



C H A P T E R T W O



Prayer and the Man Himself

I thank God for Armin Gesswein. He was truly a man of God who listened to the voice of God, embraced the vision of God and responded to the call of God on his life. His vision for a revived Church has challenged me. His example, his writings and his prayers have touched me deeply. God be praised for such a life.

—Alvin J. VanderGriend,
Lighthouses of Prayer

Men are God's method. The Church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men. . . . The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but men. He does not anoint plans, but men—men of prayer.

—E.M. Bounds

Armin was unique. There are not many with the name, and even fewer with the winsome personality and infectious sense of humor. His monthly newsletter dated November 1996 is an engaging place to make his acquaintance.

I love Thanksgiving! Partly, I suppose, because I was born on Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1907, in Corning, Missouri, not far from the Missouri River. This year it happens to come on my birthday again. And because I'll be eighty-nine this time around I'm even more thankful.

My father was a Lutheran minister in Bellingham, Washington, when my mother learned she was three months pregnant. Initially the doctor told mother she had a tumor. She was worried, and went to another doctor who smiled and said, “You better keep that tumor!” Mother went to Milwaukee where she had grown up, thinking she would have a good hospital for my birth.

It was Thanksgiving Day when someone told Mother, “There’s a box social down the road a couple miles at one of our farmer’s homes; would you like to go?” She went and toward evening she had labor pains. They quickly hitched up the horses and I had my first buggy ride. We rode not to the hospital, but back to the parsonage, next to the lovely brick church in the heart of the town.

And then guess what? My father had to deliver me! There was a doctor in the little town, but he was somewhere delivering a girl. My father was nervous. As a Lutheran minister he always prayed out of a book. But Mother said, “You should have heard him that day. He learned quickly how to pray without the book!” Soon the doctor came, and said to Dad, “You did all right!” And I guess it was a benign tumor. That was my first Thanksgiving Day!

I’ve thought two things about that day: (1) It was Thanksgiving Day, and I love thanks-giving. It’s the one thing we can never overdo. I guess it is safe to say that I was born for thanks-giving. (2) Dad went into “free-praying” when he had to deliver me. So I think I was born for “free-praying.” I also love praying with prayer books—especially the Bible, my *real* Prayer Book.

Mother’s maiden name was Lydia Hilgendorf. While her sister Renata (Nettie) was there they asked her to suggest a name for me. She admired a young man in Milwaukee whose name was Armin. So I was named Armin. What a kind lady was our “Aunt Nettie.” I was the second

of six children, and we all grew up to hear from and admire and love our dear Aunt Nettie.

Virtually every piece of information Armin transmitted regarding his childhood is always sprinkled with joy and humor and the deep conviction that God was up to something in his own formation and development.

There is not a Scripture that says,
"Be sad." I looked for one but
I couldn't find one.
—Armin Gesswein

As a youth, he loved athletics, particularly baseball. He even tried out for the St. Louis Cardinals. Years later Armin declared, "God still talks to me in baseball language: 'Remember how you used to love baseball, and would rather play ball than eat? That's the way I want you to love and serve Me.' I understand that language." Eventually, he traded his baseball bat and gloves for a set of golf clubs, a game he enjoyed into his nineties. I watched him sink a thirty-foot putt for bogie in Norway at ninety-one years of age.

Although a Lutheran pastor, he came under conviction of sin and became convinced of his need for a Savior while listening to Paul Rader, a well-known Chicago radio preacher, declare, "What you need, poor troubled soul, is not some doctrine or creed or set of rites, you need to open your heart and receive the person of Christ into your heart."

That was the message that brought Armin to his knees. "Right there I said to myself, 'That's the way it is.' I received Christ as my Savior and Lord that day. I was born of the Spirit. Gone were my many doubts and my fears about sin. Like the pins going down when a bowler gets a strike, gone

were my fears of death, hell, guilt. I walked around almost singing to myself, 'Now I'm born again.' ”

Armin's ordination into Christian ministry was the next major event on record. His father recorded the event in his own handwriting.

On August 2, 1931, I was privileged to assist in the unique and epoch-making event which consecrated my son and two other LaPorte County young men for pastoral office.

We shall all talk about last Sunday's impressive evening service at St. John's many a time yet. And there is really much, so much to be said about it. Without fear of contradiction I can say, it was the happiest day and the most felicitous event that either St. John's or Trinity have had in all these six years, the first act of complete harmonious cooperation between the two churches. A new atmosphere is on tap, and the future augurs well. It is easy enough to see the guiding and directing hand of the "Shepherd and Bishop of our souls" in it all. To Him all praise and glory!

The Haystack Prayer Meeting

Several watershed events took place during Armin's first and only pastoral ministry in a Lutheran church on Long Island where he served as a young single pastor. The first event has been referred to as the "Haystack Prayer Meeting," perhaps Armin's first Upper Room experience:

Early in the ministry I had an experience which completely changed my understanding of prayer. What a transformation! I was called to start churches and had just discovered "prayer-meeting truth" in the book of Acts. So I started a prayer meeting—the first one I ever attended.

In came an elder Methodist one night. When he prayed, I detected something new. “I have never heard praying like that,” I said to myself. It was not only fervency—I had plenty of that. Heaven and earth got together at once when he prayed. There was a strange immediacy about it. The prayer and the answer were not far apart. He had it “in the bag!” being of optimistic faith. The Holy Spirit was right there, in action, giving him assurance of the answer even while he was praying. When I prayed, God was “way out there,” somewhere in the distance, listening. The answer, too, usually seemed off in the distance.

Eager to learn his secret, I went to see him one day. His name was Ambrose Whaley, and everyone called him “Uncle Am.” He was a retired blacksmith, a Methodist lay preacher. I soon came to the point: “Uncle Am, I would love to pray with you.” At once he arose, led me outside across the driveway into a red barn, up a ladder, into a haystack! There, in some old hay, lay two big Bibles. I prayed first, as I recall it. Poured out my heart, needs, burdens, wishes, aspirations, ambitions to God. Then he prayed—and there was “that difference” again. There, in that hay, on our knees, at the eyeball level, I said: “Uncle Am, what is it? . . . You have some kind of secret in praying. Would you mind sharing it with me?”

I was twenty-four, he was seventy-three, and with an eagle-look in his eyes, he said, “Young man, learn to plead the promises of God!”

That did it! Those nine words have echoed in my soul a thousand times since: “Young man, learn to plead the promises of God!” My praying has never been the same since. That word completely changed my understanding of prayer. It really revolutionized it. Mentally I “saw it” as soon as he said it. Saw what? Well—when I prayed there was fervency, ambition, etc. And make no mistake about

it, the Lord does not put a squelch on these either. But I lacked faith. Prayer is the key to heaven but faith unlocks the door. There must be faith. Where does that come from? From hearing the Word of God. Uncle Am would plead Scripture after Scripture, reminding Him of promise after promise, pleading these promises like a lawyer does his case, all along the Holy Spirit pouring in His assurance. This man knew the promises by the bushel. He did not seem to need those two Bibles in that hay. I soon learned that he was a mighty intercessor. He prayed clear through. He prayed through the Bible. He taught me the secret of intercessory praying. How can I ever thank God enough for leading me to such a prayer warrior?

What happened? With this discovery, God really gave me a new Bible! That day I learned how to make the Bible my prayer book. It gave me a new motivation for Bible study. I began to dig in. I would now search Scriptures . . . meditate . . . mark its many promises . . . memorize, memorize, memorize! There are thousands of promises for every need, burden, problem, situation.

“Young man, learn to plead the promises of God!”
These words keep echoing in me.

The Prayer Meeting

The next significant, life-changing moment in the young pastor’s ministry was the start of his corporate prayer meeting. Some of us have heard Armin tell this story dozens of times.

I saw the prayer meeting in the Bible. Jesus had them. The early Church had them. But we as good Lutherans didn’t have them. Now I agreed with Luther: “Whatever is truly biblical is truly Lutheran.” Since prayer meetings were in the Bible, I assumed they would be accepted. I arranged for a married couple in my congregation to host our first prayer meeting in their living room. I knew that

with them in attendance there would be at least three of us present. I arrived five minutes before the prayer meeting was to begin. It was just the three of us. As I was about to begin, another person arrived. I opened my Bible to Acts chapter 1 and showed them the prayer meeting in the Bible. I got on my knees, led in prayer, and to our amazement it lasted all of five minutes. But it was a beginning. The next week there were eight and it continued to grow. I had seen the prayer and healing services of Dr. A.B. Simpson in New York City and I wanted that same prayer power on our ministry. The more we prayed, the more bold I became.

I went to a man in town who raised worms. He was very poor and not very well educated. He smoked cigarettes. I told him, "I have come to your house today so you might receive Christ. I am going into the other room and I will kneel down and pray for you. When you're ready to receive Christ, let me know." It wasn't five minutes later that he came and stood at my side and said, "I am ready." He knelt down with me and he received Christ. He became one of the greatest prayer partners I ever had. He couldn't speak well, so instead of asking God to anoint the pastor, he would pray, "Lord, 'oint Pastor Gesswein." I got more out of his "oint" than you would ever imagine.

One day God said to me, "Armin, you need to pray more." That shook me.

I prayed a lot about that. I realized

I had not lived up to the light

I had received.

—Armin Gesswein

The Communion Service

The third and undoubtedly most dramatic learning experience in the young pastor's life took place at a communion service. Around the Lord's Table Armin first tasted revival; it was that day God called him to a life of revival-prayer. Once he got his first taste, he never wanted to settle for anything less.

Conviction of sin is the
hallmark of true revival.

—Armin Gesswein

We Lutherans always took communion seriously. But this one Sunday was categorically different. God convicted my heart over the sin within my congregation. People who came to church every Sunday had some of the worst reputations in town. They had been dishonest in their business dealings, prideful in their relationships and generally discrediting to the gospel of Christ.

On Sunday, the Lord's Supper had been prepared. It sat conspicuously on the communion table, front and center in the sanctuary. As I stood to preach I told the people with deep conviction and trembling in my voice, "Today I have a heavy heart. I am unable to serve us communion because of the obvious sin in our congregation. God would not be pleased with me or with you if we partook of the Lord's Supper in this condition. We are not ready to take the Lord's Supper. There is sin, even gross sin, in our church. God is a holy God and we must not come carelessly to His table. I call you to repent now from sin, to renounce it and to get right with God today. Then those who are ready will be allowed to receive from the Lord's Supper next Sunday."

You could have heard a pin drop. I knelt down in front of my chair. Others knelt in their pews. There was silence

and there was weeping. People stayed there a long time. People openly prayed and confessed sin, made restitution, got right with people from whom they were alienated. God visited us that day in our church at the communion table.

As I stepped out the door that day, I heard the Holy Spirit say to me, "Armin, revival is your ministry." From that moment on I have not looked back. I never wanted to settle for anything less.

His Wife

Within a year Armin Gesswein was in the thick of Norway's revival. It was there he met the love of his life, Reidun Gabrielsen, who lived in a city named Tromso, 100 miles north of the Arctic Circle. On November 3, 1937, he wrote the following letter to his parents explaining his new relationship:

My dear Mother and Dad,

The time has come for me to let you in on a precious little love story. It is the thrilling romance of one who went all the way to the Land of the Midnight Sun and there found his bride waiting, prepared by Him who alone can make true love.

I felt I loved Reidun almost from the first look. It was different. She seemed to have the face and the whole personality and character I had looked for all over the world. It seemed to me to be the very God-given counterpart for me. Almost at once others noticed that we fit together long before we went out of our way toward each other or even spoke to each other more than to any others. So rare is our relationship that even imagination fails at this point to say nothing of poor reason with its slow heavy processes. But now I must watch myself and use language chaste and choice, for the paragraphs can easily become longer.

I am staying with Reidun's family. Their home is on the second and third floors over the store. We are announcing our engagement this week. That's why I am writing you this letter.

The Norwegian custom is to give the rings at the time of public announcement of the engagement. They are the wedding rings so no special engagement ring is necessary. We like that because we love simplicity. It is to the public announcement of engagement that family and friends are invited for the evening. This will be done this coming Saturday night at their home.

Her father is not living, sorry to say. Died suddenly a few years ago. He was only a couple of years younger than you. What a marvelous man he was. I have heard him spoken well of all over Norway. A keen man. Immensely practical. A rare business person and remarkable Christian. It was a tremendous blow when the Lord took him so suddenly. The mother is living. She is so sweet. And there are seven children, four girls and three boys. Two of the girls are already married, one to a Lutheran preacher and the other to the Bishop's son in Oslo. Reidun is the third child of the family. She is now twenty-four years of age. Her birthday is August 18. She's a precious girl, rare indeed. An outstanding Christian with unusual insight into the Word and the things of God. And so practical. Since her father's death she has been head of the business. And of course, as you may guess, she is also a pretty girl.

I shall try not to describe it all here. Hope to send you a picture soon. I don't know just when the Lord will have us get married, perhaps not for many months yet. I have places to visit and I am busy in the Lord's work. The Lord will yet use her here in her family business. Her brother, Leiv, will be twenty-one and soon take charge of the business. She has another older brother

who is not a Christian, or shall I say not yet. A wonderful family. It is happy again to be in such a warm family circle pulsating with life. Perhaps next year the Lord will let us marry and then come to America together.

Reidun is writing a little letter in English for you. So you see, she knows a little English. She studied it two years in high school. You will love her, I know. Of course, you know she can't express her real thoughts in any full manner in our language. Not yet. But we thought it would be nice for her to write a line, however simple.

Now I must close. So much to do these days. Write me here. Having good meetings here. The Lord is blessing much.

Your loving son,
Armin

When Armin and his bride returned to the United States, he took a professorship at Gordon Divinity School on the East Coast and then at Fuller Theological Seminary on the West Coast. It was there that his Orange County Pastors' Prayer Fellowship in the greater Los Angeles area grew into a force to be reckoned with. He attracted the regular participation of Richard Halverson (chaplain of the U.S. Senate), Chuck Smith (pastor of Calvary Chapel), Harold Sala (president of the Guidelines ministry), Ted Engstrom (president of World Vision) and others. He has crisscrossed our nation for almost sixty years of itinerate ministry, consistently calling local churches to revival-prayer.

Ministry

Throughout his life Armin was himself mentored by select men of great stature. "I spent a lot of time with A.W. Tozer," he explained. "Whenever possible, we got together. I also drove

him around a lot. What times we had together—both in his south Chicago home and in prayer together under some tree at a C&MA camp meeting. As I recall, Tozer spent five hours in prayer entering into the Spirit's fullness and settled it all. . . . I believe it was his mother-in-law who sparked his inner plug on this."

A Gesswein favorite was George Mueller, who coincidentally also lived to be ninety-three years of age. Armin claimed to be mentored by Mueller's writings and by his lifestyle. In Mueller's own words,

I would wait on God hours every day. I live in the spirit of prayer. I pray as I walk, when I lie down, and when I rise. And the answers are always coming. Tens of thousands of times have my prayers been answered. When once I am persuaded that a thing is right, I go to praying for it till the end comes. I never give up. Thousands of souls have been saved in answer to my prayers. I shall meet tens of thousands of them in heaven. The great point in prayer is never to give up until the answer comes. I have been praying every day for fifty-two years for two men, sons of a friend of my youth. They are not answered yet, but they will be. How can it be otherwise? There is the unchanging promise of Jehovah, and on that I rest. The great fault of the children of God is, they do not continue in prayer; they do not go on praying. They do not persevere. If they desire anything for God's glory, they should pray until they get it.¹

Pastors' Prayer Fellowship

Armin loved his age. For him, being old was not a detriment in the slightest. Quite to the contrary, it gave him a platform of humor that endeared him to many an audience.

- “When I was younger they used to tell me, ‘You’re good looking’; now they say, ‘You’re looking goooooood.’ ”
- “People ask me, ‘What’s the secret of living long?’ I tell them, ‘Just don’t die.’ ”
- “I hope to live to be 100 . . . because not many people die after turning 100.”

Armin had a theory on retirement which he summarized in one word: “Heresy!” We affectionately referred to Armin as Caleb, quoting the verse, “As his days so shall his strength be.” He wanted to finish the race well. And he did.

As you get older, you get
younger on the inside.

—Armin Gesswein

In April 1956, *Christian Life* magazine carried a cover story on Armin Gesswein entitled “He Sparks Prayer for Revival.” In Los Angeles, for instance, ministers gathered regularly to pray for revival. Prayer fellowship groups had been formed among pastors throughout the area. By 1949, Billy Graham’s Los Angeles campaign was flooded with prayer. That campaign proved to be the first to capture general public attention. From this campaign Billy Graham’s ministry has been catapulted into world prominence by the press, radio and TV.

The article stated,

But citywide meetings aren’t the goal of these pastors’ revival fellowships. Rather, the purpose is revival at the level of the local churches, sparked by the pastors. Spurred by God’s blessing in Los Angeles, Gesswein encouraged pastors in various parts of the country to meet regularly in prayer for revival. At first pastors were reluctant to expose themselves to the need for revival. To-

day, however, Gesswein feels the tide has definitely turned. Calls come to him from pastors of all denominations. "How can we start a revival prayer fellowship?" they query. "Do you definitely believe we shall see revival in our time?"

Gesswein responded, "Definitely. Ten years ago there was real question as to whether or not we would ever have revival again. Some said no. Others, 'We'd like to see it but it's impossible.' From some voices we heard, 'Prophecy is against it.' Meanwhile a few prayed. Today the possibilities of revival are generally accepted.

"The high rate of carnality and lukewarmness in our churches, if taken alone, argues that we are moving away from revival. But other factors show we are moving toward revival. Perhaps I should say it appears to be a movement of evangelism-toward-revival. To date, the movement of evangelism appears stronger in our country than that of revival. We need both. Scripture calls for both. I believe the second movement fulfills Scripture in the greatest possible manner. And I further believe that, before the Lord is finished, He will get us into the full movement of Scripture. Nothing less fulfills the Word, and nothing less has all the dimensions for all the need, in worldwide evangelization. In this view, all the movements of our day, including that of Billy Graham, are parts of a larger sovereign pattern to fulfill Scripture. 'God is using you,' people say. But my feeling is, 'God is working, and I'm just in on it.'

"The test of revival is, of course, the church. And the revival-barometer in the church is the prayer-life of the church. The Welsh revival, said G. Campbell Morgan, was a 'church revival.' The meetings were held in the church and chapel buildings all over Wales. Charles Finney always proceeded on the basis that a genuine revival begins in the church."

Armin's Humanity

Unlike many spiritual men, Armin never let you lose sight of his humanity. He was never caught up with himself. He was a man of genuine humility, a keen sense of humor and a passion for golf. Virtually everyone who spoke at his funeral had some warmhearted story to tell about Armin's golf game. Either the sinking of a long putt, an eagle or birdie or a come-from-behind back nine win. Armin was certainly a man of God, but he never forgot that he was just a man as well.

Summary

- I was born for thanks-giving.
- I was born for free-praying.
- God talks to me in baseball language.
- Young man, learn to plead the promises of God.
- I heard the Holy Spirit say to me, "Armin, revival is your ministry." From that day on, I've never wanted to settle for anything less.
- The revival barometer in the church is their prayer life.
- Every revival is a church revival.

Mentoring Group Discussion

1. Do I have an Uncle Am in my life?
2. What critical issue did Armin face with his denomination when he discovered the prayer meeting in the Bible?
3. What role did the communion service play in Armin's life? What role does the death, burial and resurrection of Christ play in maintaining the purity of revival?

4. What godly courtship principles do we learn from Armin and Reidun? How did he know she was a God-given counterpart?