

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ascetics

A FORGOTTEN ASPECT

Whoever reads modern handbooks about ethics, will read very little in them about *prayer*. Take the example of a very recent book: In the two-volume *Handbuch der Christlichen Ethik* (Manual for Christian Ethics)⁴⁷ in which Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians collaborated, prayer is not touched upon at all. Perhaps that does not surprise anyone for whom ethics is simply a matter of our actions towards our *neighbour* and not towards God too. In Chapter Two, I said why *both* aspects should receive attention. This is completely in the line of Reformed ethics during and after the Reformation Era. They usually concentrated upon the explication of the Ten Commandments and drew attention to both tables of the Decalogue.

Anyone taking a closer look at what Reformed theology in earlier times dealt with in regard to practical theology will notice a subsection which has completely fallen into disuse nowadays: *ascetics*. A man such as Voetius not only taught *theologica moralis* or *casuistica*, in which he discussed all kinds of ethical questions on the basis of the Ten Commandments; he also gave instruction in *theologica ascetica*, focused on the subject of prayer.⁴⁸ He took Lord's Days 32-44 of the Heidelberg Catechism (concerning the law) as the starting point for casuistry and Lord's Days 45-52 (concerning prayer) for ascetics. In this way the whole of the life of thankfulness, which man owes to God (Lord's Days 32-52), received attention in theological instruction.

The subject of ascetics has completely disappeared from theological education, at least within Protestant faculties in The Netherlands. In his *Encyclopaedie der heilige Godgeleerdheid* Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) still wrote that both subsections, casuistry and ascetics, should receive attention, but not much has come of it in this century. Ethical questions are being discussed everywhere, and in that sense it is possible to say that the line of casuistry has been extended (also without the term casuistry still being employed). Ascetics, though, has disappeared altogether.

That is not to say that absolutely no attention is being paid to prayer anymore in theology. Publications about this subject appear regularly. I am only pointing out that prayer has practically disappeared from the field of *ethics*, and this must be termed a striking phenomenon compared to former days.

ASCETICS: NAME AND CONTENT

The term ascetics is related to the Greek word *askein*, meaning "to exer-

⁴⁷ Cf. footnote 5.

⁴⁸ In my article "Gebed en ascetiek" (Prayer and Ascetics), in: C. Trimp (ed.), *De biddende kerk*, Groningen 1979, 84ff., one can find the references to literature in Voetius and the authors mentioned subsequently.

cise oneself." Perhaps one might quickly think of asceticism, as "abstention"; but the first meaning of the Greek word *askèsis* is "exercise," "training." It does not concern something negative (abstention) but something positive (training). Voetius quotes Acts 24:16, where Paul says that he always takes pains (exercises himself, King James Version) to have a clear conscience towards God and men.

This positive intention comes out even more clearly by looking at a word which can be called a synonym of *askein*. Paul says to Timothy: "Train yourself in godliness" (I Timothy 4:7). Here the word *gymnadzein* is employed for "training," also familiar to us in the word *gymnastics*. Whoever does gymnastics, participates in physical *training*.

It is now easy to understand what the subject of ascetics was all about. The goal was training in piety. In casuistry the student had to do with training in righteousness (towards his neighbour), and in ascetics with training in piety (towards God).

Whoever desires an example of such ascetics would do well to read Voetius, whose name has already been mentioned earlier. In 1664, he wrote a book with the title *Ta Askètika sive Exercitia Pietatis*. Voetius had written this *Exercitia Pietatis* (Training in Piety) especially for use among academic youth.

This book does not, as might be expected, take Lord's Days 45-52 about the Lord's Prayer as its starting-point. Prayer is discussed in a separate chapter, occupying a central place in the ascetics. All kinds of subjects, like spiritual meditation, contrition, tears, daily schedules with regular times for prayer (three times a day), fasting and waking, vows, loneliness, silence, temptation, and spiritual depression are all interwoven with prayer. After all, ascetics is concerned with training in piety. Next to prayer, then, attention must also be given to the reading and hearing of God's Word, the contemplation of the sermons and the meaning of the sacraments. The question as to how the Sunday should be spent is an important subject too. Even euthanasia received attention, but then meant as the art of dying in a Christian way!

Prayer receives extensive attention in a long chapter. Here is a sample of some of the many questions to which an answer is provided: How often should a person pray? Where? To whom? What posture should one have while praying? What does "Pray constantly" mean (I Thessalonians 5:17)? How is a prayer to be organized? How and for whom must thanks be given? What are hindrances to prayer? The minuteness as well as the seriousness with which the matters are discussed in detail makes it clear how Voetius thinks a life must be marked by prayer.

In this way, Voetius devoted twenty-five chapters to the life of the Christian, during the week and on Sunday, in all phases of life, with all spiritual high and low points. It is the life of the Christian who trains himself in piety.

WHY DID IT FALL INTO DISUSE?

The subject of ascetics has fallen into disuse. How has that happened? I think that at least three factors have played a role here. In the *first* place, train-

ing in godliness can be given such special attention that the danger of a negative attitude towards the normal life of each day is not unimaginable. "Spiritual" things are then raised above "natural" things. A dualism between soul and body, heavenly and earthly matters becomes noticeable. For example, Theodorus à Brakel (1608-1669) wrote a book, *De Trappen des Geestelyken Levens* (The Steps of the Spiritual Life), in which he describes his own training in piety and then manages to say almost nothing about his wife, his children, the church and his office as pastor, and about everything else taking place in the world around him. Something like that will not be found in the Scriptures, in which the person praying laments about his distress, confesses his sin or gives thanks. Then his enemies, his family and his people also appear in the prayer. The *world* comes along in the prayers.

It is no wonder that ascetics, which moves in the direction of *mysticism*, can certainly not have a flourishing existence in the Reformed world. Training in piety quickly becomes a sort of spiritual acrobatics, from which most people turn away, or of which they say with a sigh that the grapes hang far too high to be plucked by them. In this way, ascetics can easily breed an *elite* of those initiated in the spiritual life, whereas in reality the training in piety, as the Scriptures describe it, must be a *normal* thing for *every* Christian.

In the *second* place, there is a similar development in ascetics as in casuistry. Everything is sifted out and systematized. A model is constructed for spiritual life which all too quickly becomes a blueprint for everyone. Little room is left over for Christian freedom in order to give form to the training in piety. This *form* of ascetics evokes resistance, in the same way as earlier casuistry.

In the *third* place, we are dealing with a subject which is difficult for us all. The Heidelberg Catechism says that prayer is the chief part of our thankfulness towards God (Lord's Day 45). But how difficult it is to reserve a *quarter of an hour for it!* Prayer demands inner peace and quiet. We are usually so busy with ourselves that it is a difficult task to detach ourselves from that and to take time for contact with God. If it concerns our actions towards our neighbour in ethics, then we can give long speeches. But we quickly become silent when it concerns our actions towards God in our personal association with Him through prayer. This is even much more the case with the adherents of modern theology, who talk a lot about love for our fellow-men and about renewing this world, but who only concern themselves indirectly with God in their ethics. Man has become the focal-point. Who can then expect that attention will still be asked for (personal) association with God?

AN INDISPENSABLE ASPECT

When I, at the close of this *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, ask for attention to be given to the aspect of ascetics in ethics, I do not intend to take the path of mysticism, or to recommend a sort of casuistry which would tell in great detail what form our piety has to take. We must not fall into the mistakes of the past.

But something else demands our attention just as well. Christian ethics is not Christian ethics if it deals with working but not with praying. It can inform us what we must do during the week, but if it does not begin the week with *Sunday*, then it can easily take the wrong path of legalism or humanism.

Christian ethics must make clear to us why prayer, that brings us with *empty* hands to God, is still the chief part of our thankfulness. It can only do that if it really is *Christian* ethics and for that reason takes the words of Christ seriously: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). These words of Christ make it understandable why the Scriptures continually urge us to pray (Luke 18:1; Ephesians 6:18; I Thessalonians 5:17). It also makes clear to us why the Sunday is so important. Whoever is *really* able to rest can also work well. For he begins with Christ, Who has done the decisive work for him on Calvary. He starts where Christ has said for him too: "It is finished" (John 19:30).

Ethics as the reflection upon the responsible activity towards God and the neighbour is a serious affair. It contains no stifling aspects when it also stresses to us that nothing goes wrong when the clock of our life suddenly stands still. After all, our life is hid with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

Whoever believes that shows it in his life. Training in piety, in prayer and study of the Scriptures on Sunday and in the circle of the family are not frills on our responsible activity, but rather they *determine* our activity. And for that reason it is completely normal that Christian ethics devotes attention to this indispensable aspect of our lives.

How ethics has to devote attention to the aspect of ascetics is secondary. *That* it has to do so is obvious if ethics intends to reflect *well* upon the responsible activity of man towards God and his neighbour. Towards *God* and the neighbour. The sequence is irreversible.