PHILIPP JAKOB SPENER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PIETISM

Prayer
Scripture: I Timothy 2:1-10
Hymn: 347 "Awake, My Soul, Stretch Every Nerve"

Pietism was a movement that arose in the Lutheran Church of Germany towards the end of the 17th century and continued to flourish during the first half of the 18th century. It had its origin in the life, work, and teachings of Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) who is known as "the father of Pietism." Spener sought to combine the Lutheran emphasis on Biblical doctrine with the Reformed emphasis on a vigorous Christian life. The Pietist movement was the result of Spener's reaction to the 'dead orthodoxy' and 'Protestant scholasticism' that he saw in both Lutheran and Reformed churches. Spener was convinced that the churches of his day had exalted the external and dogmatic to the neglect of the real and inward religious life. For Spener Lutheranism was making Christian faith a matter of accepting with the mind cold intellectual propositions when it ought to be more a matter of a warm loving heart. Dogmatic formularies had usurped the place of the Bible. The priesthood of all believers was being forgotten and a despotic clergy tended to exclude the laity from a vital role in the church. Acrimonious debate had replaced Christian devotion. Spener's goal was a revival of spiritual living. His movement was nicknamed "Pietist" in scorn and derision by the orthodox and worldly.

SPENER IN FRANKFORT

In 1666 Spener accepted the call to become the chief pastor and head of the clergy in Frankfort-on-Main. He found the city commercially prosperous but quite worldly. Almost from the beginning Spener felt keenly the need to improve the religious life of Frankfort. One of his duties was to preside over the meetings of the city's twelve or more ministers, some of whom were twice his age. They were orthodox Lutherans for whom Christianity consisted mainly in correctness of doctrine. For Spener Christianity was mainly a matter of holiness of life. When Spener tried to introduce stricter church discipline he found his leadership severely limited because all religious authority was in the hands of the city government. He urged the civil authorities to enact and enforce legislation to curb ostentatious attire and to forbid trade on Sundays. He had almost no success. Both the theologians and the civil rulers considered the important concerns of religion to be church attendance, partaking of the eucharist, the use of reason to support the orthodox faith in theological discussions and debates, and to care for the affairs of the organized Lutheran church. Spener considered all of these of secondary importance. The major concern should be the cultivation of pure hearts. The princes interfered in religion too much and the clergy engaged in too much acrimonious debate. The laity had forgotten the priesthood of all believers and were little more than spectators in religion.

In his meetings with the clergy Spener urged the ministers to involve the laity more actively in the life of the church and to call for genuine Christian living. Spener took seriously the
training, ordination and installation of new ministers. He visited the parishes and kept careful records of all pastoral work. He was able to greatly improve the instruction of children and young people. He gave instruction in the catechism on Sunday afternoons and revived the rite of confirmation. He found that he was most effective working with individuals and small groups. One of the most satisfying aspects of his work was the encouragement of lay religion. He found in some and awakened in others a deep hunger for a more spiritual life. It encouraged him to preach the sermon in 1669 in which he called for the cultivation of holiness:

How much good it would do if good friends would come together on a Sunday and instead of getting out glasses, cards, or dice would take up a book and read from it for the edification of all or would review something from sermons that were heard! If they would speak with one another about the divine mysteries, and the one who received most from God would try to instruct his weaker brethren! If, should they be not quite able to find their way through, they would ask a preacher to clarify the matter! If this should happen, how much evil would be held in abeyance, and how the blessed Sunday would be sanctified for the great edification and marked benefit of all! It is certain, in any case, that we preachers cannot instruct the people from our pulpits as much as is needful unless other persons in the congregation, who by God's grace have a superior knowledge of Christianity, take the pains, by virtue of their universal Christian priesthood, to work with and under us to correct and reform as much in their neighbors as they are able according to the measure of their gifts and their simplicity.

Some of his more serious and devoted parishioners began to beg for meetings such as he had suggested in the sermon. In the following year, 1670, Spener began holding his first private meetings for edification in his own home. The meetings were held on Sundays and Wednesdays. Both men and women attended but were seated separately from each other, and only the men were permitted to speak. Spener opened the meetings with prayer and then led the people in discussions of the sermon of the previous Sunday. Passages of Scripture raised by the sermon or that had been used in the sermon were read and discussed. Sometimes Spener repeated parts of the sermon. As the meetings progressed the reading and discussion of Scripture played a larger part. Spener also read from devotional classics and made these the basis for edifying discussion. He urged that the people read their Bibles and great devotional works between meetings and for them to be diligent in prayer.

Spener's aims in the private meetings in his home were the revival of the priesthood of the believers and the accompanying deepening of the spiritual life. The meetings would promote a fellowship that would be characterized by mutual watchfulness and helpfulness. The Bible study consisted of lecturing, discussion, and catechizing. He encouraged the people to ask questions. Spener saw great spiritual growth in those who attended the meetings. The number of those eager to attend increased. The results confirmed Spener's conviction that Sunday to Sunday was too long for the people to go without fellowship, worship, and spiritual nourishment.
The meetings became little churches within the big church (ecclesiolae in ecclesia).

As news of the beneficial results achieved in the meetings spread a number of the ministers visited the meetings. Several were so well impressed that they began introducing similar meetings in their congregations. The practice spread beyond Frankfort to many parts of Germany. Spener received a host of letters from both princes and clergy seeking information that would enable them to introduce such meetings in their churches.

PIA DESIDERIA (1675)

In 1675 a Frankfort publisher, impressed with the growth of spirituality and the demand for devotional literature, planned a new edition of John Arndt's True Christianity for the spring book fair. He asked Spener to write a new preface for the new edition. Spener used the occasion to set down things on which he had long been reflecting. Some had been suggested by his experiences in his church and in the house meetings and others had been strengthened by these experiences. The suggestions had to do with the improvement of Christian living. He discussed the contents of the preface with his fellow ministers in Frankfort and secured their encouragement. The preface was an instant success.

Six months after it first appeared Spener decided to give the preface a title of its own, to introduce it with a dedication "to all officials and pastors," and to add two appendixes requested from two friends. The title was Pia Desideria, oder herzliches Verlangen nach gottgefälliger Besserung der wahren evangelischen Kirche (Earnest Desires for a Reform of the True Evangelical Church). This work of 344 pages appeared in the fall of 1675. The first appendix was by John Henry Horb, the husband of one of Spener's younger sisters and a superintendent in the Lutheran church. He agreed in general with Spener's proposals but defended theological controversy and its place in the pulpit. He opposed Spener's proposal on church discipline. He was less optimistic than Spener on the possibility of church reform.

The second appendix was by Joachim Stoll, husband of Spener's oldest sister and court chaplain in Rappolstein. He had been Spener's pastor, catechist and counselor during his youth and had continued one of his most respected advisers. He approved of Spener's analysis of the religious situation. He warned against reading such medieval mystics as John Tauler and Thomas à Kempis because their understanding of Christianity was still veiled. He objected to Spener's preferring Lewis Bayly over John Gerhard charging that there was "secret poison" in Bayly. He disagreed with Spener over the possibility of the Jews being converted.

Spener made clear that the purpose of the Pia Desideria was the cultivation of a warmer Christian life. The chief evils confronting and threatening to destroy Christian living were: (1) government interference in religion, (2) the bad example of the unworthy lives of some of the clergy, (3) the controversial interpretation of theology, and (4) the drunkenness, immorality, and
self-seeking of the laity. The chief means proposed for accomplishing reform were: (1) "ecclesiæ in ecclesia" (the private meetings) in all the congregations to restore Bible reading, and (2) the revival of the priesthood of all believers that had been practically forgotten, but when restored would bring back a warm and close fellowship that would involve mutual watchfulness and helpfulness.

The body of the Pia Desideria consisted of three parts.

(1) A review of the shortcomings of the church of Spener's day. The shortcomings included: (a) moral laxity in all classes of society, (b) sin was not taken seriously, (c) religious duties were performed for the most part in merely external and superficial ways. Clergy and laity were equally at fault.

(2) Assertion of the possibility of reform. There was no justification for despair because the promises of the Bible and the example of the early church offer ample encouragement that conditions in the church can improve.

(3) Six proposals for achieving the desired reforms.

The six proposals were:

(1) Earnest and thorough study of the Bible in private meetings (ecclesiæ in ecclesia).

(2) A lay share in church government as the proper consequence of the Christian doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

(3) A knowledge that Christianity is practical, not theoretical, and the indispensable sign of Christianity is charity, forgiveness, and devotion. Doing is important as well as believing. Vital personal piety is necessary. The church should demand a life befitting Christians.

(4) Instead of merely didactic, and often bitter, attacks on the heterodox and unbelievers, there should be a sympathetic and kindly treatment of them. Kind persuasion should replace polemic bitterness.

(5) Theological training should be reorganized, and emphasis should be laid on devotion rather than on doctrine. The education of ministers should couple piety with learning.

(6) A different style of preaching: preaching should be more practical and less rhetorical. Instead of pleasing rhetoric preaching should implant Christianity in the inner or new man. The soul of Christianity is faith and its effects are fruits of life. The new style of preaching should not be controversial aimed at triumph over an adversary nor should its aim be to exhibit the argumentative abilities of the preacher. Tricks of rhetoric should be banished and in the place of such tricks should be substituted heart-to-heart exhortation.
The Pia Desideria was an immediate success. The initial response was largely favorable. It was enthusiastically received throughout Germany. Spener received over three hundred letters, most of them highly favorable. The theological faculty of Tübingen praised his proposals and especially the idea of student meetings for edifying conversation. The contentious, orthodox theologian, Abraham Calovius (1612-1686) wrote Spener a warm letter of approval. A large number of pastors at once adopted Spener's proposals. The work made a great impression on Germany.

There was good reason for the initial success of the Pia Desideria. Its appearance was quite timely: there were many deeply concerned people who were ready and receptive. Spener did not make any one class the scapegoat. He placed the blame for existing conditions on every segment of society. He did not seek the remedy from any one segment. The evils he chose were wisely chosen and set forth with restraint. He did not offer a simple cure but called for advance toward inner spiritual renewal along a broad front. The complaints he made and his demands for reform were too well justified to admit of point-blank denial.

The demand for the Pia Desideria made a second printing necessary the following year (1676). In 1678 Spener put out a Latin translation with an appendix on the conversion of the Jews. Spener had come to expect the conversion of the Jews and the fall of the Papacy as the prelude to the triumph of the church. By 1712 three more German editions of Pia Desideria had been printed.

A delayed unfavorable reaction came. Clergymen began to feel threatened in status by the rise of the laity. Professors of theology resented the brash incursion of a pastor into their academic preserve. Increasingly complacent people felt disturbed by the appeal for change and for a departure from what they considered familiar, customary, and comfortable. The initial enthusiasm cooled. Large and growing numbers of the orthodox theologians and pastors expressed great offence at the book. A large pamphlet literature appeared and circulated. The private meetings began to be called "collegia pietatis" in derision and Spener's followers were nicknamed "Pietists" in bitter scorn.

Malicious rumors, exaggerations, and outright lies were circulated. There were accusations that Spener's intention was to lead his followers out of the Lutheran church to set up a new communion. He was accused of allowing women to preach. Spener was accused of allowing children to teach Hebrew and Greek. There were reports that wives neglected and starved their husbands at home in order to serve delicacies to new friends in the private meetings. There were accusations that men and women stripped themselves in each other's presence to see whether they still harbored evil lusts. Opponents multiplied and hostile criticism increased.

Spener's followers provoked some of the criticisms and opposition. Some of those who tried to conduct the private meetings were untrained and lacked the skills necessary to lead such meetings. Sometimes laymen without any leaders tried to conduct meetings. Fanaticism and extremism sprang up in some meetings. Some promoted
heresies and fell into grave abuses. Some private meetings did become divisive and separatist. They became little trouble making churches in the big church. Some denounced the churches as "Babel" and the ministers as "unconverted." Some refused to attend the regular services of the church giving as their excuse that they could not fellowship the "godless" and refused to receive the Lord's Supper from the hands of "unworthy" ministers.

Spener was too loyal to his sympathizers, too fearful of the questionable developments. He did honestly and forcefully deny that he had any intention of separating from the Lutheran church. He resorted to the pen to answer his critics. In 1677 he published a tract, Das geistliche Priesterthum (The Spiritual Priesthood) setting forth his views on the laity and distinguishing their rights and duties from those of the clergy.

Next to the Pia Desideria his most important work was his Allgemeine Gottesgelehrtheit (1680) or General Theology.

As tension mounted the police began invading the meetings. In 1682 Spener tried to counteract the formation of conventicles by changing the meeting place from private homes to the churches. This failed to prevent the proliferation of conventicles. In 1684 he tried to counteract the growing separation from the church with Der Klagen uber das verdorbene Christenthum Missbrauch und rechter Gebrauch (Use and Abuse of Complaints about Christianity). He urged that it was wrong to conclude from a recognition of the church's faults that the teachings of the church were false, that it was not the true church, and that separation from its services and sacraments was justified.

As the controversy between Pietists and Orthodox mounted, the Pietists tended to put more and more emphasis on the ascetic tendencies that always appear in puritanical movements. They stressed moderation in food, in drink, and in dress. They rejected the theatre, dances and cards as sinful and worldly. This led to the Adiaphora Controversy. The orthodox Lutherans contended that the things condemned by the Pietists were "indifferent things" (adiaphora--things that were indifferent in God's sight).

The orthodox accused Spener of heresy. The charges were false if by heresy they meant intentional departure from the Lutheran doctrinal standards. The charges were just if by heresy they meant that his spirit and ideals were quite unlike those of contemporary Lutheran orthodoxy. Spener had shifted from an emphasis on creeds to an emphasis on Scripture. Spener felt that if the heart was right differences of intellectual interpretation were relatively unimportant. He put the emphasis on devotion, heart-felt religion, and Christian living rather than on "pure doctrine." His emphasis tended to undermine the authority of the confessional standards as an adequate and final expression of the teachings of Scripture. Spener called for familiarity with the Bible itself.

After eighteen years Spener grew weary of the struggle in Frankfurt. He had been frustrated by the official church, harassed by the government, and persecuted by fashionable society. Even so Pietism had grown and become an effective force in Germany. Spener
had tired. In 1686 when the call came to be court preacher in Dresden he gladly accepted the call.

SPENER IN DRESDEN

The Elector John George III was attracted by the reputation of Spener as a leader in holy living and became convinced that Spener would be good for his people. He had no intention of changing his own life. In 1686 he offered Spener the first court chaplaincy at Dresden. Spener accepted the offer. Dresden offered him a wider and more challenging sphere of labor. It soon proved a more difficult sphere.

Spener introduced his private meetings for spiritual upbuilding. Criticism developed almost from the beginning. The Saxon clergy looked on Spener as a stranger and soon hated him as an innovator. Spener was shocked to learn of the almost constant drunkenness of the Elector and was disappointed to learn that he almost never attended church. Spener later declared that in five years the Elector came to hear him preach only eight times. Spener took his office as chaplain seriously and with fearless conscientiousness he attempted to discharge his duty. He rebuked the Elector for his constant drunkenness and failure to attend church. This highly incensed the Elector. Friction between the two grew. Spener refused to back down or to resign.

The year that Spener took up his work in Dresden one of his most zealous and ardent admirers, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) attempted to introduce Pietism into the University of Leipzig. Francke was one of the younger instructors in the university. With a few other young instructors he formed a "collegium philobiblicum" for scientific exegetical study of the Bible. The proposed study received approval of the university authorities. The next year, 1687, Francke experienced what he regarded as a divine new birth while in Luneburg engaged in writing a sermon of John 20:31. He went to Dresden to visit Spener and spent two months with him. The result was his complete acceptance of Pietism. He returned to Leipzig where he influenced the "collegium philobiblicum" to turn from academic exercises to the cultivation of the inner religious life. Francke began lecturing to students and townspeople on spiritual living. He introduced private house meetings to cultivate such a life. Soon Leipzig was filled with turmoil. The faculty outlawed prayer meetings and the town government issued an electoral edict forbidding the meeting of citizens in "conventicles." The faculty charged that Francke's lectures had led the students to neglect their other studies and to assume undesirable critical attitudes. Johann Benedict Carpzov (1639-1699), professor of theology, led the university authorities to limit Francke's work. Carpzov became the unwearied opponent of Spener and Francke. Francke's position became so uncomfortable that he gladly accepted a call to be a "deacon" in Erfurt in 1690.

Spener's chief duty in Dresden was preaching but he found time to carry on extensive correspondence and for writing. The most important writing from this period was his De impedimentis studii theologici (1690) or Hinderances to the Study of Theology. The three main impediments were: (1) The false notion that theology
can be apprehended by scientific study alone; (2) the crowding out of genuine theology by the dominance of philosophy and rhetoric; (3) the godless life of those engaged in the study.

During his Dresden work Spener was drawn into a great Hamburg controversy between his followers and their opponents. The opponents charged the followers with forming conventicles and engaging in extravagant practices. The controversy arose when the Pietists attacked the opera as a worldly spectacle. The rigid orthodoxist, John Frederick Mayer (1650-1712) defended not only the opera but all theater attendance, dancing, card-playing, drinking bouts, and the like as adiaphora. God did not care about such. The right use of them was permissible and only the abuse of them was forbidden. He argued that theatrical performances could be defended on the ground that the Holy Spirit had appeared in the form of a dove and the angels had taken the appearance of young men. He ridiculed the Pietists as fanatics. The Pietists called on Spener for help. In theory Spener tended to agree with Mayer. He did not advocate complete withdrawal from the world. In practice he leaned to the position of his followers who included his brother-in-law, John Henry Horb.

Spener's candor had offended Elector John George III and their relations did not improve. Spener refused to resign. The Saxon government hesitated to dismiss him since his criticisms were so just. The Elector and his court worked through the Saxon representative at Berlin to solve the difficulty by inducing the court of Brandenburg to offer Spener the rectorship of St. Nicholas in Berlin with the title of "Konsistorialrat" (Consistorial Inspector). Spener accepted the offer (1691).

SPENER IN BERLIN

Spener willingly accepted the invitation to Berlin from the Elector of Brandenburg, Frederick III (1688-1701), who was to become King Frederick I of Prussia (1701-1713). The Berlin period was a happy one for Spener. He was held in high honor and rendered some of his greatest services to the Pietist Movement. He did not succeed in converting the Elector to personal Pietism, but Frederick gave him much support. The tendency of the Elector and his court was rationalistic but Spener's true piety was honored and appreciated.

Spener had abundant opportunities for exciting and satisfying preaching, time to keep up his extensive correspondence, and he continued to employ a great part of his time writing to advance the Pietist cause.

One of his greatest and most important services to Pietism was his share in the founding of the University of Halle (1694). The Elector Frederick wanted a new university of his own. He called on Spener and Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) to be his chief advisers in the planning, launching and directing the university.

Christian Thomasius was a rationalist somewhat like Locke. He was a critic of the theological hair-splitting of the Lutheranism of his day. He was considered the father of German jurisprudence.
He was a disciple of Hugo Grotius, the father of International Law, and of Samuel Pufendorf. For years he was Professor of Natural Law at Leipzig. He was provocative in his views. He attacked the traditional methods in both law and theology. He advocated tolerance for all, including witches and atheists. He advocated recognizing marriages between Lutherans and Calvinists. He was an opponent of judicial use of torture. He was not a Pietist but he disliked the persecution of Pietists. He attempted to aid and defend Francke in his contest with the Leipzig authorities. Thomasius was immensely popular with the student body. He was denounced from the pulpits and finally was forbidden to write or lecture. He fled to Berlin to escape arrest.

The Elector welcomed him to Berlin and invited him to take part in the founding of Halle. The Elector, Spener and Thomasius began making plans for the university in 1691. The university was opened in 1694 with Thomasius as rector and head of the law faculty, an office he would hold until his death in 1728. Personally Thomasius was an orthodox Lutheran, holding that revealed religion was necessary to salvation. He made a sharp distinction between the inward and the outward in religion. He considered questions of piety and doctrine to be inward. The state should leave them alone. In external matters of worship and church life the state might rightly interfere, if necessary, to promote the general well being of the country and to maintain peace and order. The Christian should render to Caesar and to God the things which were respectively theirs. Thus he reconciled his broad sympathies with his position as a state servant.

Spener took an active part in the planning and founding of Halle. He suggested members of the faculty who were Pietist; he especially nominated Pietists for the theological faculty. Among those he recommended for the faculty was Francke.

Francke had had many difficulties in Erfurt. When he energetically tried to introduce Pietist practices he aroused fierce opposition from the clergy of Erfurt. Carpzov's hostility had followed him. In 1691 Francke was expelled by the authorities. Spener procured for him from the Elector a professorship in Halle and a pastorate in the neighboring village of Glaucha. From the first Francke dominated the theological methods and instruction. He was formally made a member of the theological faculty in 1698. His practical experiences in his pastorate in Glaucha that he brought to the classroom made him exceedingly popular with the students.

During Spener's fourteen years in Berlin his popularity and influence increased. The increase aroused great jealousy. His opponents multiplied with the years. His movement was increasingly subjected to hostile criticism. He, himself, suffered constant abuse and attacks from the orthodox Lutheran theologians. The theological faculties of both Wittenberg and Leipzig attacked him bitterly. The theological faculty of Wittenberg formally charged him with 264 errors. The attacks failed to destroy his influence. The Pietist movement continued to flourish. The Berlin years were his happiest and most successful.

Spener reiterated his position in his Theologische Bedenken in four volumes (Halle, 1700-1702). After his death in Berlin in 1705 his Letzte theologische Bedenken was published along with
a biography of Spener by his disciple, C. H. von Canstein (1711).

Spener was a voluminous writer. His collected works were published in seven volumes.

EVALUATION OF SPENER

Spener was a quiet, well-balanced mind. He was a profound Bible student. He was a charitable, practical man of devotion. In his Pietist movement he largely succeeded in uniting Luther's emphasis on Scripture with the Reformed insistence on conduct. He was not a separatist—he did not want Pietism to become a separate movement. His Pietism in the long run exercised great influence within both Lutheranism and the Reformed and spread to many other movements in many countries. He was one of the greatest religious leaders of the 17th century. He did not share the more objectionable developments of Pietism such as a complete breach with the world or the insistence of a conscious crisis as necessary to salvation. There was very little in his views to distinguish him from the orthodox Lutheran confessions of his day. The big difference was in his insistence on an emphasis on devotional and holy living. Two points on which he did differ with Lutheranism was his insistence on the need for regeneration before a man should teach theology and his belief in the restoration of the Jews and the fall of the papacy before the final victory of Christianity.