 honor God, but rather to dishonor him." *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29–87 (Brunswick, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke and Son, 1863–1900), 49:51.

10. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (1629, 3rd ed.) (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 1.1.1. For the Latin, see Guilielmum Amesium, *Medulla s.s., theologiae: Ex sacris literis, earumque interpretibus, extracta, & methodice disposita per*, 4th ed. (London: Apud Robertum Allotium, 1630). For a biographical sketch

Ames, theology is a divine-human encounter that is not merely speculative but culminates in a practical end—the alignment of the human will with the will of a holy God.<sup>11</sup> In his fullest definition of theology, Ames concludes: “Theology, therefore, is to us the ultimate and the noblest of all exact teaching arts. It is a guide and master plan for our highest end, sent in a special manner from God, treating of divine things, tending towards God, and leading man to God. It may therefore not incorrectly be called θεοξία [*theoxia*], a living to God, or θεουργία [*theourgia*], a working towards God, as well as theology.”<sup>12</sup>

Ames says that everything in the study of theology is related to practical godly living. He writes, “This practice of life is so perfectly reflected in theology that there is no precept of universal truth relevant to living well in domestic morality, political life, or lawmaking which does not rightly pertain to theology.”<sup>13</sup>

Reformed theologians, such as Calvin and Ames, have always taught that godly living finds its source in God’s gracious activity. According to Calvin, piety is rooted in the believer’s mystical union (*unio mystica*) with Christ; this union is piety’s starting point.<sup>14</sup> Union with Christ is possible because Jesus Christ assumed humanity, filling it with his virtue. Although Christ is not united with us in a crass mixture (*crassa mixtura*) of human

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of William Ames and a summary of his classic, see Joel R. Beeke and Jan van Vliet, “The Marrow of Theology by William Ames,” in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, eds. Kelly M. Kapic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 52–65. See also Jan van Vliet, “William Ames: Marrow of the Theology and Piety of the Reformed Tradition” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2002). I am indebted to Jonathon Beeke for his assistance on this essay, particularly on this section about Ames.

11. Ames, *Marrow*, 1.1.9–13.

12. *Ibid.*, 1.1.13.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.1.12.

14. Howard G. Hageman, “Reformed Spirituality,” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions*, ed. Frank C. Senn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 61.

to “practically treat the solid and orthodox science of theology, which is by nature practical.”<sup>20</sup>

The writings of Voetius, along with his thirty-six years of pastoral work (including part-time preaching, visiting the sick, and catechizing Utrecht’s orphan children), confirmed his love for the practice of theology (*theologia practica*), which induces God-glorifying piety. Though known for his polemics and scholastic methodology, Voetius was no ivory-tower theologian. Rather, he taught that the practical and experiential dimension of theology can be enhanced by the scholastic method, for, in the words of Johannes Hoornbeeck, “There is no practice without theory.”<sup>21</sup> Like Ames before him, Voetius carefully distinguished theory and practice but never separated the two. A theology that is rooted in faith must be practical; it must, according to Voetius, be used to encourage the spiritual exercises of the divine graces of repentance, faith, hope, and love.

## TWO FORMS OF PIETISM

Calvin, Ames, and Voetius all advocated a theology that encouraged holy, dependent living. They might therefore be called pietists. Some might recoil at that suggestion; however, I believe the term *pietist*, much like the term *puritan*, may be properly applied to more theologians than is sometimes done, provided we use the term *pietist*, with a lowercase *p*, rather than *Pietist*, with

20. *Ibid.*, 3. For more on Voetius’s refutation of Cartesianism, see Thomas A. McGahagan, “Cartesianism in the Netherlands, 1639–1676: The New Science and the Calvinist Counter-Reformation” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976); Theo Verbeek, “From ‘Learned Ignorance’ to Skepticism: Descartes and Calvinist Orthodoxy,” in *Skepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. Richard H. Popkin and Ardo Vanderjagt (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1993).

21. “Praxis nulla absque scientia est.” See Johannes Hoornbeeck, *Theologiae practicae* (Utrecht, Netherlands: Versteegh, 1663), 1:85.

an uppercase *P*, which refers to members of the historical movement of Pietism that developed in Germany.<sup>22</sup> Let me explain.

Defining pietism is not an easy task.<sup>23</sup> Comparing the historiographical development of this term to a “vast swamp,” Carter Lindberg helpfully outlines two broad camps of “strict constructionist” and “transconfessional phenomenon.”<sup>24</sup> The strict constructionists, led more recently by Johannes Wallmann, consider Pietism to be a definable historic movement that began in the late 1660s in Frankfurt, Germany, with a Lutheran pastor. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) became discouraged at the church’s inability to motivate its parishioners to godly thinking and action, so he started meeting with small groups of believers on Sabbath afternoons to prompt Bible study and discussion. These groups, which Spener called *collegia pietatis* (“study classes in piety”), grew and spread throughout Germany and beyond. Critics of Spener dubbed those who belonged to these groups “Pietists.” The movement lasted only a few generations, ending in the mid-eighteenth century, though its results have lingered until today.<sup>25</sup>

22. See F. Ernest Stoeffler, “Pietism: Its Message, Early Manifestation, and Significance,” in *Contemporary Perspectives on Pietism: A Symposium*, ed. D. W. Dayton (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1976), 9–10. For a bibliography of German Pietism, see W. R. Ward, “Bibliographical Survey: German Pietism, 1670–1750,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44 (July 1993): 476–505.

23. See Jonathan Strom, “Problems and Promises of Pietism Research,” *Church History* 71 (September 2002), 536–54.

24. Carter Lindberg, introduction to *The Pietist Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2–3.

25. See Johannes Wallmann, *Philipp Jakob Spener und die anfänge des Pietismus*, 2nd rev. ed. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1986); Wallmann, “Eine alternative geschichte des Pietismus: Zur gegenwärtigen diskussion um den Pietismusbegriff,” *Pietismus und Neuzit* 28 (2002): 30–71. For a basic summary of Spener’s life and piety, see K. James Stein, “Philipp Jakob Spener,” in Lindberg, *The Pietist Theologians*, 84–99; for lengthier treatments, see Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986); and Dale W. Brown, “The Problem of Subjectivism in Pietism: A Redefinition with Special Reference to the Theology of Philipp Jakob Spener and

When was the last time you thought about being pious? The word tends to make us think of having a “holier-than-thou” attitude. But this negative view strays far from piety’s beginnings. Joel Beeke reclaims the Reformers’ vision for an attractive piety rooted in the knowledge of God and our union with Christ. Focusing on both mind and soul, he offers practical ways to cultivate a vibrant piety, helping you to grow in Christlikeness and in your reverence and love for God. Bring harmony between your doctrine and practice, and bring glory to God as he cultivates the fruit of the Spirit in your life.

“A summary of piety that is both biblically rich and theologically precise, written by one whose life consistently demonstrates it.”

—Derek W. H. Thomas, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

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Cover design: Christopher Tobias  
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SPIRITUAL GROWTH & GUIDANCE

ISBN: 978-1-59638-958-8

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