



### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

Grant, O Lord, to all who study, the grace to know what is worth knowing, to love what is worth loving, to praise what delights you most, to value what is precious in your sight and to reject what is evil in your eyes. Grant them true discernment to distinguish between different things. Above all, may they search out what is pleasing to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Thomas à Kempis

### **Week #7a: Johann Arndt, Johann Gerhard and the Development of Lutheran Devotional Literature**

One of the principal questions any religious movement must face is how to disseminate its ideal to a popular audience, so as to enlist the broadest possible support for its ideals and program. Early Lutheranism might have won the battle for Lutheran theology at the universities but parish life itself was scarcely reformed (religious nominalism plus the persistence of old medieval Catholic patterns).

- If the laity were to be won over to the views of the Reformation, a new kind of literature needed to be produced—devotional literature and prayer books for personal and household use.
- A new vocabulary needed to be introduced through these works to help the unsophisticated layperson understand his or her world through the lens of the Reformation, yet without the scholastic terminology which was favored by the university-based theologians but alien to those with little or no formal education.

**Phase 1:** Pastors of local churches cobbled together devotional materials which drew upon the themes and language of late medieval mystical literature (a popular tradition accessible to those with less formal education), while editing out more objectionable elements and assuming a background of Lutheran ecclesiastical practice.

#### Medieval mystical themes:

(1) an affective, sensory mysticism (true repentance=deep and searching sorrow for sin; union with the indwelling Christ=joy, affection, transport/rapture) which emphasized  
(2) the soul's immediate experience of union with Christ when the soul, by repentance and self-denial, has emptied itself of worldly things, turning from the world to God and from its own will to the will of God.

- Arndt, *True Christianity* III.2 (Lund, p. 256): “The more the soul rests in God, the more God rests in it. If you rest completely, then God will rest completely in you. But if you use your own will, understanding, memory and desires according to

your own pleasure, God cannot use them or do his work within you. If two are to become united, one must rest and be receptive while the other must act. God is an infinite, constant, active power, pure movement, never resting, acting in you as far as he can without your hindering him...the soul cannot contain God with its powers, understanding, will, memory and desires if it is full of the world and worldly things.”

(3) the progressive growth of holiness in the soul over the course of this earthly life (true faith being inseparable from the works of love which are the fruit of regeneration)

(4) the soul's being conformed to Christ by love (Christ's love shown to it and reciprocated by it; one is conformed to the object of one's love, whether this be Christ, the world or Satan)

- Note the more introspective, individualistic, experiential character of this piety, which contrasted with the more cognitive (“objective”) style of doctrinal preaching that often prevailed in this period, due to confessional and scholastic influences.
- Note also the emphasis upon
  - personal activity (preparatory work of emotionally-charged contrition) and
  - disciplined personal quest for the progressive acquisition of holiness in this life, which contrasts with Luther's original emphasis upon consoling the believer (at once righteous and a sinner) who is subject to despair with the message that he or she is accepted by God's promise through faith alone apart from works.
    - The devotional writers hoped to find/develop a theology of sanctification (how faith is active in love in a holy life), going beyond the more rudimentary account of “neighbor love” found in Luther and the earliest Reformers (who had been primarily concerned to defend justification by faith apart from works against Roman Catholic criticism).

#### True vs. False Christianity: Arndt's Criticism of Lutheran Institutional Leadership

- The clergy/theologians are so concerned about polemical disputations (with other theologians and religious groups) and assent to doctrines that they have failed to treat Christianity as a matter of practical religion which issues from vital union with the living Christ and thus fed their parishioners' nominalism and complacency rather than calling them to repentance.
- From preaching about justification by faith and the imputation of Christ's alien righteousness, we must go on to speak about union with Christ and the new birth and new life that flow from Christ's death and resurrection.
  - Regeneration and rebirth had received relative little attention in the official confessional theology of early Lutheranism and were not seen as “an empirically observable and consciously experienced change in” one's “life under the experience of grace” (Lund, p. 148). union with the indwelling Christ downplayed after the Osiandrist controversy in favor of legal imputation to understand our connection with Christ and his benefits.)

Furthermore, we must attack complacency, encourage self-examination and even lay down some rules of pious conduct (*regula pietatis*) that may help people advance in piety.

### Criticism of Phase 1 Writers (Especially Arndt)

- While it is perfectly true that contrition must exist alongside faith at conversion, there is a certain danger in saying that a *deep and searching* sorrow for sin *must* exist before a saving faith can be had or conversion can occur.
  - While this may seem a subtle point, it is the recognition and repudiation of sin that is important, not its quantitative emotional display.
    - Focusing on the latter would undermine the believer's confidence in God's promise and God's sovereignty. ("First I must be sorry enough, then God may act, but how can I know when I have become sorry *enough*?")
    - Since we better appreciate the evil character of sin as we advance in the Christian life and are therefore come to be more greatly grieved over sin, making deep and insightful sorrow over sin a prerequisite for conversion may be making sanctification a prerequisite for conversion (which is illogical and an attempt to return to works-based righteousness). (Unless of course conversion is defined in terms of that lifelong process of turning away from sin=mortification)
- Similarly, mortification is connected with repentance and extended over the course of the Christian life (as in Luther's doctrine of baptism re: Rom. 6), but because true repentance is made a prerequisite for salvation and defined so expansively, this undermines one's confidence in the salvation God promises.
- While it is perfectly true that
  - (a) faith in time works itself out in acts of love for the neighbor and
  - (b) these acts of love are an externally visible sign of the prior invisible reality of regeneration ("new birth"),there is a certain danger in examining one's acts to discern signs of saving grace.
  - Our judgments about oneself and one's actions are never impartial and may be unhelpful and erroneous (either self-serving or excessively fearful).
  - Furthermore, placing one's confidence in one's works is always more harmful than helpful (leads to false and carnal security); one must look to the promises of God alone, apart from what one can immediately discern with the senses.
    - This is necessary because our old, carnal nature remains with us throughout this life but we do not despair over the evils we find in ourselves; instead, forsaking these evils we place our whole trust in Christ (even when this runs against everything we can discern with the senses).
- It is also true that the sacraments are of little value to the unrepentant (in confession grace is given only to the contrite penitent; contrition disposes us to receive the grace offered), but the sacraments are normally the place where one

discovers the need to repent and is moved to deeper faith (contrast Arndt in TC, 58; cited by Kelly, p. 58).

- In Arndt,
  - there is contrition and confession but no satisfaction (as in medieval penance) and
  - contrition has moved beyond the rite of confession (where absolution and consolation are found) and spread out over life as a principle of mortification (since contrition and emendation of life are closely connected) and this mortification is considered an essential component of the sanctification of those who are to be saved.

### The Defense of Phase 1

- Heinrich Müller (1631-1675), professor at Greek and theology at the University of Rostock (published the popular devotional work *Spiritual Hours of Refreshment* in 1664) defends and extends Arndt's ideas of
  - true vs. false Christianity,
  - his criticism of the Lutheran institutional leadership and its practices, and
  - false security based in participation in the sacramental life of the church (held to be efficacious)(see Lund, *Documents*, p. 265) vs.
    - examining oneself for marks of true repentance and faith (change of heart—>ardent love for God) and
    - being vigilant about signs of backsliding/decline (must examine motivations/inclinations of their hearts; a never-ending struggle necessary to prevent the spark of new life from being extinguished).

The pattern of criticism that Luther had applied to Roman Catholicism was now being applied by Müller to complacent nominal Lutherans (\*read Lund, *Documents*, 265 on the “four dumb church idols,” which turn out to be the public, sacramental framework of Lutheran church life!

- In later writers like Christian Scriver (author of *Seelenschatz = The Treasure of the Soul* and *Gotthold's Occasional Devotions*; \*read excerpts from the latter in Lund, *Documents*, 267-271 and discuss the role of emblematic books), one finds a fear of increasing naturalism and religious skepticism coming in from France, England and the Netherlands, though at the same time they were increasingly influenced by Puritan/Reformed Pietist devotional literature from England and the Netherlands, which involved descriptions of the marks of grace or the different types of Christians and their respective degrees of religious awakening/sanctification.
  - This extended the devotional writers' movement away from contested doctrines to the observation of certain normative states of religious experience and behavior (self-examination/avoidance of worldliness).
    - They argued that this was compatible with Luther's idea of (true) faith becoming active in and through love to the neighbor (see e.g. the excerpt from Müller, *Spiritual Hours of Refreshment* in Lund,

*Documents*, 266 [#160]: “Up to God, out to our neighbor; to God through faith, to the neighbor through love”).

**Phase 2:** An attempt to produce a devotional literature based more explicitly on the doctrinal basis of the Reformation as understood through the lens of the later confessional literature.

- The primary aim was to purge devotional literature of any conceptions of grace or human action that reflected medieval views, thus going beyond the Phase I devotional literature (cf. Polycarp Leyser’s [1552-1610] comment on Arndt’s *True Christianity*: “The book is good if the reader is good”; Phase II hoped to provide something of more universal usefulness to the uninstructed).
- The secondary aim was to draw out the implications of Lutheran sacramental theology and catechetical practices (e.g. Luther’s Smaller Catechism) for the devotional or ethical life in the form of meditations or prayers, so that the doctrines of the Lutheran Reformation might become truths of the heart.
  - This was a significant advance beyond Phase I devotional literature (e.g. Arndt) and its defenders (Müller) and created a churchly piety that agreed with the Lutheran confessions and Lutheran Orthodox sacramental and confessional practices (the visible, public, institutional forms of church life).
  - This distinction between Phase I and Phase II devotional literatures would later harden into a distinction between later Pietism and anti-Pietist Lutheran Orthodoxy, which weakened the Lutheran churches and made it more difficult for them to speak with one voice and resist the coming of naturalism, deism and rationalism in the late seventeenth to eighteenth centuries.

### **Life of Johann Gerhard**

Born in Quedlinburg in Saxony Oct. 17, 1582, one of seven children in a family of noble birth that had played a role in local government; his mother was active in work to serve the poor in the needy. He was sent to a good Latin school in the town, where he received a first rate education, composing a history of the Gospels in Latin verses at the age of thirteen or fourteen.

In 1588 his father Bartholomaeus, who was city counselor and city treasurer, died. Gerhard himself nearly died at the age of fifteen during a local outbreak of the plague; having received a double dose of medicine, for his mother had not known that the physician had already administered a dose, he survived and was visited and consoled by Johann Arndt, his pastor at the time.

After this, Gerhard began to pursue a life of irenic, practical piety. Since over three thousand had died of the plague (including many of the teachers at the local school), Gerhard completed his education at Halberstadt, where he wrote a series of fine Greek verses on Christ’s suffering and death.

In 1599, Gerhard entered the University of Wittenberg, initially to study philosophy in preparation for entering the ministry, preparing for disputations by entering into a book all the arguments he could find for or against a position. He attended the lectures of

- Leonhard Hutter (1563-1616; a theologian who had come to Wittenberg in 1596 and produced his *Compendium* in 1610 which became a standard Lutheran theological work, replacing Melanchthon's *Loci*) and
- Solomon Gessner (a well-known Hebraist and OT scholar, who at that time was lecturing on the Book of Daniel).

Although Gerhard had intended to study for the ministry, he was persuaded by the jurist Andreas Rauchbar, an influential relative, to enroll in the study of medicine for two years, after which Gerhard briefly practiced medicine and served as tutor for Rauchbar's son Michael.

In 1603, however, after the death of Andreas Rauchbar, he entered (with Michael Rauchbar) the University of Jena and resolved to read theology (Scripture, Church Fathers, medieval scholastic theologians) and began to lecture there himself later in the year, first in philosophy, then in theology.

On Christmas day, he fell gravely ill and believing he would die, prepared his last will and testament and a confession of faith, but recovered after three weeks.

In May 1604, Gerhard and Rauchbar entered the University of Marburg to attend the lectures of the theologian Balthasar Mentzer (1565-1627; authored *Theologisches Handbüchlein* = "Little Theological Handbook", 1620), who took a liking to Gerhard and invited him to join him in visiting the best libraries and teachers in southwestern Germany.

Gerhard's book of *Sacred Meditations* appeared in Latin in 1606, circulated five years later in a German translation and subsequently translated into English, French, Swedish, Finnish, Welsh, Greek, Arabic, Polish and Russian and for many years had a popularity that exceeded even Arndt's *True Christianity* and rivaled that of the German Bible and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (no mean feat for a twenty-two year-old student!).

In that same year (1606), he accepted the Duke of Coburg's offer of a professorship at the Coburg Gymnasium (holding weekly theological disputations) and the superintendancy of Heldburg (having episcopal supervision of 26 clergymen), though he first completed a doctorate at Jena (at the Duke's expense) before assuming his new role.

In 1616, he became a professor at Jena and there completed his *Theologici Loci* (9 vols.; over 2800 pp.; begun in 1610, finished in 1621; popularized the addition of an explanation of the *use* [*usus*] of each doctrine after it was explained; contains extensive discussion of causes and goal and means of salvation; see Lund, *Documents*, p. 221,223-225), which was perhaps the greatest work of post-confessional Lutheran Orthodox theology and ranks in quality with the works of Martin Luther and Martin Chemnitz (who

authored the Formula of Concord). He celebrated the completion of this massive work on Feb. 25, 1621 with a dinner party at his house, to which he invited the Jena faculty.

Gerhard also contributed to the most important early Lutheran exegetical work (his *Harmoniae Chemnitio-Lyserianae continuatio* was published in 1626-1627) and also offered the first patrology (guide to early Christian writers and the literature they produced).

Gerhard was married twice (in 1608 to a girl of 14, who died in 1611; in 1614 to a woman who bore him ten children, all four boys being named Johann but given different middle names).

Gerhard died Aug. 20, 1637.

*A Life of John Gerhard* was produced by Erdmann Rudolph Fischer (Eng. tr. available from Repristination Press) and is interesting not only as a way for the modern reader to experience and understand ecclesiastical and theological life in the seventeenth century, but also because it helped to form a picture of what a Protestant saint might look like and was influential on later Lutheran writers.