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GROWING IN CHRIST: GLORIFYING AND ENJOYING GOD THROUGH REFORMED SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

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“**B**ut grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18). Do we realize what Peter is saying to us? Too often people read these words as a challenge, when in reality they are a command. Grow is a present imperative in the Greek which asserts that spiritual maturity is not an option but a continuous action and requirement of God. Further, Peter implies that there is a connection between our experiential growth in Christ and God’s glory.

Many readers of this journal will likely hear echoes of the first question and answer of the celebrated *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: Q: “What is the chief and highest end of man?” A: “To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Glorifying God focuses on the nature of our almighty and gracious God. To glorify God implies we are offering something to God. Thomas Watson contends that glorifying God consists in appreciation, adoration, affection, and subjection.¹ Further “We glorify God, when we are God-admirers; admire his attributes, which are the glistening beams by which the divine nature shines forth.”² However, to enjoy God is quite different. Glorifying God honors and praises God’s divine worth. Enjoying God renews us with benefits by virtue of glorifying God. Typically we focus more on offering glory than on our receiving through enjoying or delighting in God. Watson reflects this same

emphasis; three quarters of his sermon is devoted to glorifying God and only a quarter to enjoying God. John Piper unites these themes in declaring, "The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever."³

Before proceeding there are a number of preliminary principles that must be addressed. First, I am using the term "Reformed" in its theological rather than denominational sense. Over the centuries many have held a Reformed theological view beyond the boundaries of Presbyterianism. Both Richard Baxter, an Episcopalian, and Charles Spurgeon, a Baptist, were Reformed. Likewise today, J. I. Packer and Alister McGrath, both Anglican, and John Piper and Donald Whitney, both Baptist, represent and cherish Reformed theology.

Second, we must clarify our terms. Earlier Reformed Christians would have spoken of "piety" rather than the more common contemporary term "spirituality." Piety spoke of how individuals lived out their entire life before the presence of God. Further, Reformed Christians typically spoke of experimental piety or practical divinity to emphasize that our faith always seeks to integrate the truth of Scripture into our daily lives. No area of life was excluded from this experiential emphasis. Unfortunately spirituality today is often restricted to an individual's personal or even private experience of God rather than the more balanced approach of Reformed piety. I am fully aware of the negative baggage that piety has for many modern readers. Yet our contemporary use of spirituality has likewise become so devalued and unstable that I feel it is time to revitalize piety as our preferred term.

Third, union with Christ is the foundational cornerstone of Reformed piety. The apostle Paul frequently speaks of living in Christ Jesus (i.e., Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 5:17; etc.). Previously Jesus stressed the importance of abiding in him (i.e., John 15:1-11; 17; etc.). Calvin referred

to this engrafting as the mystical union. Mystical refers to the mystery of this concept not some mysterious or esoteric principle. Drawing upon Ephesians 5:30-32 he writes:

Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.⁴

John Bunyan vividly expresses the benefits that we share through our union with Christ:

The Lord did also lead me into the mystery of union with the Son of God, that I was joined to Him, that I was flesh of His flesh, and bone of His bone, and now was that a sweet word to me in Ephesians 5.30 ("because we are members of his body"). By this also was my faith in Him, as my righteousness, the more confirmed to me; for if He and I were one, then His righteousness was mine, His merits mine, His victory also mine.⁵

We must recognize that in our union with Christ we are participating in the humanity of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit in his communion with the Father. Notice the profound implications; our spiritual maturity is not dependent upon our own strenuous efforts and results, though we must be disciplined and participate. Rather the indwelling presence of Christ's Spirit enables us to grow in

grace. John Ortberg captured the liberating essence of this distinction when he said, "Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely."⁶ The level of spiritual exhaustion in many churches is a clear indicator that numerous Christians have not understood the nature of grace or the biblical means toward maturing in Christ.

Our union with Christ enables us to glorify and enjoy God. Reformed Christians were no different than others in employing spiritual disciplines to respond to God's initiative to grow in Christ. This article examines both earlier representatives and the importance of spiritual disciplines for us today.⁷ Philip Doddridge asserts that there is no uniform method that is conducive to everyone and we need to be sensitive to our own personalities and preferences.⁸ Further, we engage in these devotional exercises not to impress God but to become more receptive to the Holy Spirit who desires to work within our lives. Henry Scougal reminds us, "Nothing is more powerful to engage our affection than to find that we are beloved."⁹ Walter Marshall offers this clarification:

We must use them as *helps* to the life of faith, in its beginning, continuance, and growth; and as *instruments* subservient to faith . . . lest, by our abuse of them, they be made rather *hindrances* than *helps* to our faith. . . . For God's ordinances are like the *cherubims of glory*, made with their *faces looking towards the mercy seat*. They are made, to guide us to Christ for salvation by faith alone.¹⁰

PUBLIC SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

1) **Public worship.** David Clarkson, successor to John Owen, preached an intriguing sermon titled, *Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private*.¹¹ Our tendency today is to emphasize the individual at the expense of the communal. Clarkson offered a number of reasons for emphasizing

public worship including that God is more glorified and it resembles heavenly worship more than private. Further, he insisted, "There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private, He is present with His people in the use of public ordinances in a more especial manner, more effectually, constantly, intimately." He illustrates this through the analogy "that the presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river."¹² Further, there is greater edification in public worship. "In private you provide for your own good, but in public you do good both to yourselves and others."¹³ He realized that people's preference for the personal is likely an overflow from public worship rather than the great power of private: "It may be thy enjoyments in private are the fruits of thy attendance upon God in public. It may be the assistance, the enlargement, the affections thou findest in private duties, are the returns of public worship."¹⁴ Many readers will realize the artificial division and that there is considerable interaction between public and personal devotional practices. Public worship is a communal event, yet each individual experiences the presence of God in his own unique way. It is impossible to guarantee the desired results for a group of Sunday worshipers. Likewise traditional personal disciplines such as meditating on Scripture or keeping a journal may create insights that transform our centripetal focus to centrifugal as we minister to others in need.

Yet more people gather for Sunday worship than at any other time in the life of the church. Hughes Oliphant Old reminds us of the power of public worship, "Worship is the workshop where we are transformed into his image."¹⁵ How often do we ponder the role of public worship in forming people in Christ? Recognize the dynamic matrix into which each worshiper enters. The name of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and exalted through Psalms, hymns, and

spiritual songs. The Word and sacraments rehearse the mighty acts of God and call for our grateful response in giving and living. Prayers are offered on behalf of the people for their needs and those of our broken world. The challenge for worship leaders is to design and lead worship that is biblically authentic and culturally relevant. It must focus on God and not tickle human tastes. The challenge for worshipers is to be aware of the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit and participate in each dimension of worship. While this formative power of public worship is often subtle, over time our minds and hearts are being shaped by how we worship. May our desire always be to glorify God by enjoying our triune God.

2) Daily prayer and family worship. Daily prayer originally centered in the church after the Reformers had closed the monasteries. The monastic tradition of daily prayer had developed the cycle of work and prayer. The famous Benedictine motto, *ora et labora* captures this balanced focus. Seven times daily the community would gather to pray the Psalms. However, with the advent of the Reformation, the local church revised this pattern to morning and evening prayer. Calvin's Geneva had weekday services on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday, probably at 4:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.¹⁶ Many of these services following the first two centuries of the Reformation included preaching or instruction.

Eventually morning and evening prayer became part of family life. The family was seen as the church in miniature as reflected in the following prayer: "Sanctify and prosper my domestic devotion, instruction, discipline, example, that my house may be a nursery for heaven."¹⁷ The father was head of the family and served as a "weekday pastor." However, the mother fulfilled this role in the father's absence.¹⁸ Early sources reveal a concern for children and servants alike. Everyone, whether resident, guest, or

employee, was in need of spiritual shepherding. Each morning upon rising and every evening before bed, the Puritan father would lead his family in prayer, Scripture reading, and singing Psalms.¹⁹ Typically morning prayers began with confession of sin and proceeded to thanksgiving for God's many blessings. Normally family prayers concluded with the Lord's Prayer. Prayers were also offered before and after each meal.

Perhaps no discipline of Christian spirituality has experienced more neglect today than family prayer and worship. When children are in preschool there are far less demands and competitions upon family time and schedule than when they reach middle and high school. Tragically many families find it increasingly difficult to gather even for a meal. However, we must be careful not to allow our pressured schedules and multiple demands to squeeze out that which is most important in life. One of the gifts of family prayer is the intentional gathering of all family members and guests to stop everything and remember our great need for God. As our frenetic society minimizes the value of relationships in general and family life in particular any efforts to reclaim this practice will yield positive results. Related to this is the surprising 1636 law of Connecticut which required single men and women to live with families. It stated "no young man that is neither married nor hath any servant . . . shall keep house by himself, without consent of the town where he lives."²⁰ Recognize the great wisdom of this practice. Due to Puritanism's strong introspective quality this would protect people from being overly serious without the objective encouragement of others.

3) Sabbath keeping. Recently Sunday as a day of rest has received renewed interest. Articles in *Women's Day* and *McCalls* as well as the more likely Christian periodicals extol the benefits of this forgotten discipline. Granted not

all of these are grounded in biblical or theological reasons but they do reveal the exhausted state of our North American life. Interestingly, the Fourth Commandment is the only devotional practice connected with the Ten Commandments. It is also the most detailed and perhaps difficult of the commandments to obey.

Calvin comments on the three-fold purpose of the Sabbath:

First, we are to meditate throughout life upon an everlasting Sabbath rest from all our works, that the Lord may work in us through his Spirit. Secondly, each one of us privately, whenever he has leisure, is to exercise himself diligently in pious meditation upon God's works. Also, we should all observe together the lawful order set by the church for the hearing of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and for public prayers. In the third place, we should not inhumanly oppress those subject to us.²¹

Therefore, the Sabbath graciously offers us spiritual rest, calls us to worship God, and reminds us of our social responsibility not to subjugate others. Further Calvin addresses our proper Sabbath behavior:

We must be wholly at rest that God may work in us; we must yield our will; we must resign our heart; we must give up all our fleshly desires. In short, we must rest from all activities of our own contriving so that, having God working in us (Hebrews 13:21), we may repose in him (Hebrews 4:9), as the apostle also teaches.²²

The Puritans moved to a greater degree of rigidity and Sabbatarianism than Calvin. Unlike the Genevan Reformer, who understood the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, the Puritans perceived it as a moral and binding law

upon all humanity. Charles Hambrick-Stowe summarizes the Puritan thinking: "It was a day of rest from all secular work and a day for the spiritual work whereby the soul could find rest. The Sabbath was a day for the re-creation of the soul, not the recreation of the body."²³ One of the frequently voiced excuses for not keeping the Sabbath is the heavy demands and busyness of our daily lives. Both Calvin and the Puritans are in agreement; we keep the Sabbath because we trust God to provide for all of our needs. Thomas Watson counsels us:

We should consecrate the whole Sabbath to God and give Him double devotion (because) God doubles His blessings upon us on this day. As the manna rained twice as much on the sixth day as any of the other days, so the manna of spiritual blessings falls twice as much on the Sabbath day as any other.²⁴

Of contemporary interest, is the recent document of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), "An Invitation to Sabbath." It was produced under the paradoxical name, "The Work Group on Sabbath." According to this report the Sabbath is God's gift for "our joy and rest, deepened communion with the Living God, draw(ing) us into the sacred rhythm God has woven into all of life and creation, (and) is profoundly prophetic, and for our life in community."²⁵ This report hints at a great need for the contemporary church. While it is essential we recover the biblical command of keeping the Sabbath day it is also wise to claim a Sabbath attitude of rest for the other six days as well. In response to our mobile society more churches are scheduling church boards and meetings on Sunday. However, pastors and church leaders who have grasped the significance of the Sabbath will be careful not to clutter Sundays with non-worship activities. As a professor I never assign any

papers, major assignments, or tests for Monday. Therefore my students are always free to keep the Sabbath for resting and not cramming or frantically trying to complete a paper or study for a test.

4) **Conferencing or spiritual guidance.** Many today are rediscovering the ancient practice of spiritual direction. It would be a serious error to assume that this was the exclusive domain of the Roman Catholic Church. On the contrary, spiritual guidance or conferencing, as it was normally called, was a significant practice among Reformed Christians.²⁶ John Bunyan illustrates both the necessity and practice of this ministry in his classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian stops at the House of the Interpreter for counsel and direction regarding his journey.²⁷ Further, Christian and Faithful walk together as "companions."²⁸ Christian learns the hard way about the importance of discernment. Once he has traveled further along the pilgrimage he discovers the danger of being gullible and following anyone.²⁹ The powerful spiritual guidance question is asked by Christian to Hopeful, "How stands it between God and your soul now?"³⁰ While part one of Bunyan's classic focuses on Christian, the second portion offers a larger community focus to spiritual guidance through the eyes of Christiana, his wife, children and accompanying friend.

Richard Rogers (1551-1618) records in 1587 his use of spiritual direction within his community: "After our meeting according to our custome this 30 of November I had a veary sweet conference with mr. L. of the practize of godliness, of the necessary frute and comfort of it, of the way to bring it foorth."³¹ Similar entries are repeated throughout his diary. Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769) offers another example. He created a "Pilgrim's Hut" where he preached and offered spiritual guidance. His approach is captured in the following lines:

And so my practice is to leave souls very much to the free leading of the grace of God, and to direct them only to those things to which I notice God wants to lead them, according to my reading of his will. I just watch God and caution them when they might strike something harmful.³²

Notice the important themes of listening to and depending upon the Holy Spirit, grace, and the attitude of wonder and awareness. Further, it is evident from Reformed writings that spiritual direction was practiced by pastors and laity alike. It was not uncommon for women to be spiritual guides. Susan Watkins Hunt, the second wife of Moses Hoge who served as the first president of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, provided spiritual guidance to Archibald Alexander, the future Princeton theologian, before his conversion.³³

Any aspect of life can be brought to a spiritual guide. Sources indicate that private conferences were used to assist people in the process of conversion, preparation for public profession of faith and church membership, dealing with doubt and difficult cases of conscience, preparing for the Lord's Supper, and continuing the process of growing in grace or godliness.³⁴ Parents would employ similar methods to guide their children and servants to faith in Jesus Christ and further growth in grace. Reformed piety like other traditions made frequent use of letter writing to offer spiritual counsel. John Calvin, John Bradford, Samuel Rutherford, John Knox, and Ann Griffiths, to name only a few, are representative of this practice.³⁵ Bradford's letters were held in such high esteem that they were often chained to a post along with the Bible in many Puritan churches. Additionally there was a strong emphasis upon group conferences. Welsh Methodists, who were actually Calvinists, formed "Experience Meetings" to counsel leaders to have different expectations for young Christians than the older

more mature believers. Oliver Heywood declares the proper function for gathering in these groups:

Let not your end be to hear stories and notions, nor yet only polemical discourses, to furnish your heads with arguments for all subjects and companies, but let your principal end be to get your hearts bettered, grace strengthened, lusts weakened, lives reformed, consciences resolved.³⁶

Today in our isolated and lonely culture it is essential for pastors and people alike to seek the accountability of a spiritual companion. Our motivation should not be guided by the current popularity of mentoring in education and industry but to reclaim the wisdom of meeting with a wise guide who can assist us like Christian was on his way to the Celestial City, stopping at the House of the Interpreter.

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

1) **Meditating on Scripture.** Tragically many expressions of contemporary spirituality are inspired by experiences that may have little or no foundation in God. Reformed Christians have consistently emphasized the need for grounding our experience in God. Hence one of the primary devotional exercises has been meditating on Scripture. While some traditions of Christian spirituality may accuse Reformed people of being overly cognitive, there was never a shyness about spiritual experiences. Nathanael Renew, who produced a major work on this subject comments, "If meditation be only head-work, and not heart-work, it is like a picture without life; like a student that studies in a mere acting of wisdom only. The right and genuine meditation is an affectionate thing: as the head acts, the heart glows."³⁷ The best of Reformed piety was conscious of the need to practice their faith. However, these experiences must be based on the objective truth of Scripture rather than disconnected emo-

tional quicksand or enthusiasm. Additionally, Reformed believers did not flinch in using their sanctified imaginations when reading or praying Scripture.³⁸

Further we must recognize that meditation is different than our typical contemporary way of reading the Bible. Meditation is a deeper reflective use of the mind that enables the biblical insights to move from our heads down to our hearts to inspire and transform us. Consideration was the common term used to refer to this process. Richard Baxter states, "Consideration is but reading over and repeating God's reasons to our hearts;"³⁹ it "opens the door between the head and the heart."⁴⁰ The intention was to stir up the affections so we might be drawn closer to God. Thomas Watson instructs us; "Leave not off reading in the Bible till you find your hearts warmed. . . . Let it not only *inform* you, but to *inflamm* you."⁴¹ The Dutch Reformed writer Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635-1711) offers this definition:

This is a spiritual exercise in which a godly person—having a heart which is separated from the earth and lifted up toward heaven—reflects upon and engages his thoughts toward God and divine things with which he was already previously acquainted. He does so in order to be led further into divine mysteries, to be kindled with love, to be comforted, and to be stirred up to lively exercises.⁴²

Watson captures the effect of this spiritual discipline in his analogy: "The bee sucks the flower, and then works it into the hive, and so turns it into honey; by reading we suck the flower of the word, by meditation we work it into the hive of our mind, and so it turns to profit."⁴³

Our contemporary age, which is prone to superficiality, would be immeasurably strengthened by recovering this practice of meditating on Scripture. Walter Marshall describes one potential benefit: "It is a duty whereby the

soul doth feed and ruminates upon the word as its spiritual food, and digesteth it, and turneth it into nourishment, whereby we are strengthened for every good work."⁴⁴ Nathanael Renew reminds us that meditation, more than reading the Bible, creates spiritual maturity.

It is not the great and much reading makes the scholar, but studying and pondering what is read. It is not reading much that makes the knowing Christian, but meditating on what is read: reading without meditation is like swallowing much meat without due chewing.⁴⁵

Since one of the primary goals of meditating on Scripture is to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Colossians 3:16), it is important to prepare properly for this exercise. Baxter counsels us to, "Get it (our heart) as empty as thou possibly canst, that it may be the more capable of being filled with God."⁴⁶

One Reformed expression of meditating on Scripture that we could reclaim today is soliloquy or preaching to our self. Baxter encourages all Christians to engage in this discipline "so every good Christian is a good preacher to his own soul. Therefore the very same method which a minister should use in his preaching to others, every Christian should endeavor after in speaking to himself."⁴⁷ The church is in great need today of Christians who not only have great passion for Christ but also who know in their heads and hearts that Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Meditation was a common practice that was used not only in discovering and digesting Scripture but also applied in meditation on heaven, on providence, on creation, on the promises of God, etc.

2) **Meditating on heaven.** Heavenly mindedness was a common Reformed devotional practice.⁴⁸ The motivation for desiring heaven was not an escape, even during the

intense times of trial and persecution, but rather an intense longing to be with God. This principle was grounded in union with Christ and the reality that while we share in Christ's benefits now on earth, that fullness would not be experienced until we reached heaven. Thomas Watson reflects this dependency upon Christ: "Paul doth not say I desire to depart and be in heaven (Philippians 1:23), but to be with Christ; it is Christ's presence makes heaven, as the king's presence makes the court."⁴⁹ And again; "If we are in Christ while we live, we shall go to Christ when we die; union is the ground of privilege; we must be in Christ before we can be with Christ."⁵⁰ Joseph Alleine captures his deep desire for heaven in a letter written to his wife:

Oh I groan earnestly to be clothed upon with my house which is from Heaven, being willing rather to be absent from the Body, and present with the Lord! Oh, when shall I come and appear before him? . . . My treasure is in Heaven, and my heart is in Heaven. Oh when shall I be where my heart is?⁵¹

Therefore, it is not surprising that earlier Christians meditated frequently upon heaven, because in one sense their soul was already in heaven.

Many of the Reformed writings on this practice emphasize the principle of enjoying God. Jonathan Edwards in a sermon titled, "The True Christian's Life a Journey Toward Heaven" asserts, "To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here."⁵² Mary Winslow speaks of that same expectant enjoyment of God: "It is my wish to encourage all that are journeying to heaven, to get much of Christ in their souls while here, not only for their present comfort, but believing that, in the same proportion, they will enjoy the glory of heaven hereafter."⁵³

Watson, in urging meditation on heaven, describes

three benefits: (1) It excites and quickens our obedience. Meditating on heaven stimulates sluggish souls.⁵⁴ Richard Baxter declares, "A heart in heaven will be a most excellent preservative against temptations to sin. It will keep the heart well employed."⁵⁵ Edwards proclaims:

The heaven I desired was a heaven of holiness; to be with God, and to spend my eternity in divine love, and holy communion with Christ. My mind was very much taken up with contemplations on heaven, and the enjoyments of those there; and living there in perfect holiness, humility and love.⁵⁶

(2) Strive after purity, for only the pure in heart shall see God (Matthew 5:8).⁵⁷ Thomas Boston asserts, "Be heavenly-minded, and maintain a holy contempt of the world. You are united to Christ; He is your Head and Husband, and is in heaven wherefore your hearts should be there also (Colossians 3:1)"⁵⁸ Likewise Henry Scougal counsels,

If our heavenly country be much in our thoughts, it will make us as "strangers and pilgrims, to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul," and keep ourselves "unspotted from this world," that we may be fit for the enjoyments and felicities of the other.⁵⁹

Earth was seen as a training for heaven by instructing us how to praise and live with God. (3) Pillar of support under our sufferings.⁶⁰ Looking to heaven will ease the pain of struggle now as we consider the joy of eternity with God. Meditating on heaven amidst affliction and struggle reminded believers that there was more to life than our earthly life. We are pilgrims and earth is not our final destination. Edwards reminds us, "We ought not to rest in this world and its enjoyments, but should desire heaven."⁶¹

Unfortunately, too much contemporary spirituality

centers exclusively on earth as if that is the full extent of life. Western Christians are often restricted by the "time-space box" that limits reality to what our senses can rationally perceive and process.⁶² Further, much of the emphasis is on happiness. We try to cram everything we can into this world because that's the extent of our focus. But a healthy spirituality looks to holiness not happiness as witnessed by the contours of Reformed piety. Meditating on heaven introduces a more balanced vision that life is greater than what we can accumulate on earth in our bulging garages and storage sheds and trains us to "set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2).

3) **Meditating on creation.** John Calvin frequently made use of the image of creation as the "theater of God's glory." While he understood that nature was not as reliable a witness of revelation as Scripture, nonetheless there was much that could be learned by gazing at the beauty of creation. Calvin states,

Meanwhile let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God and manifest in this most beautiful theater. For, as I have elsewhere said, although it is not the chief evidence for faith, yet it is the first evidence in the order of nature, to be mindful that wherever we cast our eyes, all things they meet are works of God.⁶³

Reformed Christians have understood and appreciated the spectacular truth contained in Psalm 19:1 that the "heavens are telling the glory of God." Isaac Watts' popular hymn, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," concludes with this soaring crescendo:

There's not a plant or flower below
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise, and tempest blow

By order from Thy throne;
While all that borrows life from Thee is ever in Thy care,
And everywhere that we can be,
Thou, God, art present there.⁶⁴

The Puritans developed a practice which focused on nature as a source for spiritual insight referred to as "improving the creatures."⁶⁵ John Flavel developed this to its highest degree in his two works, *Husbandry Spiritualized: The Heavenly Use of Earthly Things* and *Navigation Spiritualized: A New Compass for Seamen*.⁶⁶

However, some scholars in analyzing this approach accuse Reformed Christians of "using" creation in a utilitarian manner to reveal spiritual truths rather than to appreciate creation more deeply for its own sense.⁶⁷ While this assessment is correct for some it is not universally accurate. If these critics had studied Edwards' *Personal Narrative* they might have had a more balanced critique. Listen to Edwards as he records his contemplative joy in meditating upon creation:

God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the meantime, singing forth with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer.⁶⁸

Edwards was equally moved and inspired by the weather patterns. He continues his description:

And scarcely anything, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning. Formerly, nothing had

been so terrible to me. I used to be a person uncommonly terrified with thunder: and it used to strike me with terror, when I saw a thunderstorm rising. But now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such times, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder: which often times was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.⁶⁹

Likewise Elizabeth Singer Rowe, friend of Isaac Watts, extols the power of creation:

BEAUTY complete, and majesty divine,
In all thy works, ador'd Creator, shine.
Where'er I cast my wondering eye around,
The God I seek in ev'ry part is found.
Pursuing thee, the flow'ry fields I trace,
And read thy name on ev'ry spire of grass.⁷⁰

Unfortunately wonder is often emasculated by our high technology culture. We over analyze everything in life from the last play in sports to political and meteorological events. This steady preoccupation with analysis tends to paralyze our awareness and ability to notice as we become calloused and bored. One spiritual benefit of recovering this practice is the connection between enjoying creation and worshipping God. This is not the same as pantheism which fails to distinguish between God and creation seeing them as one. Alan Sell correctly connects the two when he writes, "Wondering contemplation on the creation doctrine should prompt not desecration, but consecration."⁷¹ Oliver Heywood (1629-1702) offers similar counsel:

Fix your thoughts upon the works of creation, study this

large, voluminous book, every page thereof will find you fresh matter of meditation and admiration; every creature hath a tongue to tell us of the power and wisdom of its Maker: Surely, this goodly fabric of heaven and earth speaks aloud the glory of the great Creator.⁷²

Those who train the eyes of their hearts and mind to notice the creation around them will grow in a wonder and appreciation of God's magnificent beauty.

4) Spiritual autobiography and journaling. Puritans and later Reformed Christians frequently noted their experiences in diaries and journals.⁷³ There is a distinction between a person who records the events of his or her life in a diary as he or she is experiencing them and an autobiography which is written later and reflects a more integrative view over a larger portion, if not all of his or her life. Normally this was a record for them used in self-examination, but frequently it was employed for encouraging family members and later generations to grow in Christ. Additionally, diaries or journals were used to assist Christians in seeking assurance of salvation, combating spiritual warfare or wrestling with the residual power of indwelling sin, and preparing for death.

James Janeway offers perhaps one of the most descriptive commentaries about the value of journaling when he comments on his brother John's practice:

He did write down every evening what the frame of his spirit had been all the day long, especially in every duty. He took notice what incomes and profit he received; in his spiritual traffique; what returns from the far-country; what answers of prayer, what deadness and flatness, and what observable providences did present themselves, and the substance of what he had been doing; and any wanderings of thoughts, inordinancy in any passions; which, though the world could

not discern he could. . . . This, made him to retain a grateful remembrance of mercy, and to live in a constant admiring and adoring of divine goodness; this, brought him to a very intimate acquaintance with his own heart; this, kept his spirit low and fitted him for freer communications from God; this, made him speak more affectionally and experimentally to others of the things of God: and, in a word, this left a sweet calm upon his spirits, because he every night made even his accounts; and if his sheets should prove his winding-sheet, it had been all once: for, he could say his work was done; so that death could not surprise.⁷⁴

Those who have practiced some form of journaling realize the great benefit of being able to return and ponder experiences in greater depth after they have occurred. The actual process of writing seems to stimulate the brain and deepen one's awareness as well as becoming more attentive to listening to God or learning how to discern God. In our contemporary age which seems so intent upon analyzing everything, we can be challenged to take a more graceful approach in using writing as a means to encourage and monitor our growing in Christ.⁷⁵

To glorify and enjoy God is both our privilege as well as the means for encouraging our growth in Christ. The words of Stephen Charnock challenge and invite a personal response from each reader when he states:

A Christian's heart is in secret ravished into heaven. There is a delight in coming near God, and warming the soul by the fire of his love. The angels are cheerful in the act of praise; their work is their glory. A holy soul doth so delight in this duty, that if there were no command to engage him, no promise to encourage him, he would be stepping into God's courts. He thinks it not a good day that passeth without some intercourse with God.⁷⁶

Author

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Notes

1. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Sovereign Grace Publishers, n.d.), 5-6.
2. *Body of Divinity*, 5.
3. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1986), 14.
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960), 3.11.10
5. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1986), no. 233.
6. John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 47.
7. Walter Marshall lists these devotional practices: knowing the word of God, self-examination, meditation on the word of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, signing of Psalms, fasting, fellowship and communion with the saints including instructions on mutual admonition and excommunication. In Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 186-216; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: The Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982); and Gordon Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion* (London: Epworth Press, 1957) are especially helpful in providing a historical overview to Reformed spiritual disciplines. See also the following contemporary sources which address spiritual disciplines: Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987); Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); and Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1991).
8. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1977), 162. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a valuable tool for exploring the interaction between personality and spirituality. See Mark Pearson, *Why Can't I Be Me?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1992); Reginald Johnson, *Celebrate My Soul* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor, 1988); and Bruce Duncan, *Pray Your Way: Your Personality and God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993) for helpful introductions to this topic.
9. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1986), 120.
10. *Gospel Mystery*, 185-86.
11. David Clarkson, *Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private*, vol. 3, *The Practical Works of David Clarkson* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 187-209.
12. *Public Worship*, 190.
13. *Public Worship*, 192.
14. *Public Worship*, 198.
15. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship that is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 8.
16. Diane Karay Tripp, *Daily Prayer in the Reformed Tradition: An Initial Survey* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1996), 26. See also Hughes Oliphant Old, "Daily Prayer in the Reformed Church of Strasbourg, 1525-1530" in *Worship* 52:2 (1978), 121-38; Hughes Oliphant Old, "The Reformed Daily Office: A Puritan Perspective" in *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 12:4 (Fall 1978), 9-17.
17. Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania and Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 113.
18. *Daily Prayer*, 6-7.
19. See for example Edward S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 136; *Practice of Piety*, 144-150; *Daily Prayer*, 32-37. See *The Family Altar: or the Duty, Benefits, and More of Conducting Family Worship*, compiled from various sources, no editor listed (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1992); James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Family-Worship* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1991) for original sources and samples of Reformed family prayer and worship.
20. Cited by Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1986), 174-75.
21. *Institutes*, 2.8.34.

22. *Institutes*, 2.8.29.
23. *Practice of Piety*, 97. See Tom Schwanda, "The Unforced Rhythms of Grace: A Reformed Perspective on Sabbath" in *Perspectives* 11:3 (March, 1996), 14-17, for a comparison of Calvin, the Puritans, and Eugene Peterson's views on the Sabbath. Unfortunately I was unable to read and integrate the conclusions of Richard Gaffin's work, *Calvin and the Sabbath: The Controversy of Applying the Fourth Commandment* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, England: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), but interested readers are encouraged to consult this critical treatment of Calvin.
24. Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken By Storm* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 36.
25. Office of Spiritual Formation, "Invitation to Sabbath" Presbyterian Church (USA), (Louisville, Kentucky, 2000), n.p.
26. See *The Practice of Piety*, 150-55; John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), especially chapters 1-12; Tom Schwanda, "Reclaiming the Guidance of the Holy Spirit" in *Reformed Spirituality Network* no. 2 (December 1988), 4-9; Arthur Dickson Thomas, Jr. "Moses Hoge: Reformed Pietism and Spiritual Guidance" in *American Presbyterians* 71:2 (Summer 1993), 95-109.
27. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1933), 29.
28. *Pilgrim's Progress*, 69. See Jonathan Edwards' example of spiritual companionship with his friend John Smith. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, vol. 16, *Letters and Writings*. Edited by George S. Claghorn. (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 797.
29. *Pilgrim's Progress*, 138.
30. *Pilgrim's Progress*, 149.
31. Richard Rogers, *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries by Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward*. Edited by M.M. Knappen (Chicago: The American Society of Church History, 1933), 68.
32. Jay C. Rochelle, "Wherever You Are, Pray and Remain Collected in the Presence: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Gerhard Tersteegen" in *The Covenant Quarterly* 46 (Fall 1988), 34.
33. "Moses Hoge: Reformed Pietism and Spiritual Guidance," 99. See also *The Directory for Family Worship* of the Westminster Assembly, chapter XIII, for a provision for those who need the spiritual support and encouragement of a friend.
34. See John Flavel, "A Familiar Conference Between a Minister and a Doubting Christian, Concerning the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper" in *The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 460-69, as one actual example of this usage.
35. Ann Griffiths (1776-1805) declares: "And I give myself to prayer . . . O for the privilege of being under the detailed supervision of the Holy

- Ghost. . . Thanks always for a Bible which fits a condition that has sunk so deep. Dear sister, it is a great privilege that one's condition can be found reflected in God's Word. O to hold it up to the holy mirror to the end that we may make use of a mediator." A. M. Allchin, *Songs to Her God: Spirituality of Ann Griffiths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1987), 94-95.
36. Oliver Heywood, *Heart Treasure*, vol. 2, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Oliver Heywood* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 125.
 37. Nathanael Renew, *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 45. *Lectio divina* or spiritual reading, which has its roots in the Benedictine tradition, has become popular today. There are Reformed variations of this as well. The primary concern is to assist Christians in knowing God through the Word in head and heart. See Tom Schwanda, "Praying the Scriptures with Head and Heart" in *The Banner* 133:23 (November 9, 1998), 24-26.
 38. See for example Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (Welwyn, Hertys, England: Evangelical Press, 1978), 386-90; Alexander Whyte, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1976), 241-55.
 39. *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 361.
 40. *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 359.
 41. Thomas Watson, *The Bible and the Closet: or How We May Read the Scriptures with the Most Spiritual Profit* (Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania: Sprinkle Publications, 1992), 39. See also Nathanael Renew who asserts, "When we meditate with the mind, we should be warm at the heart: the fuel and fire of holy affections must come to the offering up this sacrifice." *Solitude Improved*, 44.
 42. Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 4 (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 25. Thomas Watson defines meditation as "A holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves" (*Heaven Taken By Storm*, 23). Gerhard Tersteegen, Richard Greenham and Cotton Mather are but a few of the Reformed examples illustrating this practice of meditating upon Scripture. For a contemporary Reformed perspective see Eugene H. Peterson's practice of "contemplative exegesis" in *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 74-86.
 43. *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 24-25.
 44. *Gospel Mystery*, 193.
 45. *Solitude Improved*, 66.
 46. *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 354.
 47. *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 381-82. Lewis Bayly concludes his classic manual of Puritan devotion with a section titled, "The Soul's Soliloquy, ravished in contemplation of the Passion of our Lord." Bayly, *The Practice of Piety* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, n.d.), 339-43.
 48. See for example some of the representative writings on this subject.

- Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*; Bartholomew Ashwood, *The Heavenly Trade*; William Bates, *A Short Description of the Blessed Place*; and especially the final section of Bates, *The Four Last Things*; John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*; *The Holy War*. Puritan biographies often praised people for their "heavenly mindedness."
49. Thomas Watson, *The Saints Desire to Be With Christ*, vol. 2, *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 5. Elsewhere Watson writes regarding the Christian's meditation on heaven. Thomas Watson, *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects*, vol. 1 (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 48-62, 231-232, 273-291.
 50. *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects*, vol. 1, 19. William Bates draws upon the same necessity of our union with Christ when he affirms, "By all their expressions of joyful Love and Union, we may ascend in our Thoughts, what are the Joys of Heaven, where Communion of Christ and the Church is entire and uninterrupted for ever." Dewey D. Wallace, Jr. *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), 243.
 51. *Spirituality of the Later English Puritans*, 190.
 52. Jonathan Edwards, *The True Christian's Life a Journey Towards Heaven*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses 1730-1733*. Edited by Mark Valeri. (New Haven, Connecticut; and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 437.
 53. Octavius Winslow, *Life in Jesus. A Memoir of Mrs. Mary Winslow* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 305.
 54. *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects*, 1:232.
 55. *Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 282.
 56. *Personal Narrative*, 795.
 57. *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects*, 1:232.
 58. Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., n.d.), 154-55.
 59. *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 128.
 60. *Discourses on Important and Interesting Subjects*, 1:232.
 61. *True Christian's Life a Journey*, 430.
 62. Morton Kelsey addresses this weakness of our highly rational spiritless culture in his writings on the "time-space" box of life. See Kelsey, *Christianity as Psychology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg, 1986), esp. 37, as representative of his treatment.
 63. *Institutes*, 1.14.20. Cf. 1.5.8n for additional references which capture this imagery. *The Belgic Confession* (1561) instructs Christians that they may know God by two means; through the book of creation and Scripture. Regarding creation, the confession states, "That universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God; his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20" *The*

- Belgic Confession*, art. 2. Traditionally this practice has been referred to as natural theology. For a contemporary treatment of this from the pen of a popular Presbyterian professor see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1997), 109-24.
64. Isaac Watts, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God," in *The Presbyterian Hymnal, Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), no. 288, st. 3.
 65. *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans*, 119.
 66. John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, vol. 5 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 3-416. This collection of sermons covers a broad spectrum including spiritualizing on birds, various animals, trees, garden, etc.
 67. *Puritan Devotion*, 85. See Perry Miller's critique of the Puritans in general and Jonathan Edwards in particular in his introduction to *Images or Shadows of Divine Things by Jonathan Edwards*. Edited by Perry Miller. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1948).
 68. *Personal Narrative*, 794. Edwards elsewhere writes of his desire for long walks along the Hudson River, 797, and walks and horse rides into the woods, 794, 801.
 69. *Personal Narrative*, 794.
 70. Elizabeth Singer Rowe, "On the Works of CREATION" in *The Poetry of Elizabeth Singer Rowe*. Edited by Madeleine Forell Marshall. (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 246.
 71. Alan P. F. Sell, *God Our Father, Doctrine and Devotion*, vol. 1 (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Ragged Edge Press, 2000), 70.
 72. Oliver Heywood, *Heart Treasure*, vol. 2, *The Whole Works of the Rev. Oliver Heywood* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 249-50. Nathanael Renew reminds his readers "I have the whole creation for my eye-walk, my meditation, and spirit's recreation; yea, and farther than the whole world extends" in *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation*, 124.
 73. Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) remains a standard secondary source for examining this topic.
 74. *The Puritan Experience*, 20-21.
 75. Some helpful sources for journaling are Morton T. Kelsey, *Adventure Inward* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg, 1980); Ron Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson, 1982); and Richard Peace, *Spiritual Journaling* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Nav-Press, 1995).
 76. Stephen Charnock, *A Discourse of Delight in Prayer*, vol. 5, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866), 374.