

# Pride and Preference

*Jonathan Midgett*

For centuries, Christendom has offered its devotees a certain kind of particularly tempting Sunday afternoon conversation that essentially amounts to a critique of the sermon. Perhaps you can relate? It runs along these lines: “Wasn’t today’s lesson interesting? I really liked the point about (this or that),” and then, someone counters with their impressions. You know the game: we all have to get our opinion in there – what we liked or didn’t like, related to, or couldn’t. On it goes, praise and criticism, preferences and opinions – mostly harmless, but sometimes a little derogatory. To some of the older generation, it was almost an obligatory duty to give the sermon a sound rehashing over lunch. Not doing so might imply that you had been dozing, I think.

During these sessions of gush and gripe, I’ve noticed that people tend to prefer certain types of sermon topics more than others. Some people adore a sermon about the finer points of doctrine or prophecy. I know people who thrill to a true story about someone’s extraordinary discipleship or missionary work. Some like plaintive homilies. Others find an honest confession refreshing.

Whatever it is that turns your crank – spiritually speaking – it comes out during those Sunday afternoon critiques. It seems to me that you tell us something about yourself by the criticisms and compliments you levy towards various religious messages. I believe this thought came to me because, as a psychologist, I’ve had the chance to learn about different learning styles, personalities, and temperaments. Such psychological constructs can be useful for understanding human behavior across multiple domains. They are just individual preferences that portions of the populace tend to favor, for example: introversion-extroversion, visual-auditory-kinesthetic, field dependent-independent, etc. I won’t go into these things other than to notice that there are dozens of formulas for dividing humans into groups. So many, in fact, that one could even characterize the science of psychology as a grand exercise in pigeon-holing. I confess that I find such typologies to be interesting, but only mildly useful. As entertaining as they

are in friendly conversations around the kitchen table, they don't predict much, and they can be frightfully overused. In my experience, everybody has (or is) a little of each category sometimes, no matter which psychological construct you pick.

In my Sunday afternoon, post-sermon critique sessions with friends and relations, I began to think that there might be something deep-seated about our preferences for spiritual messages. Could we characterize different ways of approaching discipleship, in general? If we describe "spirituality" (in the broadest sense) as a way of responding to God and godliness, are there different preferences for expressing one's spirituality? Is there a spectrum of spirituality?

The first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, may address this, in a way. This passage notes that there are different spiritual gifts: one person has prophesying, one interpreting, another speaks in tongues, but they're all valuable. They all serve a purpose for the community as a whole. I'm going to go right to the end of my thinking: I think that each of us may have a preference for spiritual expressions. That's appropriate because we all fit together in one body, unified, to get things done in the world, and help each other along the way. So, this is a good thing, to have a spectrum of spirituality, because we are all so different. There's no single, correct way to approach the divine, or to be disciples, but let's think about some ways that we may prefer. What are some broad types of spiritual expression? Also, if we have a preference for one over the other, could that lead us to overemphasize it and could that lead us into pride?

## Seeking

The first type of spiritual expression I can think of is my personal favorite: seeking truth, seeking wisdom, seeking to know what it is that the Bible says in a scholarly manner. Call it "seeking" or perhaps, "Biblical scholarship". That is a very powerful, spiritual endeavor that brings us closer to God. This is a great way to develop a spiritual mind. Acts 17:11 says, *Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica. They received the word with all eagerness...*, and this is the part I love, ... *examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so*. So, if I examine the scriptures daily, I am noble. That sound so good! Another passage says, *God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6)*. So, if I am seeking diligently for truth, God is going to reward me! This makes scholarly examinations of the Bible my favorite. I'm sure that there are churches that attract a certain kind of person who loves Biblical scholarship. You could envision entire churches that are full of bookworms like me trying to understand the ancient Hebrew meaning

of whatever word that we happen to stumble upon in Strong's concordance. But, there's a caution here. What if that is overemphasized? If scholarly argumentation dominates your thinking, you get into a world of debate, Bibles at 50 paces, contests of persuasion and rhetoric, where pride can easily enter, and now you have to prove that you're the right one. And worse, you might neglect other forms of spiritual thinking that are equally valid, and sometimes, needed.

We don't want to be prideful with our seeking after truth, do we? Because that is also addressed in the Bible. It says,

*Have nothing to do with vain and senseless controversies; they only breed quarrels.  
(2Tim 2:23, Titus 3:9, c.f. 1Tim 6:3-5)*

By way of illustration of a vain and senseless controversy, I have heard of a church that broke into two groups in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because there was a member who bought a radio. This was back when radios were high-tech. Whoever raised his concerns about radio ownership used the Bible to prove that you should definitely not own a radio. The debate raged so furiously that the church broke into two factions. By the 1970s, they wondered, "Why do we have these two groups when we live very close to each other?" Historical documents revealed this old disagreement. By then, everybody owned several radios, plus televisions, so the two factions happily reunited. The moral of the story is that an overemphasis on scholarly argumentation can lead to the formation of schools of thought. You may have heard 1Corinthians 3:4, *I'm of Apollos. I am of Paul.* We are warned against such divisions. Our search for truth should be a group effort. Adding pride to truth-seeking can be divisive.

## Mysticism

And this leads us to another facet of spirituality: contemplating and meditating on things that are hard to understand. We could call it "mysticism." It is similar to wanting to be the person who can explain things, like the value of "seeking," but mysticism really has more to do with having a deep and abiding appreciation for not knowing something. It's the antithesis to knowing. Mysticism is an appreciation for things that are beyond knowing, things that are too big for us. I'll admit that I love to get into this mystical mindset when I think about how big the universe is. You can just revel in the awesome mystery of it all. We can approach God with a deep appreciation of how mysterious His ways are and how *inscrutable* (Rom 11:33). Isaiah 55:9 says, *For as the*

*heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* God is just so much higher than we are. Being awestruck can feel very spiritual. There are certain types of religion that are all about being mystical. Those tend to form special groups, with priestly orders or shaman, who know the secret passwords and special rites, but they only tell the initiated after they've passed the test.

Mysticism is certainly found in Christianity. Now, overemphasize your awe and wonder of God, or God's creation, and what happens? You're proud of not knowing! You appreciate that mystical aspect of God's being so much that you arrive at a place of just being unable to know. Then you're suddenly at sea, adrift in this realm where anything can happen. It's almost like animism: the belief that all things are spirit or have a spirit. You're really led into a world that's full of magic and intrigue, but it's not focused on a goal anymore. It's just an awe-inspiring loss for words. If you take pride in not knowing, you've twisted it again. You've gotten out of the realm of action. Now you're enraptured in effervescent awe which can paralyze your ability to act. When you add pride to mysticism you have a worship of secrets and mysteries. Your appreciation for things you don't know confounds the things you do know.

## Being Chosen

Another aspect of a spiritual mindset is wanting to respond to "the calling". We've been chosen. This is definitely in the text, ... *for many are called, but few are chosen (Matt 22:14)*. It leads to a wonderful feeling of specialness that can make you feel thankful to be part of that blessed group. In its purest form, it can lead to a kind of dutifulness, an obligation to follow Jesus, to be one of God's chosen people. This is a wonderful spiritual mindset. But now, as before, let's add pride to it. "I'm chosen, but, oh, you're not." All of a sudden, we've taken that wonderful spiritual mindset and perverted it into something that's exclusive and elitist.

The Israelites were accused of this kind of conceitedness. Luke 3:8 says, *Bear fruits in keeping with repentance and do not say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.* How delightful is it to think that we're the select few who were called out of the world! What an honor! But the reply is, *For, I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.* Jesus is humbling them. Yes, they were special. And, yes, you are special, too. But God can call anyone from anywhere.

## Mortifying the Flesh

What's another way we could express our spirituality? Here's one: mortifying the flesh. This is a very important spiritual value in the Judeo-Christian tradition and others, too. This is where you stop wanting the things of this world so much that you give up food for extended periods of time. You give up possessions and go live in the wilderness. John the Baptist did this. He was a voice calling in the wilderness. He ate locusts and wild honey. He wore a scratchy garment of animal hair. Mortifying the flesh, being unconcerned with worldly wealth and power, just devoting your life to seeking heavenly things is a powerful spiritual attitude.

*But I say walk by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh, for the desires of the flesh are against the spirit and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh.*  
(Gal 5:16)

This passage tells us that the works of the flesh are in contrast to the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But three verses later, the writer says, *Let us not become conceited*. So, if you take this idea that you can mortify the flesh and you can be in complete control of your body, and then you add pride to that, then you risk conceit. Let's keep pride out of it.

## Service

Here's another one that may be the most popular spiritual value: working in the vineyard. You are a spiritual person if you are providing service to other people: medical missions, infrastructure projects, education. These are wonderful spiritual expressions. Helping others is a pure expression of love. But, let's add pride to charitable service. All of a sudden, your service mindset becomes entitlement, with a desire for recognition, or even remuneration. "Look at all these great things that I've done, so you should give me more money and God owes me a favor or two." It brings to mind Charity Navigator, which is a website that helps you gauge how effective not-for-profit organizations are with spending their money. They have a score for administrative costs. There are charities in the world that devote significant portions of their budget to fundraising. This practice makes the charity into a job for the managers.

The best charities, like Meal-a-Day, have an all-volunteer administration. I really admire that. If you are engaging in a charity to enlarge yourself, your own glory, and your own

pocketbook, it's suspect. And, you kind of give us all a bad name because there are a lot of people who perceive Christianity as merely a money-grubbing, donation-seeking institution with an unhealthy psychological influence over unsuspecting, weak-minded people. Not to mention that there are a few conspicuously-wealthy televangelists.

## Preaching

Speaking of evangelism, what about that wonderful spiritual goal of preaching? To some, sharing what you know is the ultimate expression of discipleship. It's the Great Commission to draw people into the fold. What happens when we add pride to preaching? We can get puffed up.

*Knowledge puffeth up... (1Cor 8:1)*

If you have a powerful message, there's a certain amount of glory to be gleaned from being able to explain it. It's hard to keep pride out of our preaching. We can get caught up in it so much that we neglect our children and other family members, even to the point of having invested so much in our preaching to others that our own children slip away. I've had middle-aged parents with nearly-grown teens confess that they realized, in retrospect, that they had sacrificed their children to their church outreach and in-reach activities. If they had to do it over, they would do it differently.

## Relationships

Which leads me to the next expression of spirituality: building relationships, belonging. You have a connection. You've joined a new family. You have a community. You can support, share, advise, protect, and welcome one another. You show hospitality. This expression of spirituality leads to gatherings, fellowship, and all manner of social affirmations. This is wonderful and not to be undervalued. But, now add pride to your relationships. What happens? Your group may become an exclusive club, for insiders only. You've got a group that won't let anybody in because "we don't want those outsiders in here." I experienced this as a child in the 1970s at a youth event when some of the neighborhood children joined us for games. We were having a great time and then I heard one of the adults asking one of the leaders, "Do we really want our children playing with aliens?" "Aliens" was the actual word used! I've never forgotten that. It was not a good example of letting your light shine. Quite insulting, actually.

At the other extreme of over-emphasizing relationship-building, you could imagine a kind of a strange promiscuousness where anything goes. “To facilitate having as large a group as possible, we avoid conflict at all costs. We hide hurts and ignore boundaries completely. And we’re never going to talk about doctrine, because that just divides people.” That kind of relationship-building at all costs is also not a healthy relationship, in my opinion. Feel free to differ. Either way, pride messes up relationship-building.

## Feelings

Some Christians are after a certain emotional response. They attend church meetings in order to get into the right frame of mind. Many emotions may be targeted in this spiritual value, depending on who you are talking to: reverence, shame, thankfulness, hope, joy, peace, love. All these emotions are wonderful responses that we can value in our discipleship. Getting into the right emotional state is a valid spiritual goal. But if we are proud of our emotional responses, then the effects of the emotions can lead us astray. For instance, solemnity and reverence are important. But if you overemphasize them, then you become restrictive and demanding of others who are after laughter and lightheartedness, which have a place in the world as well. If you value your solemnity over anything else, would you derogate people who are being joyful? I’ve seen it happen. I’ve done it. I think people who are really joyful are slightly irritating. True confession: the happy-clappy Christians give me the heebie-jeebies. I just can’t relate, but I’m a little ashamed to admit it.

Shame is another feeling that some people really emphasize. Shame is key to discipleship, in the right measure, because it motivates us to repent. But then, if you get proud of being shameful, you reach a point of feeling that you are so bad that you are unforgivable and you’ve gone beyond God’s grace. Many of you will find this so foreign that you won’t even think such a thought is possible, but I assure you, it’s happened. I’ve spoken with people who think that they’ve been so bad that they can’t be forgiven. Clearly that makes no sense and twists a good frame of mind into a bad frame of mind, leading to despair and despondency. It doesn’t look like pride, but it is an overemphasis on shame.

How about the opposite of such an overblown sense of your own guilt? Instead, you love feeling that relief of that “amazing grace” setting you free. What if you become proud of that?

Carelessness sets in. *Let us sin that grace may abound (Rom 6:1)*. “The more I sin, the more grace there is and the more relief I feel.” We were warned not to go there.

How about thankfulness? Hebrews 13:15 says, *By him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name*. So, giving thanks is a sacrifice to God! If you add pride to thankfulness, it just becomes selfish and demonstrative. “I’m thankful about all this great stuff I have.” There’s a pull toward conspicuous consumption, justified by overt thanks.

How about hope? When we approach God, we feel hope for the future. Add pride to hope. Now it’s entitlement. “This is coming to me. I’m going to be rewarded!” Not good.

Joy? Joy is a wonderful spiritual response. *Make a joyful noise unto the Lord (Ps 100)*. It’s invaluable. Add pride to joyfulness and it becomes shameless partying. “Rock and roll and silliness because we’re joyful and we’re proud of it.” That’s too much of a good thing.

Peace? What happens to peace when you add pride? If I’m really proud of being peaceful, I’m kind of dispassionate and dissipated. I’m just drifting along, totally at peace and that’s it. Just peace. No action. No goals. No purpose. Clearly, that’s lacking something.

And then we get to that most excellent emotion: love. Add pride to love. What’s prideful love look like? Can love, at least in its truest definitions, co-exist with pride at all? I’m undecided, but, to me, love is selfless and pride is selfish, so when love turns on, pride turns off, and vice versa. We also know that *perfect love casts out fear (1John 4:18)*. I believe that pride may be connected to fear in such a way that love is its antidote. Maybe that’s why the Scriptures tell us that the greatest of the spiritual gifts is love.

*If I speak with all the languages of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become like sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1Cor 13:1-3)*

## Conclusion

That’s all of the different flavors of spiritual expressions that I could think of to put on our spectrum of spiritual values. Surely, I missed some. Anyway, I experience all of these things in my spirituality and I have preferences for some more than others. Sadly, my preferences have led me



to denigrate some of the others. For instance, I elevate scholarship so much that I denigrate joyfulness.

You get the point. I think everyone has a preference for a certain expression or style of spirituality. But I've come to believe that one is not more appropriate than another and that we should all engage in each type, at least once in a while. If there are some ways of expressing spirituality that we never engage in, maybe we should try them out.

Finally, anyone's spirituality can be corrupted by pride. All of us have pride lurking inside and it makes us susceptible to wanting to criticize other people's spirituality. Let's watch out for this natural tendency, especially during our inevitable Sunday afternoon gush-and-gripe sermon critiques. Let's nurture personal humility, for it says in 1Corinthians 1:31, *He that boasts, let him boast in the Lord.*