

# **An Examination of the Pietistic Content of Johann Friedrich Stark's *Tägliches Hand-Buch, in guten und bösen Tagen,* Stark's *Gebet-Buch***

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Pietism arose in the latter half of the seventeenth century as a reaction to the social, political and religious conditions of the time. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) had exhausted the Lutheran Church, Germany and much of Europe. Although some of the greatest Lutheran theologians—Gerhardt, Quenstedt, Hollaz etc.—were active at this time, people had grown tired of religious schism and the political strife which accompanied it. Many felt it was time for a change. They felt it was time to move away from theoretical doctrines to practical actions. It was time to put an end to polemics and embrace religious union. It was time for religion to move from the head to the heart.

In 1675, a pastor from Frankfurt am Main named Philipp Jacob Spener published a book entitled *Pia Desideria*. In this book Spener introduced ways to curb the moral indifference which had been growing among the laity. He suggested ways of making religion practical instead of merely theoretical. He encouraged personal Bible study and a pious lifestyle. Whether he had intended it or not Philipp Spener became the father of a new age, the Age of Pietism.

Pietism brought a variety of changes to the Lutheran Church—some positive and some negative. In a positive way Spener's followers 1) worked hard to apply God's Word in a practical way to the everyday life of the ordinary lay person. Because Pietists held a deep reverence for the Scriptures, they 1) encouraged others to study the Bible more diligently in personal devotions. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of Pietism was 3) the zeal for mission outreach.

But in spite of their deep respect for the Holy Scriptures, Pietists fell prey to a number of errors. Although Pietists valued personal Bible study, they 1) were unconcerned with identifying and defending biblical doctrine. Many felt comfortable communing openly with Reformed sects and even Catholics. Similarly they 2) overemphasized the importance of heart faith and religious feeling. In this way they paved the way for the modern "Deeds not Creeds" philosophy. Pietists often 3) demanded visible evidence of regeneration. In general Pietists 4) downplayed the importance of the Means of Grace. Some denied the power of baptism and therefore denied infant baptism. Instead of viewing the Lord's Supper as a gift from God, Pietists emphasized one's own worthiness when accepting the sacrament. Communion attendance declined because of the elusive emotional high necessary for receiving Christ's body and blood. Strong Pietists 5) tended to view themselves as the real church within the larger unfaithful church. Some Pietists 6) fell into millennialism. They 7) tended to view justification as a process of *Bußkampf*, *Durchbruch*, and *Wiedergeburt*. In a legalistic way Pietists 8) severely limited Christian freedom by virtually denying adiaphora. Finally Pietists 9) attacked the very foundation of the Christian faith by downplaying *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide* and instead focusing on one's life of sanctification.

Johann Friedrich Stark, who also served as a pastor in Frankfurt am Main, first published his *Gebet-Buch* in 1728—about fifty years after Spener wrote *Pia Desideria*. His work became a classic almost immediately. The preface to the edition used for this paper accurately boasts, "*Johann Friedrich Stark ... hat in guten und bösen Tagen schon viele tausend Seelen erquickt und getröstet, und ihnen das letzte Stündlein zu einem Freudenstündlein gemacht, so daß es weitem Empfehlung nicht mehr bedarf. Es ist ... von vielen Reichen und Armen nebst der heiligen Schrift als das Haupt- und Hausbuch betrachtet*" (5). This work has also endured as a familiar classic. The preface continues, "*Du hast also hier, mein lieber christlicher Leser, deinen alten Starken, der schon deine Ur- und Großeltern in mancher betrübten Stunde erquickt*" (6).

Stark intended that lay people read his handbook every day. He divided his book into four main sections: 1) *Für Gesunde*. The devotions in this section focus on daily Christian living.

There are morning and evening devotions, hymns and prayers which one may use on each day of the week. The remaining three sections contain meditations for specific occasions (e.g., devotions on behalf of parents, devotions concerning troubled consciences, devotions in times of inclement weather); 2) *Für Betrüübte*, 3) *Für Kranke* 4) *Für Sterbende*. All of these devotions include a Bible verse, encouragement based on that Scripture verse, a prayer and an appropriate hymn.

Since the Pietists were uninterested in defining their exact doctrinal position, various individuals and groups held to various degrees of Pietistic philosophy. Stark's *Gebet-Buch* also demonstrates some differences from the "normal" set of Pietistic doctrine identified above. This paper seeks to identify, discuss and evaluate the Pietistic elements contained in Stark's *Gebet-Buch*.

In a positive way Stark displays a deep reverence for Scripture and encourages his readers to make more diligent use of God's Word in daily meditation. The reader easily observes this reverence and encouragement throughout the entire book. For instance in Sunday's evening prayer Stark writes, "*Du hast meine Seele gespeiset mit dem Brot des Lebens, und mir aus der lebendigen Quelle zu trinken gegeben*" (28).

Stark also radiates a reverence for Scripture through all kinds of biblical references and allusions. He continues his Sunday evening prayer, "*Dein Wort ist meinem Munde süßer gewesen, denn Honig und Honigseim. Ach! laß dein Wort Zeit meines Lebens ein Licht auf meinen Wegen bleiben*" (28). Stark's prayers often display a comfortable familiarity with the Psalms, other Old Testament accounts and portions of the life of Christ and the apostles. He often makes brief, subtle allusions to a particular portion of Scripture and expects the reader to follow and understand his point.

Stark departs from typical Pietistic doctrine by ascribing divine power to baptism. He correctly recognizes that "*wir haben in der heiligen Taufe erlangt: 1. die Kindschaft bei Gott; ... 2. die Gerechtigkeit Jesu Christi; ... 3. die Einwohnung des heiligen Geistes, ... 4. auch die ewige Seligkeit*" (59). Stark further confesses baptism's permanent power and value. In a vivid prayer he exclaims, "*O welche Herrlichkeit hast du mir in der heiligen Taufe mitgeteilt, da du mich zu deinem Kinde angenommen hast! Rühmen Menschen viel ihre Glückseligkeit, die sie erlangen durch ihre hohe Geburt, Besizung hoher Ehrenstellen, großen Reichthums, ansehnlicher Güter; siehe, so achte ich meine Glückseligkeit viel größer, nämlich diese, daß ich dein Kind bin; denn sind wir Kinder, so sind wir auch Erben, nämlich Gottes Erben und Miterben Christi*" (60).

By God's grace Stark clearly advocates infant baptism and also confesses its permanent power and value. In a prayer thanking God for godly parents he says, "*War meiner Eltern erste Sorge nach meiner leiblichen Geburt, daß ich, o mein himmlischer Vater! durch die heilige Taufe in deine Arme gelegt wurde, darin du mir den heiligen Geist zum Pfand meiner Kindschaft und himmlischen Erbes gegeben, so laß diesen guten Geist mich immerdar leiten und führen*" (172-173).

Perhaps Stark's most striking strength is the practicality of his devotions, prayers and hymns. The author has tailored devotions for many specific situations in life. There are devotions for preparing to go to church, asking God for gentleness, asking to bless children, asking to bless parents, requesting blessing while traveling abroad, asking for a stronger faith, asking to heal a troubled conscience, asking to see the usefulness of sickness, and asking for a quiet, peaceful death.

Not only is there a wide variety of devotions which may serve various times of life, but the wording of these meditations makes it easy to remember and apply throughout the day. For instance Stark wrote a prayer for the lay workman as he prepared for his work week on Monday morning. He says, “*Ich lege meine Kleider an, Herr Jesu! kleide mich mit dem Rock deiner Gerechtigkeit. Ich wasche meine Hände, Herr Jesu! wasche mich mit deinem heiligen Blut von allen meinen Sünden*” (38-39). Later Stark encourages the blue collar worker to remember what is truly important. “*Und weil es nicht liegt an unserm Rennen und Laufen zur Arbeit, soll er 3. sonderlich Gott um seinen Segen anrufen, oder auch mitten unter der Arbeit an Gott denken, und mit Gebet die Arbeit anfangen und vollenden*” (40-41). Stark knew his flock. He knew what kinds of problems they faced and he tried to apply the Scriptures to their individual needs.

We have examined some of Stark’s strengths; unfortunately it is also necessary to point out some weaknesses.

Although Stark acknowledges the power and value of baptism, he has a tendency to turn both of the sacraments into law. In one line he says that baptism gives the gift of eternal life, but then in the next sentence he urges the reader to find comfort and assurance of this gift within his own sanctified life. After he listed the blessings baptism gives, Stark adds this warning: “*Aber sehe sich auch vor, 1. daß er die empfangene Gnade nicht wiederum verliere; 2. daß er würdiglich wandle in seinem Beruf; 3. daß er die Welt nicht wiederum lieb gewinne, oder mit Unwiedergeborenen und Weltkindern vorsätzlich sündige, und sich ihnen nicht gleich stelle; 4. daß er seinem himmlischen Vater gehorsam sei, wie die lieben Kinder, daß er dem Herrn Jesu nachfolge, und des heiligen Geistes Treib nicht widerstrebe. So ist er gewiss, daß er den dreieinigen Gottes Liebe, Gnade, Hülfe und Beistand wird genießen hie in der Zeit, und auch dort in der Ewigkeit*” (59-60).

It is difficult to find a passage in *Tägliches Hand-Buch* concerning the reception of the Lord’s Supper which cannot be understood in an orthodox manner. However the context of certain passages sometimes suggests a law oriented attitude toward the means of grace and Holy Communion in particular. In a devotion which asks God to kindle love within the heart of a believer Stark says, “*Die Liebe ist das Band, welches Gott und unser Herz, aber auch uns und unsers Nächsten Herz auf’s Genaueste verbindet*” (87). He then lists six things which a believer must do (without any emphasis on what God has done) to make sure that love remains and grows in his heart. One of the items he lists is this: “*Er muß auch die Mittel nicht verachten, dadurch Gottes Liebe in ihm kann angefangen und vermehrt werden, nämlich: die andächtige Anhörung und Betrachtung des Wortes Gottes, und den würdigen Gebrauch des heiligen Abendmahls*” (88). A reader who assumes a gospel centered message may understand this passage in a good way. However, the fuller context does not imply a gospel centered message.

One positive aspect of Pietism which is lacking within Stark’s *Gebet-Buch* is the zeal for mission work and reaching out to the lost. The devotions, prayers and hymns all center on the spiritual life of the Christian reader and ignore unbelievers. Whenever Stark does mention the ungodly children of the world, he is usually warning his reader to avoid them rather than urging Christians to reach out to unbelievers with the gospel. Even the devotion on the Pentecost account (482-483) focused entirely on spiritual growth within the heart of the reader and failed even to mention mission work.

Along with other “typical” Pietists, Stark fell into the trap of trying to sort out which people were the real Christians, *die wahre Kinder Gottes*, and which were really unbelievers inside the visible Christian church. He suggested that one could distinguish between true Christians and hypocrites by taking a close look at their sanctified (or unsanctified) lives.

*“Weltkinder achten das gepredigte Wort nicht, und wenn man sie Montags fragen wollte: was ihnen ihr Kirchgang genutzt, was sie gehört, was sie gelernt? so wissen sie nichts; der Teufel hat das Wort sogleich wieder von ihren Herzen genommen, auf daß sie nicht glauben und selig werden, Luc. 8, V. 12. 4. Und wenn sie ja noch etwas wissen, so bringen sie es doch nicht in die Übung”* (32). He then goes on to say that true children of God behave entirely differently. When Stark makes statements like these, he is, of course, forgetting that each believer is *simul iustus et peccator*.

We have seen that Stark confuses law and gospel by turning God’s gospel in word and sacraments into law. He also unfortunately confuses law and gospel by laying down law in cases of adiaphora. In a devotion intended for use on Sunday after meditating on the divine word Stark talked about people who broke the New Testament sabbath. *“Weltkinder gehen, wenn sie noch viel thun, des Morgens zu dem Gottesdienste, Nachmittags aber zur Lust, auf die Jagd, zum Spiel, zum sündlichen Vergnügen, da sie hernach, wo nicht berauscht, doch mit eitlen Gedanken, sündlichen Zerstreungen und weltlichen Thorheiten nach Hause kommen”* (31-32). In a devotion praying for blessing while traveling Stark admits that there may be legitimate reasons to leave home. However, he condemns pleasure trips. *“Von Hause zu reisen, können einen gläubigen Christen vielerlei Ursachen antreiben, theils die Berufsgeschäfte, theils die Liebe des Nächsten, theils der Zustand der Gesundheit; denn Üppigkeits- und Wolluftsreisen stehen einem wahren Kinde Gottes nicht an”* (185). In this way Stark harms Christian consciences by limiting Christian freedom.

Some of Stark’s overemphasis on sanctification certainly came from a false idea of conversion and justification. Instead of seeing that for Jesus’ sake God justifies mankind instantaneously by divine decree, Stark and the Pietists viewed conversion as a process. They confused justification and sanctification. Stark writes, *“Wenn ein Mensch in seinem Christenthum und in seiner Bekehrung hat einen guten Anfang gemacht, daß er sich von äußerlichen groben Sünden gereinigt, als da sind: Fluchen, Entheiligung des Sabbaths, Üppigkeit, Leichtfertigkeit, Unrechtigkeit, Spielen, Welt-Gesellschaften, so muß er bedacht sein, auch das Inwendige zu reinigen, sonderlich von Stolz, Neid, Zorn, Hass und Nachgier, und sich der Sanftmuth beflleißigen”* (116-117). This teaching is dangerous because it opposes Scripture. It places the responsibility for conversion on the sinner instead of on God. How can one ever be certain of salvation if he cannot even be certain of his own conversion? This hymn stanza (to the melody of *“O Gott, du frommer Gott!”*) sums up the Pietistic view of conversion: *“Hörst du aus Gottes Wort die wahre Buße lehren so thu’ auch wahre Buss, fang an, dich zu bekehren, und werd ein neuer Mensch; ach! bleib nicht, wer du bist, ja, ändre dich bei Zeit, und werd ein frommer Christ”* (36).

Because one’s own efforts toward conversion ultimately proved one’s own true faith, the Pietists and Stark demanded regeneration evidence. This evidence had to be visible so that others could know who the real Christians were. This hymn stanza (to the melody of *“Jesu! der du meine Seele”*) urges the reader to display his regeneration evidence. *“Also muß in dir vorgehen eine Herzens-Änderung, also muß man an dir sehen eine Lebens-Heiligung, daß Herz, Sinnen und Gebärden ganz an dir erneuert werden, daß sie Glaub und Lieb auszier, daß sie Gottes Geist regier”* (62).

This regeneration evidence is important not only for other observers but also for the individual himself. If a Pietist is concerned about his eternal salvation, he must examine his life of sanctification to reassure himself of his own conversion. (What a horrible doctrine!) Stark writes, *“Hat Gott ihnen nun Vergebung der Sünden durch den Mund seines Dieners widerfahren*

lassen, so trösten sie sich dessen, trachten aber 3. einen gnädigen Gott zu behalten, indem sie lassen den heiligen Geist regieren, sie befließigen sich eines christlichen Lebens, und beweisen solches auch in Reden, Worten und Werken, fliehen die Laster und vorigen sündlichen Gewohnheiten, alsdann wissen sie, daß sie in Leben und Sterben einen gnädigen Gott haben werden” (145).

All of the errors listed above attack *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide* in one way or another, but there seems to be a general pattern in *Tägliches HandBuch* which attacks this core of biblical doctrine more directly. This pattern consists of four parts: 1) Jesus is often portrayed as merely an example for pious living. 2) Stark seems hesitant to pray for the forgiveness of sins. 3) He is much more eager to pray for the Holy Spirit to sanctify his life. 4) There does not seem to be any solid, clear exposition on vicarious atonement.

In a devotion which speaks of following after Jesus, Stark encourages the reader to follow in our Savior’s footsteps (but he does not provide any gospel motivation for doing so). “*Er folgt sonderlich 3. dem Herrn Jesu, der uns hat ein Vorbild gelassen, daß wir sollen nachfolgen seinen Fußstapfen; die Fußstapfen Jesu aber sind: seine Demuth, Gehorsam, Geduld, Sanftmuth, Keuschheit, Freundlichkeit und Frömmigkeit. Hierin besteht die heilige und wahre Nachfolge*” (99).

In another section Stark discusses praying for spiritual blessings. He writes, “*Er bittet 2. absonderlich um geistliche Dinge, um den heiligen Geist, um ein frommes Herz, um das Reich Gottes, welches ist Gerechtigkeit, Friede und Freude in dem heiligen Geist, Röm. 14, V. 17. Er bittet um Erleuchtung, Wachsthum in dem Guten, Heiligung und die Gabe des heiligen Geistes, dieses ist das Vornehmste, was er von Gott bitten kann*” (45). He prays for all kinds of good spiritual blessings, but he omits the forgiveness of sins. It almost seems that one cannot be a true Christian if one commits sins that need to be forgiven. (Stark does pray for forgiveness more frequently later in his book.)

Although he seems unwilling to pray for forgiveness, Stark does pray that God would sanctify his life. “*O Jesu! heilige mich durch deine Gerechtigkeit, Verdienst und Blut ... Heilige mein Leben durch dein heiliges Wort. Heilige mein Herz, daß es immer mit guten Gedanken möge umgehen. Heilige meinen Mund, daß er nichts Unanständiges, Unchristliches und Böses möge reden. Heilige meinen Willen, damit ich das allein wolle und vollbringe, was dir gefällig ist*” (71-72).

Stark has the gift of vividly painting pictures in his prayers and in his meditations. Because of this gift the reader naturally looks for a beautiful, complete picture of Christ’s vicarious atonement. However, he does not find it. Once in a while Stark does come close to speaking of vicarious atonement. “*Rechne mir zu, was Jesus Christus, mein Heiland, für mich gethan; um Jesu willen sei mir armen Sünder gnädig*” (146). But these few statements leave the reader spiritually unsatisfied. Together these four points downplay *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide* because they minimize man’s sinfulness and the value of Jesus’ saving work.

Stark’s *Gebet-Buch* is useful for teaching the importance of a complete knowledge of the Scriptures. It can provide some good models for prayers. It teaches how to use Scripture references to illustrate points. It shows the importance of knowing a person’s spiritual needs and being able to apply God’s Word to those needs.

However, in many ways this book is like a beautiful mirage in the middle of a desert. This book may address the exact situations which people face in life. It may have some memorable devotions and beautiful prayers. But a soul which is spiritually thirsting needs more than this. A thirsty soul needs to hear about how Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins of the

whole world—including mine. A thirsty soul needs to hear about Christ’s vicarious atonement. A thirsty soul needs the gospel to motivate and empower him to lead a sanctified life. Stark at times comes close to meeting these needs. But the thirsty soul needs more.

### **Bibliography**

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