

The Perils of Piety

John R Gavazzoni

Most of those who will read this are, to varying degrees, familiar with, and put off by scandalously smug scholasticism that glories in its theological correctness which, in turn, gives birth to the boring, boorish doctrinal watchdog whose radar is always turned on to detect any blips of unorthodoxy appearing on his screen. He or she is convinced that they have been divinely commissioned to root out, expose and destroy all religious error while, all the while, being themselves, error personified and insidiously infecting others who might be foolish enough to remain within range of their breath and touch.

But are we equally aware of that other lurking danger of piety gone bad?

Scholasticism and pietism gone bad can be contrasting poles of the same generic religious world. I certainly have had my fill of the former, having locked horns with several of that ilk who, if their real biblical and spiritual understanding were dynamite, they wouldn't be able to blow their nose, much less be a guide to spiritually seeking souls.

The older I get, though, I've become equally sensitized to the perils of piety (yeah, that's an intentional take off on the Perils of Pauline--- remember those old silent films). Beware, dear saint, of the slippery slope into self-conscious, narcissistic spirituality. A true lover of God is one who is caught up in the beauty of the Lord, rather than in the admiration of one's own spiritual ardor.

The narcissistic fall in love with what they perceive to be the superiority of their spiritual passion compared to that of others. It's extremely subtle because they see themselves as always seeking higher heights of devotion to Christ, yet are proud of having that kind of seeking heart.

They usually have spiritual heroes and acknowledge that they yearn to walk in their heroes' higher plane, but they're proud of that "humility" also.

I've been down that path, I confess. Though genuinely disturbed by the Holy Spirit to seek beyond the box of the fundamentalism of my early days as a Christian, a disturbance that I could not shake off, and which initiated an intensely personal quest for "the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Nevertheless, I see clearly in retrospect how vulnerable I was to spiritual pride.

At one point, having cancelled nine months of solid "bookings" for my evangelistic services in order to give myself totally to what I felt at the time to be God's very unique gathering of saints for the purpose of recovering the church to its pristine glory, I came to identify myself as a "seeking-one", a popular catch phrase within the loop of our restorationist movement. I'd become infected.

I had become very self-aware, very caught up in the perception of myself as being among the "seeking-ones," compared to what we were coming to view as our more run-of-the-mill, ordinary, less spiritually exercised brethren who seemed to us to be very content with the evangelical status quo.

At that point, from stage right entered the severity of the Lord and, quite a bit of my delusion exited stage left. Through an amazing arrangement of a providential mix of internal and external circumstances, I found myself suddenly plunged into spiritual darkness, inundated with every kind of spiritual contrariness and ungodliness. I experienced nearly everything that might be described as being lost. And it didn't take long in that condition for me to become very empathetic to the plight of "the lost." Not only empathetic, but in the middle of, part of, and down into the lowest levels of lostness.

Now I understand how that was necessary to return my humanity to me. I had become divine. Having become so impressed with the evidence of my divine sonship. I had nearly ceased identifying myself among the sons of humanity. God has His ways to deal with such an anomaly, such perversity. The Stone fell on me and ground me to dust. Out of that experience, followed by deliverance (wholly without my contribution) came a valuation and appreciation of the pure grace of God that no amount of Bible study or prayer could ever have given me.

It's all grace, brethren. You bring nothing of yourself to the process. You have no superior dedication or commitment, no superior spiritual ardor. Both the pilot light and the flame are of God, and only God. You know how we all at times check to see if our deodorant is working. Check to see if there's any of the scent of the Pharisee about you. Usually, you're the last to notice it.

John R Gavazzoni