



O Faithful God, Thanks Be to Thee

Text: Nikolaus Selnecker (1532-1592)

Tune: Louis Bourgeois (1510-1561)

Our Confession and Absolution hymns take on two separate characters. Some hymns focus more on the aspect of what we confess (e.g., “Lord, to Thee I Make Confession,” “Lord Jesus, Think on Me,” etc.). Others make their focus the absolution itself. This hymn, “O Faithful God, Thanks Be to Thee” is one of those hymns. It makes its sole focus the joy that springs from the one whose sins are forgiven.



Nikolaus Selnecker

This hymn was written by Nikolaus Selnecker, who has written several other well-known hymns (“Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide,” “Let Me Be Thine Forever”). Selnecker was born December 5, 1532 in Hersbruck. While he was attending school in Nürnberg he also served as organist at the chapel in the Kaiserburg, where he attracted the interest of King Ferdinand and the royal singers. He eventually graduated from Wittenberg in 1554. While studying at Wittenberg, he was one of Melanchthon’s favorite students. He was ordained in 1558 and was appointed to the Saxon court. While there, the Calvinist influence was rising, especially in regards to the disbelief of the presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper. However, in the Court Selnecker was able to stop their influence, since he was a strict Lutheran, unlike his teacher, Melanchthon. In 1564, after several years of theological battle with the Calvinists, they won, and Selnecker was asked to relocate. In March 1565 he took up a teaching position in theology at the University of Jena. However, while at Jena he was suspected of holding Calvinist beliefs

because of his associations with Melanchthon, who was compromising the Lutheran beliefs to create peace with the Calvinists. This created great tension there, and he stayed only three years. After Jena, Selnecker went to Leipzig and taught theology at the University, served as Pastor at St. Thomas Church (the same church where, a little more than a century later, J.S. Bach would take up the post of Kantor and produce some of his greatest work), and was appointed as Superintendent of Leipzig. In 1574, after several years of quiet work, a bitter doctrinal dispute over the Lord’s Supper arose in Leipzig. Selnecker fought for the Biblical teaching concerning the Real Presence, and teamed with Martin Chemnitz and Jakob Andrae to write the Formula of Concord in 1577. After the theological debates had calmed down, Selnecker devoted his time to growing the Motet Choir at St. Thomas, the same choir that would later become Bach’s choir. Unfortunately, after the Elector died, his son, a Calvinist, dismissed Selnecker. However, that son’s reign was short and Selnecker returned to Leipzig. Despite this, his health was too poor for him to work, and he died there May 24, 1592. During his lifetime he wrote approximately 150 hymns and over 175 theological works. He is remembered as one of the champions of pure Lutheran doctrine.

“O Faithful God, Thanks Be to Thee” was first published in 1572 in a volume entitled *Drey Predigten* (Three Sermons). This collection of sermons by Selnecker and Chemnitz also contained six hymns, one for each Chief Part of Luther’s Small Catechism. Selnecker authored this hymn for the Fifth Chief Part, the Office of the Keys and Confession. He titled it, “How one may find comfort in the blessed absolution.” This title is extremely appropriate, as each stanza builds on the previous one to thank God for the gift He has given in Holy Absolution. Stanza one calls this word of forgiveness a way that God blesses both soul and body. This absolution, spoken by Christ’s servant, the Pastor (st. 2), is only possible because of His Blood which “dost heal our smart” (*smart* is an archaic word for pain or injury) (st. 3). Finally, stanza four implores that the Holy Spirit would remain with us “till life is spent” in the Word and Sacraments to preserve us in the faith and hold the peace of Absolution ever before our eyes.