PHILIPP JAKOB SPENER AND PIETISM

Prayer
Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:1-5
Hymn: 532 "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"
      559 "Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadow"

Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) has been called the father of Pietism, 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. The name "Pietist" was given to the adherents of the movement by its enemies as a term of ridicule. After the movement disintegrated in Germany its ideas, spirit and many of its practices spread and continued to exercise great influence not only in Germany but in movements throughout the world in the 18th and 19th centuries.

CONDITIONS THAT PROVOKED THE RISE OF PIETISM

At the close of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia Germany was divided into more than 300 territories or states, each governed by an Elector, prince or other petty ruler. These petty rulers claimed their power was absolute because it was received directly from God and owed nothing to the consent of the people. Many of these German rulers aped the court of Louis XIV of France and their courtiers imitated the court of the French king. All too often in the second half of the 17th century these German rulers were members of the church only in a nominal sense. They were noted for their ignorance, boorish manners, vulgarity, drunkenness, and their mistresses. Even so they considered that they had absolute authority over the church. Luther had considered the princes the "chief members of the church and had made the princes responsible for the reformation and direction of the churches in their territory. The result was the growth of the state church pattern with the rulers keeping ecclesiastical legislation and appointments firmly in their grasp. Some princes were able and upright; others were irresponsible; some united a public pretention to religion and some even diligence in prayer with almost unbelievable wantonness. Rulers who were sincere in their Christian profession and who had good intentions meddled in the inner life of the church sometimes to its detriment rather than to its good.

Usually the rulers exercised their control through a consistory which was a standing commission of clergymen and lawyers appointed by and responsible to the ruler. By the 17th century the consistories were often dominated by bureaucratic lawyers who considered the church as another bureau of the government to be administered as a legal institution. Under the consistories were "superintendents" appointed to carry out the orders of the consistories. The "superintendents" exercised episcopal functions--"superintendent" was derived from the Old Latin used to translate the Greek for "bishop" or "overseer."

Congregations had no independent powers. The state appointed the ministers. The clergy often spent more time politicking for promotions from the worldly court than in preaching and ministering to the people. Among the most coveted appointments was that to a court chaplaincy. Court chaplains in the 17th century became as obsequious toward the rulers as other courtiers. They were distinguished more by flattery than by candor. A contemporary described the relation of the ruler, the clergy, and the people as follows:
Even if a ruler is godless, tyrannical, and greedy, it is nevertheless not proper for his subject to resist or oppose such godlessness, tyranny, and greed but rather to acknowledge these as the chastisements of the Almighty which the subjects have by their sins deserved. Accordingly it is not proper for subjects to demand new statutes, for it is the office of the ruler to make laws, and subjects are under obligation to render due obedience to their rulers.

The clergy were forbidden to criticise the drunken rulers with their noble mistresses.

The state appointed clergy owed their allegiance to the state rather than to the people of their congregation. Often they were haughty, dictatorial and tyrannical in dealing with the people. Secular duties such as collecting taxes and keeping public records and making public announcements for the government consumed much of the time of the clergy. Sometimes the minister was more policeman, or spy and informer than spiritual guide. Too often the clergy were notorious for ignorance, gluttony, drinking, card playing and gambling, and attendance at theatres and play houses.

Class distinctions had become rigidly fixed in the Germanies. At the top were the princes and their courtiers who expected and demanded outward marks of respect and devotion from both nobles and the people. The nobility consisted of the professional people (especially the lawyers) and the clergy and rich burghers. They too expected respect from the workers and peasants who were the bottom level of society. In the churches the upper classes occupied elevated and upholstered places that were reserved for them while the common people sat on hard seats in the nave. The upper classes could demand private baptisms, weddings, funerals and communion; only the common people performed such acts in public in the church. There were sharp class distinctions or rank even among the clergy.

Ecclesiastical distinctions were as sharply drawn as the class distinctions. There was little tolerance between Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists and lesser groups. The old formula "as goes the prince, so goes the religion" (cujus regio, ejus religio) still prevailed. The absolutist rulers saw political advantage in religious uniformity and were intolerant toward other confessions. The expansion of the Calvinists in the latter part of the 16th and early part of the 17th centuries (the Reformed became strong in Anhalt, Baden, Hesse, and Brandenburg) and their recognition in the Peace of Wesphalia evoked bitter resentment among the Lutherans. A Wittenberg professor, Polycarp Leyser, delivered a series of theses entitled: "Whether, How and Why One Should Have Fellowship with and Place Confidence in the Papists rather than with and in the Calvinists" (1602). The Lutherans considered themselves the only "Evangelicals." Colloquies between Lutherans and Catholics and between Lutherans and Reformed aimed at reducing the bitterness and ultimately bringing unity came to nothing. Religious intolerance continued one of the chief characteristics of the times. All sides continued to express sarcastic lampoons of the other's teachings and practices. Interconfessional polemics occupied a prominent place and were a major portion in the education of the clergy.

The Lutheran Church had continued Melanchthon's attempt to systematize the teachings of Luther and to construct for Lutheranism a doctrinal system. By the 17th century the Lutheran Church had become a creed-bound theological and sacramental institution, placing more emphasis on an orthodox theology than on everyday Christian living. Orthodox theologians like Johann Gerhard of Jena
(d. 1637) ruled with almost the absolutism of the papacy. Christian faith had been dismissed from its seat in the heart, where Luther had placed it, to the cold regions of the intellect. The dogmatic formularies had usurped the position which Luther himself had assigned to the Bible alone, and as a consequence only they were studied and preached, while the Bible was neglected in the family, the study, the pulpit, and in the university. Instead of advocating the priesthood of all believers, the Lutheran pastors had made themselves a despotic hierarchy, while they neglected their practical pastoral work.

The very training of the ministers contributed to the gulf between clergy and laity. The theological education was in Latin. There was an emphasis on Aristotelian logic and ethics with an aim to public disputation. The emphasis was on the Confessions rather than on exegesis of Scripture. It was assumed that the Scriptures were adequately expressed in the Confessions. There was very little historical understanding and even great ignorance of the Reformation. The creeds were considered timeless truths and Christian faith became intellectual propositions. When the clergy took an interest in teaching the people the emphasis was on learning by rote the intellectually formulated "pure doctrine" expanded by references to the current controversies. A favorite tool of instruction was Leonard Hutter's A Compend of Lutheran Theology (1610).

In the Reformed Churches in spite of the predestinarianism of Calvin there was less emphasis on doctrine than on the practical every day Christian life. The Presbyterian constitution of the Reformed Churches gave the people a share in church life that the Lutherans lacked. Increasingly the hide-bound creed making a dogmatic legalism of Calvinism threatened Christian freedom and fostered self-righteousness. The spiritual life declined.

In the Germanies the people were regular in church attendance because it was compulsory. Outwardly this gave the impression that the church was flourishing but there was little evidence of genuine Christian life. With the people required by law to attend church they tended to think of church attendance as a good work the mere performance of which gave them credit in God's sight. Participation in the Lord's Supper was regarded as having a mechanical effect on one's relation to God. Often the people were not attentive. Sleeping during the sermon was common. At his funeral John Gerhard was expressly praised for never having slept in church. Prohibitions were issued against people walking around and gossiping during prayers and hymns.

FORERUNNERS OF PIETISM AND CALLS FOR REFORM BEFORE SPENER

Revivals of moral and religious earnestness occurred throughout Christendom during the 17th and 18th centuries. They did not appear everywhere at the same time and did not always assume precisely the same form. There were protests against the formalism in doctrine, worship and life into which the churches had fallen as the original impulses of the Reformation were dissipated. There were attempts to cultivate a keener awareness of the present reality of God's judgment and grace and the bearing that these should have on the personal and social life. There were pleas for and earnest efforts to encourage and direct true spiritual living.

In England the Puritans expressed great dissatisfaction with cold formalism of the dominant Anglicans. John Bunyan and Richard Baxter were among the favorite authors of those seeking a more spiritual life. Baxter in his Autobiography (1630) tells of the criticism, opposition and ridicule of his Anglican father that he heard as a boy. His father urged reforms in the Anglican
When I heard them speak scornfully of others as Puritans whom I never knew, I was at first apt to believe all the lies and slanders wherewith they loaded them. But when I heard my own father reproached and perceived the Drunkards were the farthest in the reproach, I perceived that it was mere malice. For my father never scrupled Common Prayer or Ceremonies, nor spake against Bishops, nor ever so much as prayed but by a book or form, being not very acquainted then with any who did otherwise. But only for reading Scripture when the rest were dancing on the Lord's Day, and for praying by a form out of the end of the Common Prayer Book in his house, and for reproving drunkards and swearers, and for talking sometimes a few words of Scripture and the life to come, he was reviled commonly by the name of Puritan, Precisionist and hypocrite, and so were the godly conformable ministers who lived everywhere in the country near us, not only by our neighbors, but by the common talk of the vulgar rabble all around us.

Willem Teelinck in the Netherlands led a 'Second Reformation' among the Dutch Reformed in the Netherlands that stirred many and his influence spread to England and Germany. His followers were called 'Precisionists' in ridicule and the term was also thrown at any in England and Germany who stood for a purer life. Other leaders in a Dutch Pietism were Gisbert Voet and Jodocus van Lodensteyn (Ritschl calls Jodocus "the first Pietist").

Blaise Pascal and the Jansenists represented the revival among the Catholics. The Hasidist movement in Judaism was such a movement among the Jews.

In Germany there were a few earnest and powerful voices that were fore-runners of the Pietists. They cried out against the shortcomings of the church and pled for a revival of practical and devout Christianity. One of the earlier voices was the mystic, Jakob Boehme. One of the most widely known, most appreciated and influential was Johann Arndt with his True Christianity. The preacher, Heinrich Muller, described the font, the pulpit, the confessional, and the altar as the four dumb idols of the Lutheran church. The theologian, Johann Valentin Andrea, who was court chaplain of the Landgrave of Hesse, used his influence for improved church life. A preacher named Schuppius pled for the restoration of the Bible to its place in the pulpit. Theophilus Grossgebauer (d. 1661) of Rostock cried out from his pulpit and in his writings against the direction the Lutheran church was travelling. Paul Gerhard in his poems and hymns anticipated the Pietist movement. His hymns became popular with followers of Spener.

It was Spener who was the direct originator of the Pietist movement. He sought to combine the Lutheran emphasis on Biblical doctrine with the Reformed tendency to vigorous Christian life.

THE EARLY LIFE AND TRAINING OF PHILIPP JAKOB SPENER

Philipp Jakob Spener was born on January 13, 1635 in Rappolstein in Upper Alsace not far from Strasbourg. His father was a steward and councilor of the duke of Rappolstein. He received his early religious impulses and training from his devout mother and from a devout woman of the house of Rappolstein who was his godmother at his baptism. She continued to take a great interest in his spiritual development and encouraged him to read the great devotional classics. Next to the Bible his favorite was Johann Arndt's True Christianity that would exercise great influence over him throughout his life. During his boyhood he
read several English books which he found in German translation in his father's library. One was Emanuel Sontham's Golden Treasure of the Children of God. Another was Lewis Bayly's The Practice of Piety (c. 1610). He read Daniel Dyke's Nosce te imsum, or Self-deceit (1614). Also he read Richard Baxter's The Necessary Teaching of the Denial of Self (c. 1650). The criticism of conventional Christianity in these works of the English Puritans made a lasting impression on the boy. From them he learned something of self-examination, of an earnest quest for holiness, and standards of morality that would set the true Christian apart from his worldly neighbor. Like Arndt these writers exalted a rigorous religion and moral life over a dogmatic intellectualism.

Spener received his early education in the grammar school of Colmar.

One of the great influences in his youth was that of his pastor, Joachim Stoll. He regularly heard his sermons and Stoll was his catechist and counselor. Stoll preached the Bible more than the Lutheran creeds. Spener grew up convinced of the necessity of a moral and religious reformation of the German church. Stoll later married Spener's oldest sister and remained his respected adviser; he also wrote the second appendix to Spener's Pia Desideria.

Later in life when Spener had become the leader of the Pietists, Baron von Canstein asked him whether in his early life Spener had ever been a bad boy. Spener replied: "Indeed, I was bad, for I remember very well that when I was twelve years old I saw some people dance and was persuaded by others to join in the dancing. Hardly had I begun, however, when I was overtaken by such fear that I ran away from the dance and never since that time tried it again."

By the time Spener was sixteen he had completed his preparatory studies and entered the University of Strasbourg (1651). In the university he devoted himself to the study of philology, history, and philosophy. One of his professors was Sebastian Schmidt who emphasized practical Christianity over against theological disputation.

As a student Spener led an ascetic and secluded life. He did not participate in the drinking bouts, fencing matches, and dancing that were popular with most of the students. He avoided members of the opposite sex and had only a small circle of friends. One day a week he did not eat dinner. On Sundays he refrained from his studies as well as from worldly pleasures; he spent the day attending church and in reading and discussing devotional literature with a few friends.

In two years Spener completed his Master's degree (1651) with a disputation against the philosophy of Hobbes. He began the study of theology with the view of entering the Christian ministry. The professor who influenced him most was John Conrad Dannhauer (1603-1666). Dannhauer introduced him to and guided him through Luther's works. He taught him to think of salvation as a present and not merely a future gift of God. He opened his eyes to the place of the laity in the church. He suggested the use of the vernacular in at least parts of the theological education. Dannhauer represented the scholastic theology and ethics of the seventeenth century. He taught Spener to emphasize the proper observance of Sunday.

During his theological studies he served as a private tutor to the princes of the Palatinate, Christian and Charles. He also lectured in the university on philology and history.
Spener completed his theological studies in the summer of 1559. He spent 1659-1662 in travel, visiting some of the leading universities of Europe. In Switzerland he visited Basel, Bern, Lausanne and Geneva. In France he visited Lyons and Monthéliard. In Germany he visited Freiburg and Tübingen.

Spener spent most of one year in Geneva where he became well acquainted with the zealous French Reformed preacher, Jean de Labadie (1610-1674). Labadie was one of the most important of the devotional writers among the Calvinists. He was at the height of his influence and Spener often went to hear him preach. He made a lasting impression on the young theologian. Six years later Spener translated and published one of Labadie's French tracts, Kurzer Unterricht von andächtiger Betrachtung (Frankfurt, 1667). The travels gave Spener an opportunity to become well acquainted with Reformed church life and to observe the organizational patterns of the French-speaking Reformed.

In 1663 Spener returned to Strasbourg where he was appointed a preacher without pastoral duties with the right of holding lectures. He did some teaching and was ordained assistant preacher. He wrote the dissertation for his doctor of theology degree. He married a twenty-two year old young lady who had been recommended by his mother.

SPENER IN FRANKFORT

In the spring of 1666 Spener received and accepted a call to become the senior of the clergy in Frankfurt am Main. He accepted the call more out of a sense of duty than out of confidence in his fitness. He preached and administered the sacraments in the city's principal church. He presided over meetings of the city's twelve or more ministers, some of whom were twice his age. Although of a timid nature he worked with great zeal and vigor. He ordained and installed new ministers, visited parishes, and kept careful records of his pastoral work. He began a program of instruction of the children in the catechism on Sunday afternoons. It came to be known as the "Kinderlehre." He revived the right of confirmation. He urged the civil authorities to enact and enforce legislation to curb ostentatious attire and to forbid trade on Sunday. He met strong opposition and had little success.

In Frankfurt Spener made the acquaintance of men trying to end religious intolerance and to promote unity. One was John Dury (1596-1689) from Scotland who spent fifty years on the continent trying to reconcile the Reformed and the Lutherans. Spener declared that he saw more evidence of true Christian discipleship in Dury than in many of his Lutheran brethren but he regarded Dury as unrealistic.

He also became a personal friend of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Later they corresponded on literary and historical topics and on church union.

He became acquainted with George Calixtus (1586-1656), the theologian whom Duke Ernest of Goth requested to give a formal opinion on church union. Calixtus recommended that the churches unite by returning to the consensus of the first five centuries of the Christian era. Spener was sympathetic with the intentions of Calixtus but felt he was unhistorical in his use of history and that he was placing tradition above Scripture.

One of the most important accomplishments of Spener in Frankfurt was his encouragement of lay religion. In a sermon in 1669 he recommended the holding of private meetings to cultivate 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.

The following year, 1670, Spener began holding private meetings under his leadership in his own home, on Sundays and Wednesdays. Both men and women attended but they were seated separately, and only men were permitted to speak. The meetings were opened with prayer. This was followed by discussions of the Sunday sermon. Sometimes Spener would repeat parts of the sermon. Scripture passages bearing on the subject of the sermon were read and discussed. As the meetings continued the Bible became more and more the center of the discussions. Also passages from devotional books were read and discussed. Spener encouraged those who attended to read their Bibles and the devotional classics in their homes between meetings. Some of the favorites that Spener used and recommended were:

- Joachim Lütkemann's Vorschmack der gottlichen Gute (Fortaste of Divine Goodness (1643)
- Johann Arndt's True Christianity
- Lewis Bayly's Practice of Piety

Spener saw great improvement and spiritual growth in the members who attended the meetings. Some of the members would not attend and were even critical of the meetings. The meetings became for Spener a kind of church within the church. He felt this church within the church was the hope of the future. As news of the meetings spread a few of his fellow ministers attended the meetings. Some of them began similar meetings in their own congregations. Some ministers reserved judgment. It was not long till some ministers were openly critical of and hostile to the meetings. The meetings came to be called "collegia pietatis". Soon those who attended were nicknamed "Pietists" in scorn and derision. The opposition made Spener more keenly aware of the danger of the Christian life being sacrificed to zeal for rigid orthodoxy and the love of worldliness.

Spener carried on an extensive correspondence with the nobility all over Germany who had heard of his meetings. He began to be called "the spiritual counsellor of all Germany."

The "collegia pietatis" were not a completely new phenomenon. In Geneva Jean de Labadie had held similar house meetings. The "Prophecyings" among the Puritans in England were famous. The Reformed had held similar meetings in the Netherlands. There had been some earlier house meetings in various parts of Germany among Lutherans. It was under Spener's guidance that these meetings grew into the Pietist Movement.