



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

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled.

My Lord, fill it.

I am weak in the faith;  
strengthen me.

I am cold in love;

warm me and make me fervent that my love may go out to my neighbor.

I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust wholly in you. O Lord,

help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you.

In you I have sealed the treasures of all I have.

- I am poor; you are rich and didst come to be merciful to the poor.
- I am a sinner; you are upright.
- With me there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness.

Therefore I will remain with you,  
of whom

I can receive,

but to whom

I may not give.

Amen.

--Martin Luther (1483-1546)

### **Week #6a: Johann Arndt as a Precursor of Lutheran Pietism**

Johann Arndt was born on Dec. 27, 1555, the son of a Lutheran pastor. At the time of Arndt's birth, Lutherans were in the process of trying to define their beliefs (following the death of Luther in 1546) and arrive at agreed formulations that could

- put an end to the internal disputes and divisions that threatened to undermine the emerging Lutheran movement and
- provide a positive basis for institutions to emerge that had a peculiarly Lutheran character (i.e. how could one have a Lutheran university or a Lutheran church if no one could agree on what being a Lutheran actually meant).

*The Struggle to Define What Lutherans Believed: Early Controversies over Grace, Works and Church Practices*

The first major confessional works of the Lutheran church were

- the Augsburg Confession (1530)
- the Apology for the Augsburg Confession (1530)
- The Smalcald Articles (1538)

Luther's successor **Philip Melancthon** (1520-1575) wished to revise the Augsburg Confession so as to allow for a greater diversity of interpretations. This was in part because

- he was an ecumenically minded humanist who had a detailed knowledge of the Church Fathers and wanted to find a position (on the basis of Scripture and the consensus of the Fathers) that could include most Protestants (excluding the not-so-ecumenically inclined Anabaptists).
- the Protestant military forces had been defeated in 1547 and some concessions had to be made to the Emperor concerning the toleration of Catholic practices. (The final settlement, the Religious Peace of Augsburg, was signed only in 1555, the year in which Arndt was born.)

Melancthon's rationale for this conciliatory approach was that certain traditional rites and ceremonies were not in conflict with the fundamental Lutheran teaching about justification, good works, law and gospel and so could be retained without harm, since these rites were indifferent matters (*adiaphora*), i.e. traditional church practices that were neither expressly commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God.

#### The Adiaphorist Controversy

Melancthon was opposed by **Matthias Flacius Illyricus** (1520-1575; professor of Hebrew at the University of Wittenberg) and Luther's old friend **Nikolaus von Amsdorff** (1483-1565; bishop of Naumburg-Zeitz), who fled to Magdeburg in northern Germany and led the resistance to Melancthon and his followers.

- Gnesio-Lutheranism=wanting to preserve an older, "genuine Lutheranism," which they felt was being compromised by Melancthon.

The Gnesio-Lutherans argued that yielding to the demands of enemies under pressure or in the face of persecution would

- confuse simple believers,
- undermine resistance to papism and tyranny and
- discourage the confession of the true faith, leading to a decline into idolatry and superstition).

Thus, even if these traditional church practices were indifferent matters, still in the time of persecution, permitting such things could only have a negative effect.

Melancthon's supporters responded that it was foolish to think that inessential rites could ever endanger our Christian liberty, i.e. the fundamental freedom that we have in Christ.

#### The Majorist Controversy

There followed a number of rather bitter controversies about

- whether human beings can in some manner cooperate with God in their salvation (synergism) and
- whether works of obedience must be performed in order for a person to be saved.
  - Furthermore, how are such works of obedience to be related to the Law?

Drawing upon the Church Fathers, **Melanchthon** had argued that justification is to be distinguished from good works but not diametrically opposed to good works, for where justification is truly found, there good works will also necessarily be present.

- Criticized by Amsdorff, Melanchthon admitted that he had introduced the notion of necessity rather incautiously.

One of Melanchthon's colleagues at the University of Wittenberg, **Georg Major** (1502-1574), who had also been criticized by Amsdorff, opposed what he saw as the antinomianism of Amsdorff and the Gnesio-Lutherans: If one teaches that justification has no intrinsic connection with the life of new obedience and that after justification the Christian has no need to seek guidance from the Law of God, only complacency and immorality will result.

- **Major** therefore argued that a true and living faith cannot exist where there is no evidence of its fruits (=the good works that arise from the new obedience that follows conversion).
- **Amsdorff** responded that good works could actually be detrimental to our salvation since they could lead us to trust in our own work rather than looking to God.

### The Synergist Controversy

This was followed by some rather complicated disputes about how one should understand the nature and effects of original sin and predestination and how one could understand the role of the human will in salvation.

- The Gnesio-Lutherans argued that if the biblical language about slavery to sin and subjection to death is to be taken seriously, one must hold that original sin makes the will resistant to God and so we must look to the action of divine predestination and calling to understand how the will of sinful human beings is turned to God.
- Melanchthon's followers, influenced by the rather fuzzy but optimistic teaching of the Greek Fathers on free will, held that the will is drawn willingly to God and thus human beings are to blame if they are not saved. Thus, they argued, original sin had weakened the power of the will but not to the extent that the capacity to accept or reject the divine offer of grace was lost. Therefore in a limited sense one can regard the will as a cause of our salvation along with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

### Other Controversies

Melanchthon's followers were somewhat sympathetic to Calvinism, which was beginning to emerge as a force in its own right in certain parts of Germany and some theologians had gone over to the Reformed movement wholeheartedly (e.g. Zacharias Ursinus, who was responsible for the development of the Heidelberg Catechism).

- There was conflict between those sympathetic and unsympathetic to Reformed thought about how Christ's humanity should be viewed, particular in regard to the way that this is present to the believer who receives the Lord's Supper (we'll come back to this in talking about Calvin).
- Both the Gnesio-Lutherans and Melanchthon's followers (Philippists) rejected the view of **Andreas Osiander**, who taught that justification was not just the declaration of the forgiveness of sins based upon the imputation of Christ's alien

righteousness. Also (and perhaps even more importantly), Osiander argued, Christ enters the justified sinner and by this union gradually causes the sinner to become righteous, so that the sinner is infused with righteousness in virtue of his union with Christ. The way this doctrine was stated made it look much like the old pre-Reformation Catholic view of justification, in which the idea of being *reckoned righteous* was underemphasized and our righteousness and Christ's righteousness were run together, blurring the lines separating justification and sanctification.

### Resolving Differences: The Formula of Concord

These controversies were largely settled with the production of the Formula of Concord by **Jakob Andreae** (b. 1528) and **Martin Chemnitz** (1522-1586) in 1577 and its inclusion (as authoritative) with the other Luther confessions in the Book of Concord in 1580. This leaned toward the Gnesio-Lutheran position but avoided some of its more extreme positions.

### Lutheran Orthodox Theology and Protestant Scholasticism

Melanchthon in his *Loci communes* had used the traditional medieval method of systematically discussing the main points of Christian doctrine on a topic-by-topic basis according to a traditional order (e.g., justification, sanctification, church, baptism, etc.). As discussions within the Lutheran community became more intense and were carried on by university-based theologians, the analytic tools of late medieval Aristotelian philosophy, adapted to suit the Christian faith, were increasingly employed.

- This scholastic philosophy was helpful in that it could help disputants identify the significant points at issue in a discussion (rather than just talking past each other).
- In the context of the disputation system taught in universities from the middle ages to the early modern period, scholastic theology could nonetheless be used as a weapon for attacking fine points in an opponent's argument and thus could be seen as adversarial (a *theologia spinosa* = a prickly theology that stabs and hurts all that come in contact with it, as Spener once put it), more concerned with assent to correct doctrine than in saving faith, and detached from the problems and interests of ordinary believers.

### *The Need for a Lutheran Devotional Literature, Which Rested Upon a Peculiarly Lutheran Understanding of How One is Reconciled to God*

Although Lutheran orthodoxy was certainly not indifferent to pastoral concerns—for example, some orthodox theologians wrote simple catechisms to teach the truths of the faith to children, encouraged the use of confession to console the doubting and saw good preaching as essential to the health of the church—there was a gap that needed to be supplied in terms of German-language hymns and practical devotional literature for the average parishioner that could help people

- engage in self-examination before confession,
- understand
  - what gospel repentance is and what it involves,
  - how one should pray,
  - how one might avoid falling into sin when tempted

- how one might pursue a more consistently Christian life in one's practical affairs (work, family, treatment of servants, etc.)

Some useful devotional works were published by

- Stephen Praetorius (1536; Arndt published an edition of Praetorius' shorter writings in 1622 under the title *Von der gülden Zeit*),
- Martin Moller (1546-1606) and
- Philip Nicolai (1556-1608).

These writers appropriated language from popular medieval German mystical texts about

- love for Christ,
- spiritual rebirth (new birth from on high) and the joyful experience of union with Christ and
- the holy living which follows from faith in Christ
- the distinction between true and false repentance and the nature of true sorrow for sin and compunction (i.e. being pierced to the heart at the recognition of one's sins as offences against God).

and adapted these for a contemporary Lutheran ecclesiastical setting.

This became an accepted, if increasingly controversial, practice within early Lutheran devotional literature.

- On the one hand, Luther had himself recommended several medieval mystical works, including the *Theologia deutsch*, Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and the sermons of Johann Tauler.
- On the other hand, given the distance separating late medieval theology from Lutheran orthodoxy, there was always a concern that this process of adaptation might backfire and adapt simple Lutheran laypeople back to the dubious medieval views whose bondage they had only recently escaped.

The more subjective, affective character of this literature can be appreciated by looking at the hymn of Philip Nicolai, "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (from his 1599 *Mirror of Joy of Eternal Life*; tr. in Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, p. 272), which became quite popular and was often sung at weddings or by those gathered around a family member's deathbed.

In conclusion, Arndt pastored and wrote for a church that had

- had trouble negotiating the boundaries of its identity and
- found common ground apart from the polemics by trying to adapt late medieval mystical themes to a Lutheran setting.

### Life of Johann Arndt

Arndt's father died when Arndt was 10 (1565), plunging the family into economic hardship. At 20 (or 22), Arndt went to Helmstedt to study medicine at the university there. He became ill and subsequently gave up his plan for a medical career and began to read theology and devotional and mystical literature, studying in Wittenberg, Strasbourg

and Basel and then served as a schoolteacher. By 1583 he was ordained and served as a deacon at Ballenstedt and married Anna Wagner (a happy yet childless marriage that lasted 38 years). In 1584, Arndt was the pastor in the village of Badeborn and then later in the nearby town of Quedlinburg. Arndt opposed the Duke by refusing to omit the rite of exorcism before baptism (a traditional practice of the Western church which Lutherans had retained but was rejected by those inclined toward Calvinism). In 1596, in response to Calvinist iconoclasm (avoidance and destruction of images), he published a defense of the use of images in Christian devotion. He moved in 1599 to Braunschweig (where he again had to deal with the political machinations of the Duke) and in 1609 to Eisleben, before being appointed General Superintendent of Celle in 1611. He died in 1621.

### Works of Arndt

Arndt began by publishing a number of editions of classic devotional works, often adding an introduction that opposed polemics and urged greater attention to the practice of the Christian life.

- 1597—reprints Luther's 1518 edition of the *Theologia deutsch*
- 1605--reprint of the above plus Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*
- 1605—German version of Johann Staupitz' *On the Love of God*
- 1621—edition of Johann Tauler's sermons

Arndt is best known for his treatise *Wahres Christentum (True Christianity)*, the first book of which appeared in 1605.

- Responding to criticisms of the work (including that it deviated from Lutheran orthodoxy), Arndt revised it and republished it in 1606 (being more careful in the language he used in the work; switching registers and the language used is always a problem when writing for a general audience, rather than for university-based theologians).
- In 1610, the first book was again republished together with three further books (Bks. II-IV).
- Due to its great popularity, the book went through 20 editions prior to Arndt's death in 1621.
- After his death, it was reprinted over 125 times prior to 1800, normally with two additional books added.
  - Book V includes Arndt's tracts *On True Faith and a Holy Life*, *On the Union of the Faithful with Jesus Christ*, *Our Head*, and *On the Holy Trinity*.
  - Book VI consists of his replies to his critics, trying to resolve misunderstandings, defending the agreement of the language he used with the Lutheran Confessions.
  - Some editions printed after Arndt's death also include his *Informatorium biblicum* (1623; a posthumous compilation of Arndt's unpublished writings by Melchior Breler), which discusses how to approach and understand the Bible, as well as his two spiritual testaments.

### *Structure and Themes Discussed in Arndt's True Christianity*

Bk. I (The Book of Scripture) is perhaps the most interesting and original – what is said in the Bible about the image of God and its loss and recovery (important organizing

principle in *True Christianity*—a Lutheran precursor of the Neo-Calvinist concept of worldview)

Bk. II (The Book of the Life of Christ)—medical metaphors—Christ as the doctor who heals the disease of sin and provides the example of godly life

Bk. III (The Book of Conscience)—describes the indwelling of Christ and how the Christian can come to experience this.

Bk. IV (The Book of Nature)—meditations on the six days of creation, showing that knowledge of God could be derived from nature (influenced to some extent by the writings of the medieval mystic Paracelsus).

In these books, significant use is sometimes made of late medieval authors, whose works are generally adapted for Arndt's Lutheran setting and used as witnesses (*Zeugen*) to support the account of Christian life and spirituality that Arndt's wing of the Lutheran tradition endorsed. Arndt's sympathy for these writers also shows an optimism about

- discerning God's contemporary action (contrast Luther's theology of the Cross, as expressed at the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation);
- subjectively experiencing union with Christ in a relatively unmediated way (as opposed to the forensic idea of being declared righteous);
- the connection between faith and the works of love that issue from faith as its fruit;
- the potential for spiritual growth (=the possibility of greater holiness) even within this present life (compare Luther's emphasis upon *simul iustus et peccator* "at once righteous and a sinner").

Arndt was also known for his

- prayer book, *A Paradise Garden Full of Christian Virtues* (1612; still valuable);
- Postills on the Gospels (1615-1616) (postill [*postilla*]=a collection of sermons based upon the church year), which includes a fine sermon on the Lord's Supper, an English translation of which has been recently reprinted in Warren M. Ojala, *By Way of the Cross*);
- Catechetical sermons (1616);
- *An Exposition of the Whole Psalter of David* (1617), a minor work

Note the catechetical focus: the Psalms, the Gospel readings of the church year, the catechism, and a structured introduction to personal prayer for the more devout.

#### Early Favorable Reception of Arndt's Work

- The need to show clearly how Christian belief actually affected the way one lived was made all the more necessary by the spiritual and moral complacency of many church members in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (see Lund's article)
- Arndt's concern about the moral and spiritual deterioration of society and the relative failure of the Lutheran church to adequately provide for the moral needs of its ordinary members later came to be seen as prophetic.

- The Thirty Years War (1618-1648), which was a series of vicious religious battles between Catholics and Protestants (largely in Germany and frequently involving mercenaries who ravaged the conquered cities and their civilian population).
  - The result was impossibly high war taxes; scorched fields; cities in ruins; widespread death from starvation, malnutrition and plague (around 35% of the urban population and 40% of the rural population in Germany); and even cannibalism.
  - The social order largely collapsed and the Church lacked the resources to deal with the situation. (See the account of J.V. Andreae in Lund, *Documents from the History of Lutheranism*, pp. 177-179, who concludes by echoing Arndt's concerns.)
  - It was questioned whether the situation at hand was a judgment from God, whether the end of the world was at hand, and whether there was really any possibility at all for social or ecclesiastical renewal. Arndt's concern seemed prophetic and his prescription (the confession of sinfulness and seeking personal spiritual renewal and the revitalization of popular piety throughout the land) seemed compelling.

#### The Later Reception of Arndt's Work

- Up until the end of the nineteenth century, Arndt was perhaps the most popular devotional writer in Protestant northern Europe and was even more widely read than Luther, *True Christianity* often being the only book beside the Bible that was owned by German immigrants to the USA and other countries. Between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century, his works were translated into Latin, Dutch, English, French, Russian and a number of languages.
- When the wave of Pietism which had swept over northern Europe in the 1830's to 1860's came under attack from the 1880's onward by German liberal scholars like Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack and by German and Scandinavian Neoorthodox theologians like Karl Barth and Anders Nygren, Arndt was also criticized since he was seen as a proto-Pietist and was thus held responsible for the subsequent sins of the Pietist movement ("mysticism"=subjectivism, emotionalism, excessive introspection, etc.).