

## Articles and Sermons :: Philip Jacob Spener -smithers

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### **Philip Jacob Spener** *by David Smithers*

In every generation God has had a remnant that strived to restore true Christianity according to the Apostolic pattern. 17th century Germany was the home of just such a people known as the Pietist. The Pietist yearned and prayed to see the Church restored to Her original purity and power.

The vision and dreams of these earnest Christians found a prophetic voice in the ministry of Philip Jacob Spener. Spener, considered the father of pietism, was a man of both vision and practical direction. Over 300 years ago Spener had a good understanding of the church's needs, and how to mend them. Concepts that are today considered new and innovative in many Christian circles were laid out long ago by the old German prophet.

Philip Jacob Spener, like most 17th century pietist, was a Lutheran. Spener had become deeply concerned that the teachings of Luther had produced a church only half reformed. Germany was filled with professing Christians who had been instructed in the academics of salvation by faith, but yet lacked the holy fruit of faith. Spener saw that many were void of any trace of loving fear and devotion for the Lord Jesus. A spirit of presumption had come into the church, causing many to take the grace of God for granted.

In 1670 Spener began to bring together small groups of believers who, like himself, were not satisfied with a lifeless religion. They met for the purpose of Bible study, prayer and for the watching over of one another. "Before long these meetings were being conducted throughout the city. Persons of like interests in spiritual edification gravitated together to form cells that promoted Christian piety and earnest devotion." Spener did not consider these meetings as a new church but as an extension of the Reformation within the reformation churches. They encouraged the formation of "cell groups," that is little churches, within the Church. "Pietists in the Netherlands were the first to use the term 'huis Kerk' or house church for their renewal meetings." In these meetings Spener found expression for the burdens of his heart. With great zeal he preached repentance, declaring the apostasy of the Bride of Christ from her first love. "He consistently heralded a message that emphasized the Biblical command for holy character and holy living."

Spener was also a bold advocate of the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. Pietists felt that laymen had not been given sufficient opportunities in the Church. In the home meetings all believers were allowed to express their heart and ask questions. Spener taught that, "believers are not passive in spiritual matters, but have a responsibility for building one another up in the faith." As a result of Spener's revival efforts, he was severely maligned and persecuted. He was literally driven across Germany. As Spener fled from city to city new house churches sprang up, reviving the dry and formal Lutheran church.

Without a doubt, Philip Jacob Spener is one of the great, though forgotten, revivalists of the Church. Although forgotten, Spener has touched us all through those he personally influenced. It was Spener's apprentice, Francke who inspired the famous George Muller to provide for orphans through simple faith and prayer. He also impacted the young Count Zinzendorf with his powerful teaching and vision of a restored Apostolic Church. Count Zinzendorf in turn led the great Moravian Mission effort to evangelize the world. Included in those won to Christ by the Moravians were John and Charles Wesley. Spener's ministry has truly impacted the world we live in.

The goal of all Spener's efforts was to have the Church of his day reflect the early Apostolic Christian community. Whom among us is willing to follow Spener's example in seeking to restore such a Church? Are we willing to strip ourselves of our man pleasing traditions and half reformed ways? Such a willingness will cost us much more than we realize, yet in the end it will leave us with fewer regrets.