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True Piety

James Calvin Schaap

I'll admit it. 'Twas sad to discover that the church I was looking for out in the country worships today in a brand new steel building. That was a shock, and it shouldn't have been, given the life of timbers. Most homegrown churches were built in the late 19th century. I'd expected something small, something white, something frame with a bell tower, you know--a calendar shot, an old post-card, because this church is really off the beaten path. Check a map.

The church declares its German heritage by existing where it does, a couple of miles from town or any main road. It's not necessarily a rule to live by, but 19th century Dutch Reformed immigrants tended to build churches in towns or where they determined towns would be. German Reformed people—this works for Lutherans too, by the way—put them up across the pasture. That's why that new, old church stands alone in the corn fields, only its parsonage beside it, and a well-pampered cemetery.

Oddly enough, the church stands proudly on its own gravel road, "South Holland Church Road," even though its ethnic roots are more German than Dutch. The street name is no surprise, however, since throughout its first 149 years it's been in league with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, an organization that once named itself "the True Dutch Reformed Church," just in case you wondered. If you'd scan the register of former pastors, you'd likely find more Dutch names than German (these days it's Pastor Ritzema); but don't be deceived: the congregation now named "Grace Valley CRC" has roots that are Deutsch, not Dutch.

When, in 1868, my Schaap ancestors arrived in North America, once they put New York in rearview mirrors they didn't have, they took

trains west and south around Lake Michigan, then stopped the first right there in the fields surrounding a clapboard church building that now, I take it, belongs to history.



The C. C. Schaap family had just come from Terschelling, a sandy slip of an island just off the coast of Friesland that today is about 100 percent touristy, offering the best beaches on the North Sea, spacious playgrounds that sometimes kept my great-grandparents employed. When they weren't tending sheep (hence, the name Schaap?), they were probably *jutters*, beachcombers pulling their carts along the shoreline to gather what flotsam the sea served up from continuing shipwrecks.

My great-grandfather was a seaman who likely farmed part-time. But in 1868 he brought his family to America because—or so I was told by an old Dutch relative—there was no *Gereformeerde* church on the island, no breakaway church, no body of believers whose hearty determination put them at theological loggerheads with a state church they'd grown to believe had crossed a line into apostasy.

My great-grandparents left the Netherlands for religious reasons, and when they arrived at the German Valley Church just two years after it was

founded right there, four miles from what is today US Highway 20, I can only imagine how thrilled they must have been to find themselves finally on what must have seemed home ground.

They were Dutch, not German. But the several Terschelling families they'd come with had determined their new world destination via a tip given by a woman with German roots who lived on the island and knew the immigrant pastor at the German church out there in the country with a totally unpronounceable name—"Illinois." Her knowing the pastor was their sole link to life in the U.S.—someone knew someone, a pastor of the very church I left the highway to find.

Let me summarize. Once upon a time a family of great importance to me, a man and a woman with several kids, Cornelius C. and Neeltje Kuipers Schaap, my great-grandparents, found a kind of "saalem," a place of great peace, right there on Holland Church Road. Just a week or so ago I got off the highway to find it because I had to see it for myself, to sit and listen to voices that still might be in the air.



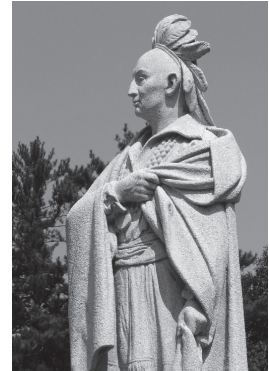
But once I saw that it was a new church, I didn't get out of the car. German Valley True Dutch Reformed Church is now Grace Valley CRC. I parked at the side of the road and read tombstones for a while, but I never got from behind the wheel.

Still, I'd go there again in a heartbeat. Next time I'm east of Galena, I will.

But I kept going because I was on my way to Chicago for a retreat set up by the Christian Reformed Church, the denomination my great-grandparents came to America to be part of. This retreat/workshop was an all-day event that

ended at night, although those who attended were invited to worship on Sunday morning with Ebenezer CRC, 1300 South Harvey, Berwyn, an urban community absolutely nothing like German Valley. More people live on Ebenezer's block than anywhere near Grace Valley, no matter how broad and unending its yawning backyard.

I could have flown to O'Hare, but there's good country to see. I wanted to drop by that old country church. Besides, you can't tour Ronald Reagan's birthplace if you're in a jet, can't drive past U. S. Grant's home either. And northern Illinois is Blackhawk country, the gorgeous Mississippi River valley region the famous Sauk chief determined to take back from white folks because he couldn't and therefore wouldn't leave the bones of his own grandparents buried in the gracious hills those bones made sacred. The 1832 Blackhawk War didn't last all that long, but ever more permanently set white America on a course of doing everything it could to rid the "new land" of redskins.



The Ebenezer retreat, in Chicago, attempted to teach those who attended how to run a kind of simulation called "The Blanket Exercise," something designed to teach participants a summary of the sad story of European immigrants—my great-grandparents among them—and the indigenous people of this land, people like the Sauk and Fox Blackhawk championed right there at that old country church thirty years before German Valley was German.

I had determined I'd leave Chicago early Saturday evening when the workshop/retreat ended, rather than stay over with the other out-of-towners. So I started out from the heart of the city at six, determined to make it home and spend the Sabbath in northwest Iowa.

I'm no longer a fool when it comes to all-nighters. I will quit driving when my eyes are closing, and that's what happened by the time I got to Waterloo. I pulled off the freeway—it wasn't yet midnight, but getting uncomfortably close. Four long hours were still ahead of me. On-line, I found

a Motel 6 that had but one room left, booked it—\$65 bucks, with tax. No kidding. Great deal. Read my review on Travel Advisor.com

So the next morning, I was on the road when the congregation who worships at Grace Valley CRC were gathering. I was already out west of Waterloo, a couple of hours away, still there on Highway 20, passing Kanawha and Ackley and Parkersburg, towns where people I know were gathering at some other country churches, just as they have for more than a century.

There's more to the story of C. C. and Neeltje Schaap and their family. They had a baby boy born there, my grandfather, who was a kid when the old sailor moved his family west with homesteading fortune-seekers as well as that gaggle of Terschellingens. When they left German Valley, they stopped again for a time in Grundy County, Iowa, then Sioux County, Iowa, and finally Douglas County, South Dakota, in search of something they apparently didn't find because by the turn of the century the Schaaps were back east in Parkersburg.

Here's the thing. I was on Highway 20 when I passed Parkersburg exit and the church where my grandfather made profession of faith, the church he left as a kid when he went to Michigan to study to become a minister of the Word and sacraments in the only church he knew, the CRC. I was on the road when people in that very church were worshipping the Lord and likely would have welcomed me.



Right then, at that moment, I couldn't help but remember my own parents carefully determining where we'd be on Sunday when we'd travel, how purposefully they'd measure distances so that, on the Sabbath, they'd be near a Christian Reformed Church, some worshipping congregation in the

denominational family of German Valley, now Grace Valley CRC. Or Parkersburg. Or Oostburg, their home church and mine.

I was doing 75 miles an hour on open road, pretty much alone on a Sunday morning, three hours from home. In two days' travel I'd followed the western path of my Schaap ancestors, deeply pious folks who had forsaken home and family on a beautiful North Sea island for a new world where they could—and did—worship God on Sunday as they pleased and did so, pardon my saying it, religiously.

And I'm driving along as if all of that is ancient history. I'm not at worship.

Or was I? How do we assess something as ethereal, as complex as whatever it is we mean by *worship*, or *piety*, for that matter?

Piety is probably as difficult to define as it is to live. Ford Lewis Battles, who in his time probably knew more about John Calvin than anyone on earth, once attempted to define *piety* as Calvin did; but what resulted is a definition so unwieldy that your and my Bible study groups could spend three years lost in its ponderous phrasing:

True piety consists...in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death. And whoever have been endowed with this piety dare not fashion out of their own rashness any God for themselves. Rather, they seek from Him the knowledge of the true God, and conceive Him just as He shows and declares Himself to be.

Go ahead and tweet that if you can.

Piety is immensely personal and very much time-nuanced. For instance, "Give me that old-time religion" assumes that our own practice of faith just isn't at all what it was in days of old. Really? Maybe Battles is right in beginning to define piety with a slippery phrase—a "sincere feeling," a phrase some might argue is itself a contradiction because feelings are always, well, no more than feelings. You have to wonder about sincerity, right? And what's more—do "feelings" *love God*?

I don't know that I get it quite frankly.

What I know is I'm on Hwy 20 at 10:00 a.m.,

on a Sunday morning, and coming up like zombie ball players from the Iowa cornfields all around are my own ancestors looking searchingly at this grandson tooling down the road as if the Sabbath is just another day on the calendar. I get that.

I get Cicero too—believe me: “In all probability,” he wrote, “disappearance of piety toward the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.”

And Cicero wasn’t even Reformed, wasn’t even Christian.

And I get Einstein, too: “A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer lives are based on the labors of other men, living and dead,” he said once upon a time, “and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.”

I get that too. It’s a kind of piety I understand. Somehow piety is about reverence, isn’t it?—about believing, about humility before that which is forever, eternally, greater than we are, about servanthood. I get that too, but it’s living it out that’s the problem.

I just now stepped outside because whenever

the Lord God almighty paints the sky above this heavily agricultural region in sweet feminine pastels, I just love the irony. And the colors. But then, the morning sun arrives bearing an immense blessing so wonderful that the Yankton Sioux, who once camped right here on the Floyd River, wouldn’t have thought of facing their teepees in any direction other than east, to the dawn. They were pious folk.

It’s Saturday today. Think of this yarn I’m spinning, this travelogue, as my own elaborate confession of sin, my request for forgiveness. Think of it as penance for my missing worship, for driving past places once thought almost sacred to people from whom I was given at least something of my own DNA.

Think of this whole essay as a meditation, for that’s what it is, something that doesn’t preach what it knows to be true, but falls on its knees before too much that I simply do not know. Think of it as piety, if you’d like.

But trust me on this: tomorrow is Sunday. Somewhere here I’ll be in church. It won’t be Grace Valley, but I’ll be thinking about them praising the Lord out there in the country.