

PIETY IN PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANITY¹

by

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Introduction

“What is piety? Who are the genuinely pious?” — These are the questions that are sometimes raised by serious Christians in the face of a maze of contradictions and false definitions. Additionally, in America a new interest in examining post reformation pietism and its significance for the issues of faith in our time has developed. As a byproduct of this examination there has come about the necessity of a precise definition — more correctly — a clearer description of piety.

The words “piety” and “pious” are not simple. In addition, these words have been given a negative tone through excessive use by particular pietistic groups in America. Their extreme view of faith limits piety to a discreditable emotionalism. Through my study of the German theological literature I have come to the conclusion that the problem of a clear understanding of “Frömmigkeit” is very similar to our word “piety.” Is one pious (fromm) by regularly attending church? Or does piety (Frömmigkeit) have refer to a distinctly Christian ethic, and to obedience—strict obedience? Is piety a consequence of an inner attitude and spiritual disposition? Or, of religious deeds? Or, is it a combination of both? Piety has been defined in differing ways through the centuries by scholars and various religious groups: as “religious behavior,” as “subjective, psychological feeling,” etc.

Perhaps a personal word is appropriate here. In 1979 I examined in a journal article the type and manner of heresy set forth in the Pastoral Epistles. In this connection the idea of εὐσεβεία surfaced, as well as some related concepts more frequently used as significant ideas for correct Christian association with the truth. I came across passages like Col. 2:23, which contain related the related idea of ἑθελοθρησκεία (self-made piety), as the distinction between false and true piety. From that point on, I concerned myself with the question, What does piety signify, in a biblical sense? My interest in the New Testament view of this issue gained a strong impetus through the declarations of some seminary students and well known preachers who occasionally call upon our church to practice “true piety,” that is “true spiritual living.”

The so called “Deeper Life” movement among Baptists and other groups in America has put forward the claim that true piety demands an especially narrow life style and pattern of worship that is grounded in a ‘deeper’ experience of God and, connected to this, a deeper biblical insight. But such an assertion is not congruent with that found in the New Testament. Thus in the meanwhile my students as well as church members have put many questions to me on this theme.

Through my work and personal experiences I have been motivated to take a closer look at the New Testament perspective. This has been done along with consideration of the historical background of the ancient world, that of Judaism and that of Hellenism. In the past year here in Germany² I have gathered material on this subject, and have gotten this research underway. With this I must emphasize that my efforts in this field have not yet been advanced to a final position.³ Indeed, I am much closer to the beginning of my work than I am toward reaching my goal. From this personal concern some basic questions have become crystallized that presently guide the direction of my research.

1. What does the Bible understand concerning “piety”? Is it a unified or a much varied concept? Also, in the biblical view is there one or several possibilities of being “pious”? Closely related, Is the New Testament perspective derived from that found in the Old Testament? If the Bible presupposes a stratification, then all assertions of one narrow biblical view are misleading!

2. How does the influence of various cultures express itself on the early Christian view of piety? How strong did Judaism influence early Christian understanding? What roll did the Old Testament play? Did Hellenism bring about a new definition of piety in the apostolic community? For some time I have been of the opinion that the surrounding culture more profoundly influences theology than that which comes through the biblical principles. This is so in spite of our Baptist understanding of the Bible as the central authoritative foundation of our faith and practice.

The differing perspectives on piety demonstrate the influence of culture in our modern world. The problem of these differing views is solvable only if the biblical principles hold sway over the development of a person. To be sure, he must not deny the legitimate role of his own culture, but this cannot become the dominating influence and he must be conscious of its influence. My personal opportunity to spend this year in a very different culture has helped me to reflect upon my American culture more objectively, and in this way influence my understanding.

The knowledge of the interplay of culture and scriptural understanding, which greatly determines one’s view of piety, should lead to a greater understanding for various positions. This hopefully will be the case for the students I teach, many of whom intend to become missionaries and will serve in many very different cultures. In the

same way my aim is through this knowledge to proclaim the biblical gospel, rather than a Southern Baptist gospel.

3. What do I mean by piety? Contemporary definitions suggest a wide spectrum of viewpoints, sometimes in great opposition to each other. Were such varying opinions also characteristic of the ancient world? Additionally, what difference is there between piety and religiosity? What is typical of piety in contrast to similar phenomena?

The intention to define piety, or at least to describe it, is the most difficult but also the most important task of this undertaking. Always present is the tendency toward isogesis, instead of exegesis.

Thus far I have discovered that some interpreters have busied themselves with consideration of key words to the neglect of such pericopes that treat the subject of piety but do not contain these terms. Furthermore, difficulties are encountered in tracking down every key term in its historical meaning.

On the other hand, the opposite tendency to exegete the texts not containing the key terms without an awareness of these terms and their occurrences can be frequently found. To be sure, the passages without the key terms embody a degree of subjectivity. Some pericopes, like Matt. 6:1-19, unmistakably deal with a form of Christian piety that stood in contrast to a rabbinical piety of the first Christian century. Should one not also consider such passages like Matt. 23 as appropriate sections?

These are some of the problems with providing a well-balanced analysis that will do justice to both sources of understanding in scriptures. Both lead inevitably into an inadequate understanding and thus produces a distorted picture that usually falls prey to isogesis. Needed are some clear principles by which piety can be defined. Such can form a foundation for inclusion or exclusion of appropriate passages related to piety.

These challenges can turn into enthusiasm with an intensive treatment of this subject. To master successfully such barriers can lead to the production of a valuable contribution to the understanding of the Bible. For me personally, such a prospect offers the potential for deep satisfaction.

Now for a quick glance at the planned approach: Part One contains the attempt to open up a glance at the relevant circumstances to the New Testament setting, namely the Jewish and Hellenistic backgrounds.

Part Two approaches the perspective of the New Testament from two sides. This includes an analysis of key terms that point to piety and an brief analysis of those passages that although without the key terms do touch on the subject of piety.⁴ The three questions, mentioned above, will serve as guiding questions through the analysis:

What is the biblical image(s) of piety?

What influence did the surrounding culture(s) have on the Christian thought process?

What constitutes piety within a given cultural setting?

By this I hope to come to some relevant and worthwhile conclusions.

I. The Background to the New Testament

Because God's Word came to us through the words of men who lived in a particular time and in a particular culture, the historical setting is crucial to accurate understanding of the New Testament texts and terms.

This necessitates an analysis of two distinct, often opposing cultures that mutually influenced each other and were sometimes fused with one another. Judaism and Hellenism in the ancient world were the source of many

view points that have been passed on through the writings of the New Testament.

A. The Jewish Background

Here a complex and often bewildering picture of piety emerges. Who was regarded as pious in the Judaism of the first Christian century? In part, the answer depends on which section of the Jewish community one appeals to. Piety was understood differently. E.M. Kredel⁵ has set forth three different forms of piety in late Judaism that have significance for the New Testament era: Cultic Piety (Kultfrömmigkeit), Law-oriented Piety (Gesetzesfrömmigkeit) and Apocalyptic Piety (apokalyptische Frömmigkeit).

1. Cult Piety

Very central in early Jewish life were the temple and system of sacrifice. Piety from this perspective meant regular participation in the offering of sacrifices, especially at the festivals. This piety took on a very external and formal character.⁶ This is what Luke essentially meant in Acts 2:5, when he described those who had gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost as “pious men” (ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς).

The element of obedience to the regulations of the sacrificial system is also found in Luke: Luke 2:25 - Simeon as δίκαιος καὶ εὐλαβής (just and pious) and Acts 8:2 - the men who buried Stephen as ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς (God-fearing men).

2. Law-oriented Piety

On the other hand, in the first Christian century the prevailing orientation of Jewish piety was more comprehensive than just the bare sacrificial system. It took on an extensive religious and moral character.

As Bousset describes, “the ideal of the pious Jew is the man who studies the Law day and night.”⁷ In this connection, two points concerning piety appear to be important: study of the Law and obedience to it. The study of the Law remained a central point of the Pharisaical understanding of piety. Both of the rabbinical schools of this era, that of Hillel and that of Shammai, took somewhat different positions with respect to the question of who might be worthy of such a study. Those from Shammai said that no one should teach who was not a smart, humble and well-to-do man from a good family. Those of Hillel, on the other hand, held that everyone should have the opportunity to teach the Law because in Israel many in spite of their failures might become proper, pious and perfect men through the study of the Torah.⁸

The Shammian view was based on the conviction that only one from a well-to-do family who at the time of entrance into the rabbinical schools possessed wisdom and humility could hope to achieve this goal.

Thus piety (חסיד, hasid) in both schools was achievable only by those who dedicated themselves devotedly to the study of the Law. The rest, called “‘Am - ha’ares”⁹ were damned, as is expressed in John 7:49: ἀλλὰ ὁ ὄχλος ὁ μὴ γινώσκων τὸν νόμον ἐπάρατοί εἰσιν.

In both rabbinical schools there existed a special system to arrive at obedience to the Law through the study of the Law. A midrash on Deut. 23:15 by Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair summarizes this process as follows:¹⁰

Care leads to cleanness, this to purity, this to holiness, this to humility, this to the fear of sin, this to piety, this to the holy spirit, this to the quickening of the dead, and this to Elijah the prophet.

To be called pious grew out of a very achievable personal endeavor in the above categories and was to be rewarded by the gift of the Holy Spirit in this life. This gift manifested itself through competence in prophecy. In the life beyond there was the reward of the resurrection and eternal life in Heaven. This achievement was actually achievable only for very few.

Of Hillel's original 80 students (first century B.C.) only 30 were declared worthy of the Holy Spirit, that is, considered to be pious.¹¹ Thus with Hillel especially, piety was perceived as distinct religious actions. Hillel's intention was to do everything for the glory of God. The particular religious laws, i.e. the sabbath laws, were important to Hillel, but for Shammai they were still more important, almost to the point of exclusivity. Hillel also stressed interpersonal relations in daily contacts with people and deeds of charity. Piety had for him an equally religious and moral character. This rabbinical view is fully summarized in general terms by John 9:31: οἴδαμεν ὅτι ἁμαρτωλῶν (the 'Am - ha'ares) ὁ θεὸς οὐκ ἀκούει, ἀλλ' ἐάν τις θεοσεβῆς ἦ καὶ τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ ποιῆ ἀκούει.

There were three very important expressions of such piety: almsgiving, prayer and fasting.¹² These were treated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6: 1-18), where he recognized these activities as actions also of Christian piety. In contrast to the neglect of such actions in some rabbinical circles, the abuse of these activities, assumed in this text, was soundly condemned by Jesus.

Luke likewise took over this concept of Jewish piety, although in a less technical but more positive understanding. This is reflected in his description of Cornelius (Acts 10:2) described as εὐσεβῆς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν (pious and fearing God). This characterization is defined, or perhaps better, demonstrated through almsgiving and prayer (ποιῶν ἐλεημοσύνα πολλὰς τῶ λαῶ καὶ δεόμενος τοῦ θεοῦ παντὸς).

3. Apocalyptic Piety

A third form of piety described by Kredel¹³ and Bousset¹⁴ is called apocalyptic piety. Its distinctive is extension of the idea of a Law-oriented Piety into Messianism and eschatological expectation. This becomes especially clear in 4 Ezra and 4 Maccabees where the Greek idea of εὐσεβεία (piety) is especially frequent. The description of Simeon in Luke 2:25 points also in this direction: Simeon was δίκαιος καὶ εὐλαβῆς προσδεχόμενος παράκλησιν τοῦ Ἰσραήλ. This positive image, however, was overshadowed by a narrow-minded, exclusivistic nationalism in most Jewish writings that saw no hope except for the pious in Israel. Above everything else the coming of the Messiah would bring devastating damnation to the impious.

B. The Old Testament Background

Important to the development of Jewish understandings of piety, and also for a Christian view, is the question of the Old Testament perspective. Immediately, one is confronted with some critical issues.

Can one really speak of an Old Testament piety? To do this presupposes the acceptance of an existent individualism in the Old Testament,¹⁵ whereby more precise assertions may well be quite difficult. A personal accountability to God for example is doubtless evident in the patriarchs and the prophets. But also the collective character of the Israelite covenant with God is a central feature of this piety. Thus simultaneously there emerged two contrary influences: First, a personal accountability and, second, a collective accountability before God, in

other words, an individual piety and a cultic piety.

The individual aspect can be found in the leaders of faith such as Abraham and the major prophets who answered the call of God with an unconditional adherence to the divine will. Acceptance by God with moral obligations, linked to the recognition of human consciousness of 'creatureliness' and 'sinfulness,' awakened the readiness to carry out a full devotion to God.¹⁶ The fear of God constitutes the core of this piety. Not to be overlooked here is that this Old Testament piety existed not so much in feelings as much more in verification through actions. Humility and trust, based on God's actions, led to devotion. The temple served as the central point of the cultic aspects of Israelite piety. The worship service and the giving of sacrifices produced the opportunity for a formal expression of piety and devotion to the covenant with God. In this connection the Psalms played a central roll in the understanding of the cultic piety of Israel. Since the work of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinkel the cultic formulation of the majority of the Psalms has been widely recognized.¹⁷

Through the Psalms we can acquire insight into Israelite piety in gathered worship. And as Vriezen describes "Die Frömmigkeit ist im Alten Testament lebendig, existentiell, persönlich, frohgemut, während die legalistische Note sich in ihr nur zum geringen Teil bemerken läßt, sie begann sich erst spät herauszubilden."¹⁸

Piety became a joyful praise of God in public worship. The collective and the liturgical elements were important aspects. Piety was then the answer of man to the Word of God.

C. The Hellenistic Background

The other world that played a decisive roll in early Christian thinking was that of the Greek and Roman cultures, called Hellenism after Alexander the Great. The significance of Hellenism for Christian piety is decisive for the understanding the extensive change that occurred after the close of the apostolic era. One cannot comprehend the emerging image of early Catholicism in the second through fourth centuries without a detailed awareness of Hellenistic thought. This is also of significance for the New Testament, especially for the later writings that were keyed more to a Gentile oriented Christianity, than to the earlier Jewish-Christian experience.

Professor Festugière has given a helpful analysis of this subject in his book *Personal Religion among the Greeks*. In both instances, the classical as well as the later Hellenistic era, two views of piety were active which Prof. Festugière has categorized as 'people piety' (*Massenfrömmigkeit*) and 'reflective piety' (*Reflektive Frömmigkeit*). Both perceptions carried individual as well as collective orientations.

Plato, in his dialogue on piety, made Euthyphro the speaker of a general view of the meaning of the key Greek terms *εὐσεβεία* and *ὅσιος* which refer to piety: "Of a subsequent kind there appears to me thus, O Socrates, to be the God-fearing and pious, the justification which is connected to the anxieties for the gods" (12c).

Or, more precisely defined by Euthyphro in a later text: "If one can say and do pleasing things to the gods in prayers and offerings, this is the pious thing and it brings salvation to the families and the nation" (14b).

In the following dialogue Plato's view becomes clear: to be pious is "to be a servant of the gods in doing good,"¹⁹ a view of the more reflective piety. This way can be thusly summarized by the following: for educated Greece the deeply reverential, admiring awe of the high and pure value of the divine, its adoration in the cult and esteem of the regulations upheld by it, these comprise the special contents of *εὐσεβεία*. It is not an unconditional duty bound existence of a personally responsible power.²⁰

Therefore piety represented an important expression of loyalty to the state, as much as to the family and to the gods. The personal and the group aspects of piety can be seen partly in public worship and sacrifices in the temples which were similar to the private worship and the sacrifices that took place in the small shrines by the roads and in private homes.

Both the public and private aspects were important, especially in the people piety (Massenfrömmigkeit). Piety in typical Greek consciousness was a piety that expressed itself both in public and private worship. In regard to a reflective piety, an attitude of awe appears occasioned by the prevailing deities. In both instances, piety was understood as a central, supplementary virtue that could bring harmony, accomplishment and prosperity both to the individual and society.

II. New Testament Perspectives

Which image of piety unfurls out of the pages of the New Testament in light of the Hellenistic and Jewish understandings of piety? Sometimes an answer is sought through painstaking investigation of some key words. But attention must be given also to the texts that treat piety without using these special terms. This treatment begins with an examination of key word groups.

A. Wordgroups

1. The σεβ-Wordgroup

The most important word group is the σεβ-complex. From this group come subgroups that possess various levels of significance for this subject.

There is the group σέβομαι, σεβάζομαι and Σεβοστός. These appear ten times in the New Testament, eight of which are found in Acts. The other two are a LXX quote of Jer. 29:13 in Matt. 15:9, paralleled in Mark 7:7, where they describe the uselessness of the worship of Israel because of its hypocrisy.²¹ In parallelism to μάτην δὲ σέβονταί με (Matt. 15:9a) is Ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με τιμᾷ (15:8a), defining piety in relation to cultic worship. σέβομαι appears as a participle in Acts eight times²² mostly connected to φοβούμενοι τὸν θεὸν where they refer to the so-called God-fearers in Judaism. They encompass more than just respect of God. These Gentiles pay tribute to the God of Judaism in a special form of worship.²³

Similar is the single New Testament use of σεβάζομαι in Rom. 1:25 where this general concept of worship is specified by λατρεύειν, which means to worship in the cult.²⁴ The noun σέβασμα appears twice (Acts 17:23; 2 Thess. 2:4) and refers to adoration, or paying homage, especially the picture of adoration of the divine. The other word Σεβοστός is the somewhat official title for the current Κοῦσαρ and is the rendering of the Latin “augustus” (Acts 25:21,25). Very significant in this group then is σέβομαι, which underscored the practice of a common Jewish piety by Gentiles.

Of greater significance for the New Testament understanding of piety is εὐσεβεία (15 times)²⁵ with its related forms εὐσεβής (3),²⁶ εὐσεβέω (2)²⁷ and εὐσεβώς (2).²⁸ The words are used almost exclusively in the Pastoral Epistles and in 2 Peter to describe Christian faith and Christian living (18 of the 22 uses). Peter (Acts 3:12) denied that the power to heal the lame came from εὐσεβεία. Cornelius and one of his soldiers (Acts 10:2,7) are called εὐσεβής in the sense of Jewish piety. Paul declared that the Athenians εὐσεβείτε (worshiped)

him whom they did not know, in accordance with their cultic piety.

In the Pastoral Epistles the εὐσεβ-words indicate a particular kind of lifestyle.²⁹ ζῆν εὐσεβῶς Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (2 Tim. 3:12) and σωφρόνως καὶ δικαίως ζήσωμεν (Titus 2:12) make this clear. Also other passages illustrate this: βίον διάγωμεν ἐν πάσῃ εὐσεβείᾳ καὶ σεμνότητι (1 Tim. 2:2), also 4:7 et als. εὐσεβεία as a distinctive Christian lifestyle separates true doctrine from false (1 Tim. 6:3; Tit. 1:1); true εὐσεβεία has the power to shape the life of the individual (2 Tim. 3:5), and in connection with moderation it is a great accomplishment (1 Tim. 6:5). The secret of its power is the crucified, resurrected and glorified Christ who lives in the Christian (2 Tim. 3:16). In contrast to the then current Jewish piety, εὐσεβεία is not based on the law, for the law only played a roll among the false teachers in the Pastoral Epistles. In distinction to the Greek world, it does not originate in the cultic activities of worship; neither is it a well-defined idea of God nor a virtue in the Greek sense. Instead, it is the adoration of God as Creator and Redeemer in daily living. “It is the worship that remains in the structures of life.”³⁰ This interpretation of W. Foerster fits these passages better than “the behavior that honors God” advocated by Schlatter, Spicq and Cremer. Also it is more suitable than Holtzmann’s “sound morality based on biblical faith” (similarly also to P. Feine), and equally to Dibelius’ “Christian citizenship.” Thus the preferable translation of εὐσεβεία is that which is consistently used in the German translation of the Jerusalem Bible and also in the Züricher Bibel, Frömmigkeit (piety), better than Luther’s “Gottesfurcht” (fear of God) or “Gottseligkeit” (godliness).³¹

The four uses of the word group εὐσεβ- in 2 Peter corresponds to the employment in the Pastoral Epistles, although the problem with false teachers is over libertinism, rather than asceticism as with the Pastoral Epistles. In 2 Peter it has the general sense of a pious life, that is, a morally good life.

2. The εὐλαβ-Wordgroup

The second word group comes from the stem εὐλαβ-: εὐλάβεια (2), εὐλάβομαι (1), εὐλαβής (4). εὐλαβής appears only in the Lukan material: Luke once; Acts 3 times.³² εὐλάβεια and εὐλάβομαι are found only in Hebrews: 5:7; 11:7; 12:28.

The Lukan uses refer uniformly to Jewish piety: Simeon (Luke 2:25), the Jews at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:25), the men who buried Stephen (Acts 8:2), Ananias who is called a ἀνὴρ εὐλαβής κατὰ τὸν νόμον (Acts 22:12). These passages characterize Jewish piety as fear of God based on obedience to the law. This meaning follows the use of εὐλαβής in the LXX.

In Heb. 11:7, the author says that Noah based on εὐλαβεῖς built an ark, after he had received the divine command. But what is the sense of εὐλαβεῖς? (1) Noah became fearful and built . . . ; (2) Noah was on his guard . . . ; (3) in pious fear Noah built an ark. The notion of fear certainly appears in the secular use as well as in the LXX use, although its widespread use is fear of God, like the meaning of φοβέομαι.

πίστει (by faith) in Heb. 11:7 confirms the meaning of “pious fear” so that the piety of Noah stresses an attitude of respect or awe of God.

In Heb. 12:28, εὐλαβεία is linked to δέος (fear), and together with reverence and awe they express a pious adoration, while a few later manuscripts express it with αἴδους instead of δέους. Also the Vulgate translates this with “metu et reverentia.”

In Heb. 5:7, there is a difficult use in reference to Jesus: εἰσακουσθεῖς ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας. If εὐλαβείας means piety, as it was mostly used in the ancient world, then these words have the sense that Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane for deliverance from the fear of death were heard because of his piety. An other possible interpretation is to understand εὐλαβείας as fear of death. Then the meaning would be: "He was heard because he had a fear of dying." But such an interpretation is unsatisfactory in this context. The first meaning grasps the words of Jesus "Not my will but thine" (Matt. 26:39) as an expression of his piety and as readiness to accept the cross - not as fear of death.³³

From εὐλάβεια comes then the stress on piety as an attitude of adoration that leads to specific acts of obedience.

3. The θρησκεία-Wordgroup

The third word group is θρησκεία (4),³⁴ with θρησκός (1)³⁵ and ἑθελοθρησκεία (1).³⁶ These words stress the external dimensions of piety in either good or negative religious actions. The etymology of θρησκεία is unclear. Perhaps it came from Plutarch who connected it with the Thracian women who were dedicated to the Bacchanalian and Orphic cults. But another possibility is the view that θρησκεία was linked to the θεραπ- stem in the sense of religious service.³⁷ Therefore θρησκεία can have both a positive and a negative meaning, as becomes clear in the New Testament.

Three categories of meaning for θρησκεία are used in the New Testament. In the witness of Paul to King Agrippa (Acts 26:5) it refers to the Jewish adoration of God, whose strictest group was the Pharisees. θρησκεία is here variously translated as "Religion" (JB), "Religionsübung" (exercise of religion; ZB), and "Glauben" (faith; L, OGN).

The negative meaning is seen in Col. 2:18,23, where θρησκεία (v. 18) and ταπεισοφοροσύνη (v. 23) are connected to ταπεινοφοροσύνη (here, false humility) and together with ταπεινοφοροσύνη describes a false piety. θρησκεία is further defined as angle worship (v. 18) and is linked to regulations concerning food and drink, in order to establish a supposed deeper piety. The actual consequence, however, was a sinful pride. This piety is not acquainted with the source of true piety, Jesus Christ. Such legalistic piety is ἑθελοθρησκεία (self-made piety; v. 23), which possesses no value for the transformation of the fleshly mind.

Only in Jas. 1:26-27 does θρησκεία point to a Christian piety, although the Jewish background is clearly in view.³⁸ The personal concern for true piety or the appearance of piety (δοκέω has this double sense.) is characterized by three special features: controlled speech; care for other people, especially the needy; and correct conduct. For this reason, piety has both the inner and outer aspects and much more than just the cultic facet which is very important in the meaning of the stem.

4. Other Words

Other words are also important to this subject, i.e., ὅσιος, ὁσιότης (holy, holiness) with ἀήσιος (unholy) and ἄσειβεία, ἄσεβής and ἄσεβέω (godless, godlessness and godless actions). These have association with the meaning of ἄδικος, ἀδικία (unjust, unrighteousness; cf. Rom. 1:18) and with ἁμαρτωλός (sinful). In general these words describe a sinful conduct that originates out of disdain for God's will and his demands on men (cf.

Jude, 2 Pet., 2 Tim.).

B. Passages without the Key Words

Now let us take a quick glance at some passages where there is treatment of the theme of piety without containing these key terms. A central passage is in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:1-19) concerning almsgiving, prayer and fasting.³⁹ The core of genuine Christian piety is personal adoration of the entire heart without any pretension. To help the needy, to seek God in prayer, to discipline oneself through fasting — all this has value only if it is motivated and determined by the awareness of the majesty and greatness of God as well as by unconditional devotion to the will of God. The pharisaical rejection of obedience to this principle produced the egotistical, self-glorifying piety which Jesus strongly repudiated in the pronouncement of woes in Matt. 23.

The early Christian understanding ran in the same path as Jesus' but with the added understanding that Jesus was the divine redeemer and lord. Primitive Christian piety was therefore in its essence a fully trusting devotion to the Lord,⁴⁰ as the confession of Paul in Phil. 3:2-21 shows.

Conclusions

What can be concluded from this analysis? First, in the ancient world there existed a multifaceted view of who was pious. The Jewish understanding in the first Christian century extended from the popular view of a general devotion that expressed itself in obedience to the Torah, to the extreme legalism of pharisaical piety that was valid only for a chosen few. The collective view stressed the liturgical aspect both in regard to the temple and the synagogue and was connected to individual piety in daily life. The eschatological expectation exalted the necessity of a pious life for many Jews in the first Christian century.

Out of the Greek world on the other hand came a personal and reflective dimension that called for both a personal and a collective pietistic edification. The centerpiece of popular Greek piety was cultic actions such as offerings, prayers etc. often with a superstitious undertone. Reflective piety sought to become aware of the reality of God, of life etc. through intellectual efforts, thus finding a rational foundation for its understanding of piety. This de-emphasized the cultic aspects in favor of the moral as an expression of piety to the gods. Indeed both popular and reflective views upheld the unity and necessity of piety. The personal life, the family and society of an individual in their stability and in their harmony were dependent on piety. Piety was both an expression of political loyalty and a personal religious experience.

The Christian view developed precisely in this milieu, not in a vacuum and, indeed, through interaction and confrontation with both influential streams. This experience exists today also. Both yours as well as my view of piety achieves its distinction by standing in confrontation and interaction with dominating trends in our culture. Our intention is to trace out the foundational principles of the apostolic teaching and to make use of them in order to introduce them into this process of interaction with our world so that our understanding and practical handling of piety is indeed biblically grounded, but also stands in touch with our world.

Furthermore, ancient Christian piety was grounded in a personal relationship to Christ, whereby it expressed itself in the concrete form of devotion to Christ. The two governing elements — attitude and conduct are mainstays of a proper understanding. The feeling of awe and tribute to God must be preserved. The redemptive act

of Christ and the presence of the living Christ are the unique foundations for a correct stance. Neither the Torah nor a superstitious fear and/or the desire to manipulate the Godhead or a detailed, well-organized philosophical or theological system can lead to a correct view. Proper pious conduct, on the other hand, shows itself in its treatment of others (i.e., widows and orphans), in its efforts for personal morality and proper interpersonal relations (i.e., controlling the tongue), as well as in the cultic actions of worship. Piety is a distinctive way of living that serves as an important witness to the world (1 Tim. 3:7; 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:5; 8:10), but also brings a deep personal fulfillment (1 Tim. 6:6).

Finally, the surrounding dominating culture seeks to imprint piety with its respective stamp. The New Testament definition of piety is not so much wide and general as narrow and distinct. The piety of the gospels represents a reaction to the extreme Law-oriented Piety of the Pharisees; James answers a further variation of Jewish piety that sought to satisfy itself in a detachment from personal ministry and morality. Paul responds essentially to the Greek, in particular to the Gnostic tendencies of his enemies in the middle of the first Christian century. Thus there originated various forms of true Christian piety in the first century. The general characterization of personal devotion to Christ and the expression of this in relation to other people with regard to morality and personal service is completed in the culture and environment of the individual. This presupposes to a great extent freedom, tolerance and understanding among Christians for one another. To demand a narrow and uniform image of piety for oneself signifies not only a rejection of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles but also it reflects an egocentric world view that turns men away from God more than leads them to him.

APPENDIX ONE:

Diagram of Matt. 6:1-18⁴¹

- 6:1
 (63) *δέ*
Προσέχετε τὴν δικαιοσύνην ὑμῶν μὴ ποιεῖν
 ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων
 πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι αὐτοῖς·
- δέ*
 εἰ μή γε,
 (64) *μισθὸν οὐκ ἔχετε*
 παρὰ τῷ πατρὶ ὑμῶν
 τῷ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.
- 6:2
 οὖν
 Ὅταν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην,
 (65) *μὴ σαλπίσσης*
 ἔμπροσθέν σου,
 ὥσπερ οἱ ὑποκριταὶ ποιοῦσιν
 ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς
 καὶ
 ἐν ταῖς ρύμαις,
 ὅπως δοξασθῶσιν
 ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων·
- (66) *ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν,*
 ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.
- 6:3
 δὲ
 σοῦ ποιοῦντος ἐλεημοσύνην
 (67) *μὴ γνώτω ἡ ἀριστερά σου*
 τί ποιεῖ ἡ δεξιὰ σου,
- 6:4
 ὅπως ἦ σου ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ·
 καὶ
 (68) *ὁ πατήρ σου*
 ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ
ἀποδώσει σοι.
- 6:5
 Καὶ
 ὅταν προσεύχησθε,
 (69) *οὐκ ἔσεσθε*
 ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταί,
 ὅτι φιλοῦσιν
 ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς
 καὶ
 ἐν ταῖς γωνίαις τῶν πλατειῶν
 ἐστῶτες
 προσεύχασθαι,
 ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις·

(70) ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν,
ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.

6:6 δὲ
σὺ ὅταν προσεύχη

(71) εἴσελθε
εἰς τὸ ταμεῖόν σου
καὶ
κλείσας τὴν θύραν σου

(72) πρόσευξαι τῷ πατρί σου
τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ·

καὶ
(73) ὁ πατήρ σου
ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ
ἀποδώσει σοι.

6:7 δὲ
Προσευχόμενοι

(74) μὴ βατταλογήσητε
ὥσπερ οἱ ἐθνικοί,
γὰρ

(75) δοκοῦσιν
ὅτι ἐν τῇ πολυλογίᾳ αὐτῶν εἰσακουσθήσονται.

6:8 οὖν

(76) μὴ ὁμοιωθῆτε αὐτοῖς·
γὰρ

(77) οἶδεν ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν
ὃν χρεῖαν ἔχετε
πρὸ τοῦ ὑμᾶς αἰτῆσαι αὐτόν.

6:9 οὖν

(78) Οὕτως προσεύχεσθε ὑμεῖς·
Πάτερ ἡμῶν
ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,

(79) ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου·

(80) 6:10 ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου·

(81) γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου,
ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς·

(82) 6:11 τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν
τὸν ἐπιούσιον
δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον·

6:12 καὶ

(83) ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν,
ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν·

6:13 καὶ

(84) μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς
εἰς πειρασμόν,

- (85) ἄλλα
 6:14 ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ.
 γὰρ
- (86) Ἐὰν ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν,
 6:15 ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος·
 δὲ
- (87) εἰ μὴ ἀφῆτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις,
 οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.
- 6:16 δὲ
- (88) Ὅταν νηστεύητε,
 μὴ γίνεσθε
 ὡς οἱ ὑποκριταὶ σκυθρωποί,
 γὰρ
- (89) ἀφανίζουσιν τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν
 ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις
 νηστεύοντες·
- (90) ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν,
 ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.
- 6:17 δὲ
- (91) σὺ νηστεύων
 ἄλειψαί σου τὴν κεφαλὴν
 καὶ
- (92) τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι,
 6:18 ὅπως μὴ φανῆς τοῖς ἀνθρώποις
 νηστεύων
- ἀλλὰ
 τῷ πατρὶ σου
 τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ·
- καὶ
- (93) ὁ πατὴρ σου
 ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ
 ἀποδώσει σοι.

Structural Analysis of Matt. 6:1-18

The core structure is as follows:

Foundational Premise:	63-64
Almsgiving:	65-68
Praying:	69-87
Fasting:	88-93

The foundational premise provides an organizational structure for the subsequent pericopes in the following manner:

	Premise:	Alms- giving:	Praying:	Fasting:	
Header: ⁴²	65a	69a	74a	-	88a
Comand (-):	63	65	69	74	76 88
(Reason:) ⁴³	-	-	-	75	77 89
Promise (-): ⁴⁴	64	66	70	-	- 90
Comand (+):	67	71-72	-	78-85	91-92
(Reason:) ⁴⁵	-	-	-	86-87	
Promise (+): ⁴⁶	68	73	-	-	93

Endnotes:

¹A translation and revision of the lecture "Frömmigkeit in der urchristlichen Gemeinde" originally delivered at the Theologisches Seminar in Hamburg, West Germany on May 20, 1983. This paper was given to the Ph.D. Colloquium at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary on March 6, 1990.

²That is, during my sabbatic leave at the University of Bonn in the 1982-83 academic year.

³Indeed, this is still the case in 1990. A significant part of my sabbatic leave in the academic year of 1990-91 at the University of Heidelberg will be devoted to a continuation of this research. This research will be presented at the University of Göttingen in a lecture in the Sommer Semester 1991.

⁴This is the area where the greatest amount of research still needs to be done. In particular, some clearly defined appropriate criteria for selecting the New Testament texts need to be developed.

⁵"Frömmigkeit" (Piety), LThK.

⁶Bousset, Religion d. Judentums.

⁷LThK, 399.

⁸Translated out of the Talmud in Adolph Buchler, Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety: The Ancient Pious Men (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1968), 58. See also George W.E. Nickelsburg and Michael E. Stone, eds., Faith and Piety in Early Judaism: Texts and Documents (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 89-115.

⁹In the gospels the ἀμαρτωλοί (sinners); see Matt. 9:10-11, 11:19; Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1; John 9:31; Gal. 2:15.

¹⁰Buchler, Piety, 42.

¹¹Ibid., 57.

¹²LThK.

¹³LThK.

¹⁴Religion.

¹⁵Auer, Rel. Wiss. Wörterbuch, “Frömmigkeit.”

¹⁶LThK.

¹⁷Ringgren, Faith of the Psalmists, xi-xxii; Ringgren, Israelitische Religion, 138-41.

¹⁸Theologie des alten Testaments, 260.

¹⁹TWNT, 176. Euthyphro 14b. Cf. Plato I in the Loeb Classical Library, 49-49.

²⁰TWNT, 177-78.

²¹Matt. 15:8-9.

Ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσίν με τιμᾷ.
ἡ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ·
μάτην δὲ σέβονται με
διδάσκοντες διδασκαλίας ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων.

²²Acts 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7, 13; 19:27.

²³Ibid., 172.

²⁴ 1:25 οἵτινες μετήλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὅς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.

²⁵Acts 3:12; 1 Tim. 2:2; 3:16; 4:7, 8; 6:3, 5, 6, 11; 2 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:3, 6, 7; 3:11.

²⁶Acts 10:2, 7.

²⁷Acts 17:23; 1 Tim. 5:4.

²⁸2 Tim. 3:12; Tit. 2:12.

²⁹Ibid., 181.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹In the RSV, εὐσεβεία is variously translated as devotion, devout, godliness, godly, piety, religion, religious service. See Richard E. Whitaker, The Eerdmans Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 1520. In the KJV, only godliness (14) and holiness (1) are used to translate it.

³²Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12.

³³Cf. Ibid., Jeremias, NTW, 52-53.

³⁴Acts 26:5; Col. 2:18; Jas. 1:26, 27.

³⁵Jas. 1:26.

³⁶Col. 2:23.

³⁷TWNT.

³⁸ 1:26 Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ, τούτου μάταιος ἡ θρησκεία. 1:27 θρησκεία καθαρὰ καὶ ἀμίαντος παρὰ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὕτη ἐστίν, ἐπισκέπτεσθαι ὀρφανούς καὶ χήρας ἐν τῇ θλίψει αὐτῶν, ἄσπιλον ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου.

³⁹See Appendix One for details of the structure of this text.

⁴⁰LThK.

⁴¹Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing, Inc., 1989), 135, 144, 157-59, 171.

⁴²The new topic header is the Ὅταν clause; the shift from the negative to the positive subsection is introduced by either a participle (67 & 91) or by a modified Ὅταν clause (71).

⁴³Introduced by γὰρ

⁴⁴It is the same in each instance (66,70,90) and reaffirms to premise declaration:

ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν,
ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν.

⁴⁵Introduced by γὰρ.

⁴⁶The promise is the same wording in each instance (68,73,93), and plays off a reversal of the negative promise in the premise:

ὁ πατήρ σου
ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ
ἀποδώσει σοι.