The Halfway House of Hedonism: Potential and Problems in John Piper’s Desiring God

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In Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist, John Piper begins by reframing the Westminster Larger Catechism, "The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever." Piper’s work then elaborates several welcome insights. First, it emphasizes the profound interrelation of worship, adoration and delight. Second, the work rightly reminds us that we short-change ourselves by settling for anything less than delighting in the supremely delightful God. Finally, the work explores how God is truly glorified when God’s creatures delight in him.

The church is indebted to Dr. Piper for renewing popular attention to the theology of the affections. Piper can be credited with moving many North American Christians away from a strictly duty-centred model of the Christian faith to a more affection-based model. Piper can be credited with an emerging dynamic in Canadian civil society, is the formation of religious coalitions representing the common values of all the major faiths to guard what is precious in the human person and the religious freedoms of faith communities in the face of ideologies, politics and jurisprudence that would subvert these. Will the definition of Canadian pluralism and multiculturalism be religiously friendly, as in our longer tradition, or religiously hostile and exclusionary, as in recent experience? My hope is that this project will contribute historical perspective and better-informed, positive responses to this most important challenge.

Endnotes
7. Ibid., 184.
8. Ibid., 302-303.
9. R. Roebuck, to get the report accepted by his Quebec Liberal colleagues, had to undertake last-minute revisions that deleted most of the evidence the Committee had received on violations of Canadian civil liberties and excised a more positive endorsement of an entrenched bill of rights. Roebuck left a copy of the earlier draft report in his papers with the handwritten note: "This shows how many compromises were necessary to get the report by the Committee."
determination of the will. The divine Spirit, not a created quality inhering in the soul, is the grace of God. For Edwards, grace is personal and relational, eliciting a response in the beloved, not a created capacity that enables the will to incline to the point of choosing God and to act in a righteous manner.

Clearly, Piper rejects external-based religion. In his theological anthropology of hedonism, affections play a key part. Nonetheless, a duty-based rather than affective theology and ethic is an ever-present propensity for advocates of the glory of God paradigm, in whatever form. Though one can glorify God without loving God, one cannot love God without also desiring to glorify God. Put differently, the person who loves God longs to glorify God, while the person who glorifies God does not necessarily love God. Every knee will bow before Christ, and every heart will bow out of affection on that day.

Piper is partially right. For God would not love us were God to withhold himself from us. But God's love has deeper roots than an ambition to display glory. The Father wishes to honour the Son whom he loves. The Father seeks the Son's glory and the Son the Father's. True love always seeks the glory of the other, a love that is perfectly displayed in the triune life of God. Though in one place Piper speaks of God's delight in the communion between Father and Son, his argument relies on the notion that the Father delights in his Son because the Son reflects his glory.

Although Piper goes on to speak of the Triune God being uppermost in the Godhead's affections throughout eternity, he underlines a properly Trinitarian dynamic of communion by promoting a Monarchian-like model of relation within the Godhead. For instance, upon considering texts speaking of the glorious Son, Piper writes:

From these texts we learn that through all eternity God the Father has beheld the image of his own glory perfectly represented in the person of his Son. Therefore one of the best ways to think about God's infinite enjoyment of his own glory is to think of it as the delight he has in his Son who is the perfect reflection of that glory (Jn 17:24-26). As God the Father contemplates the image of his own glory in the person of his Son, he is infinitely happy.

Piper's emphasis on God's pursuit of glory eclipses the primacy of love in the Triune Glory. The Father gives the Son glory because he unconditionally loves, that is, delights in the Son. John 17:24 makes clear that the Father gives glory to the Son because he loves the Son. "Father, I want those you have given me...to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (italics added).

The Son also seeks to glorify his Father because he loves the Father. The unconditional love God shows the world is exemplified in the life of the Godhead. The Father and Son seek ever to glorify one another in the Spirit out of love for one another in that same Spirit. According to 1 Corinthians 15, the Son will submit all things to the Father in the end so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:20-28).

Yet, Scripture also teaches that the Son will reign forever with the Almighty (Dan 7:13-14; Rev 11:15). For though the Son purposes to submit all to the Father, the Father intends to shower eternal glory on the Son (see Jn 5:23, 8:49-50, 54, 12:23-33, 17:24-26). So too, considering the Spirit in relation to the Son, one finds this same dynamic. For the Spirit directs the disciples' gaze not to himself but to Christ (Jn 16:12-15). And the Son, for his part, says that all sins will be forgiven, except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:30-32).

Just as the Father delights in glorifying the Son, so too, the Son delights in glorifying the Father. "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (Jn 17:23; see also Jn 5:23; 8:49-50, 54; 12:23-33). Thus, God's glory is always love-motivated and others-focused, never a means to the end of self-glorification.

All this discloses the reality of a community of persons, "person" understood in terms of what John Zizioulas has called a hypostasis in ekstasis, signifying a turning outward toward others in service to them. This ecstatic character of true communion between persons stands against self-centered devotion. Along these lines, Kallistos Ware argues that "person is not synonymous with "individual. For the individual is "isolated" and "self-dependent." Ware adds that an individual's "ego centricty is the death of true personhood." This is true not only on the human level, but even more so on the divine.

In glory-of-God models, however framed, God exists ultimately because God glorifies God's self and is glorified by self: God's chief end is to glorify himself and to be glorified by others. But this describes love of an individual, not of a person. It is self-love, consumption, narcissism. In John's Gospel, on the other hand, one finds in the relationship of the Father and Son what Ware calls "an unceasing movement of mutual love," the love of persons. Such a God exists because such a God loves. And so it is that the Christian God is not an Absolute individual in isolation, but a community of persons in selfless, abiding communion. Thus, the supreme glory each of the divine persons receives in the joyful communion of love is the fruit of each person's loving purpose, not the focal point.

On Adoration and Participation

A third problem with Piper's thesis about the glory of God lies in a focus on believers' adoration of God to the exclusion of their participation in God's life. God's people partake in the glorious love of the God they worship, for Christ requests that throughout the ages they might behold the eternal glory of Christ's loving Father gives him and that they might experience what he withholds from the Father on which the Father has ever loved the Son (Jn 17:24-26). Thus, central to the divine economy is not simply the eternal divine communion of glorious love, but also the participation of Christ's redeemed bride in that glorious love in eternity (Rev 19:6-9).

Jesus says, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be as we are: One in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:22-23; italics added). The Father loves those who are in his Son even as he loves the Son, and will shower upon them the glory that belongs to him (see also Rev 3:21; 5:6-7).

I have in view John 17's presentation of the spreading and inclusive glory of God rooted in the divine love. God's glory is expansive. John 17 shows that Christ wishes to be glorified...
Again, according to Jesus here, the Father gives Christ glory here on earth (17:11). Together with him, showers his glory on Christ (17:23, 24). Christ gives this glory to us so that we might be one as the Father and Son are one, with one another and in them as well (17:22–23). Again, according to Jesus here, the Father loves his Son's bride with the very same love he has for his Son in the Spirit (see again Jn 17:22–23).

One might assert that God's chief aim is his glory. But what is God's glory if it is not his Beloved—his Son, whose own glory towards the Father is set forth in John's Gospel as his obedience unto death (see Jn 12:23–28)? The Father will give his glory to no other (See Is 42:1–8).25 God's glory is his Son and his Son's spouse, who reigns with Christ in mystical marital union by faith through the Spirit. The whole of human history moves toward this end (see Rev 19–22).

In the preface to the second edition of Desiring God, Piper claims, "God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in him."24 Agreed, but with one qualification, and from two angles. Although God is most glorified in people who are most satisfied in God, this glory is the fruit of the Trinitarian love that is itself a response to God's love poured out into their hearts through the Spirit (see Rom 5:5). It has nothing ultimately to do with self-interest. For ideally, one is not self-conscious or mindful of oneself when one truly worships. One does not lose oneself, but rather is most truly oneself when caught up in the pleasure derived from worshipping God—but in God, the source of true, lasting pleasure.

The premises involve a perspective critiqued by earlier theologians. For instance, Bernard of Clairvaux argues that loving God for his benefits is an immature or underdeveloped form of love. One is to move beyond love of self for self's sake and love of God for self's sake to love of God for God's sake, and ultimately, to love of self solely for God's sake, which will only be attained freely and wholly at the resurrection of the body.27

Some early Reformers and their later followers would have nothing to do with love that is ultimately self-directed (incurvatus in se)—an introspective focus characteristic of Cartesianism in its many forms. Melanchthon writes: "Nothing is loved except what is advantageous for us. But God does not wish to be loved for the sake of any advantage; he wants to be loved freely. The man who loves something advantageous does not love God but himself, and the Scriptures warn everywhere against such depraved love."28 Luther maintains that, "To love God is at the same time to have oneself and to know nothing but God."29 Luther was, moreover, concerned about certain forms of mystical engagement. As Heiko Oberman points out, Luther perceived "grave dangers in the pursuit of the suavitatis which is 'rather the fruit and reward of love than itself.'"30 In the end, Piper's talk of delighting in God for self's sake seems unintentionally to reverse the two great commandments and put humans at the centre (see Mk 12:30–31).

Charles Wesley's hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" expresses the point of my critique implicitly: "Changed from glory into glory. Till in heaven we take our place, Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise."31 The saints in glory worship God not for the benefits they receive. They are enamoured with God as the object of true delight, not with themselves or with their pleasures in God as such.32 Thus, they cast their crowns before God simply because of who God is. This is no stoicism based on duty and a stiff upper lip. Rather, it is the beloved ones’ response to the captivating grandeur of God's glorious love. This orientation is free from self-interest and narcissism as an end in itself. By not recognizing love as the focus and glory as the fruit of the Triune life, Piper's arguments ultimately, and ironically, fail to be sufficiently free from the duty-based models he seeks to leave behind.

A true theology of the affections is not built on the affections as such, or on the fulfillment of them, but on a relational response to the triune God who inspires such affection. In place of the maxim that humanity's chief end is to glorify God by enjoying him forever, the position set forth here is built upon the thesis that humanity's chief end—or better, God's great call—is to love God forever (based on Mk 12:30), which will inevitably birth the glorification of God. It all flows from a response to the love of God (see 1 Jn 4:10–11), wherein one is captivated by God, who is enamoured with us in Christ (Jn 17:23; Eph 1:5–6). In our Spirit-engendered love for God, the glory of God will indeed reside in the praises of his people, honing the affections of their hearts in faith through the Spirit in view of heaven's coming hope, the Lord Jesus (1 Pt 1:8–9; 1 Jn 3:1–3).

The ultimate problem from the human standpoint, then, is not ultimately a mere weakness of desire, as Dr. Piper maintains in Desiring God,26 but the object of desire. God's desire is that spiritual seekers increasingly gaze outward and upward, fixing their eyes on the true prize of the pilgrimage—the Lover of our souls. Homeward bound.28 By not recognizing love as the focus and glory as the fruit of the Triinitarian life, Piper’s arguments ultimately, and ironically, fail to be sufficiently free from the duty-based models he seeks to leave behind.
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Endnotes

1 John Piper, Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist, 2d ed. (Sisters: Questar Publishers, Inc., 1996), 14. See pages 14-20 for Piper's treatment of hedonism. Even if Dr. Piper were to claim that the use of the term "hedonism" and the like is a rhetorical device, nonetheless, the substance of a Christian form of hedonism is deeply imbedded in the structure of his argument.

5 The wording "response-oriented model" has been borrowed from "diversity-oriented model" given the long history of "diversity"'s denotation being viewed as a function of human initiative in the tradition of Christian spirituality. See Louis Leon Rich's work, The Spirituality of John Calvin (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 78-93.

20 As Piper indicates on page 9 of the second edition of Desiring God—John Piper, Desiring God, 2d ed. (Sisters: Questar Publishers, Inc., 1996), 20. As Piper indicates on page 9 of the second edition, he has removed standards to the argument of the first, but see also note 21.

24 Please note the first edition or second of Desiring God to which reference is made in all future notes. This essay focuses on the first and second editions of Piper's paradigmatic text, Desiring God. I know of no instance in his other works where Piper revoices what he writes here, including the 2003 edition of Desiring God.

25 Piper might argue that God is simply and appropriately loving that which is most lovely, and glorifying that which is most glorious, himself. But the nature of God's love is to spread his love outward, not turn it on himself. The reversal is perverse. Only in God's communion does John's claim that "God is love" exist. Such love is a transitive activity, not an intrinsically qualitative.

20 Brian D. Bruns refers to this dynamic within the Trinitarian life as the shyness of God. See Frederick Dale Bruner and William Hoerdt, The Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 26.


28 Melanchthon, Loci Communes Theologii, 42.

33 Along these lines, it is interesting to note what Melanchthon claims in the Loci Communes. According to Melanchthon, salvation was to be found in an act of faith overcoming another "(affection is overcome by affection);" it is not the enablers of the will (27). For a recent discussion of the central importance of the affections to the Reformation teaching of Luther and the early Melanchthon, see Ronald N. Frost's essay, "Luther's Ethos: The Real Reason for Luther's Reformation?" Trinity Journal 18NS (1997): 223-241.

34 Piper, Desiring God, 2d ed., 9. See pages 14-20 for Piper's treatment of hedonism. This essay focuses on the first and second editions of Piper's paradigmatic text, Desiring God. I know of no instance in his other works where Piper revoices what he writes here, including the 2003 edition of Desiring God.

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36 I am indebted to Nathan Baxter, Joshua Butler, Winky Chin, Matthew Farlow and Ronald Frost, who read and commented on earlier editions of this essay.