

Philipp Spener and the Role of Women in the Church: The Spiritual Priesthood of All Believers in German Pietism

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The Pietist movement opened opportunities for women's participation in religious life in early modern Germany. Women wrote hymns. Women led conventicles in their homes. Women wrote theological tracts. But what did the so-called "Father of Pietism," Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705), say about women's roles? Did Spener introduce new possibilities for women's involvement in the church, or was he, as K. James Stein has stated, "a child of his times when it came to equality between the sexes"?¹ A useful lens for understanding Spener's view of women's place within the Pietist movement can be found in his vigorous defense of the spiritual priesthood of all believers. A long-acknowledged fact in the literature on Spener is that he drew heavily on this idea for the laicization of the church, yet little in-depth analysis of his theological writings related to the spiritual priesthood exists, particularly as this idea pertained to women.²

1. K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1986), 248.

2. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 99, does not provide a particularly thorough analysis of how this idea became integrated throughout Spener's theology. While Jutta Taege-Bizer and Ruth Albrecht both briefly mention potential implications of this doctrine for female Pietists, they do not analyze the concept itself: Ruth Albrecht, "Frauen," in *Geschichte des Pietismus: Glaubenwelt und Lebenswelt*, ed. Hartmut Lehmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 522–55; Jutta Taege-Bizer, "Weibsbilder im Pietismus: Das Beispiel von Frankfurt am Main 1670–1700," in *Frauen Gestalten Geschichte: im Spannungsfeld zwischen Religion und Geschlecht*, ed. Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz (Han-

In this article, I explore Spener's notion of the spiritual priesthood, focusing on the ways Spener treats women in his published works. My examination concentrates on *Pia Desideria* and *The Spiritual Priesthood*, texts that offer the public face of the Pietist movement and Spener's prescribed theoretical and theological constructs. I argue that Spener's stress on the spiritual equality of all persons allowed for greater recognition of women's participation in the church, while simultaneously supporting standard patriarchal assumptions regarding church and family. Spener's attitude also reflects a larger societal shift between public and private spheres. In order to understand Spener's writings, we must first briefly discuss his pastoral context.

Spener's Life: Church and Controversy

Opinions divide regarding whether Spener was the harbinger of a new Lutheran reformation or whether he reintroduced a medieval mysticism that led to individualistic experiential religion. Consider these polarized views of Spener:

In the history of the evangelical church in Germany, only one man has attained and long maintained a place only a little behind Martin Luther himself: P.J. Spener, the father of German Pietism.³

Even today it is debatable to what extent [Spener] is to be regarded as a reformer or to what extent a deformer... [H]e bore two peoples in his breast, the people of scrupulosity, of legalistic piety, and the people of liberal mindedness... [H]e actually prepared the way for that subtle enthusiasm whose disintegrating effects the church would experience soon enough.⁴

What, then, was Spener? Was he the perfecter of Luther's reformation,

nover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1998), 109–36. Douglas Shantz's recent comprehensive volume on Pietism mentions Spener's writings on the spiritual priesthood in relation to women but does not analyze their relevance: Douglas H. Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 195–97.

3. Martin Schmidt, "Spener und Luther," *Luther Jahrbuch* 24 (1957): 102.

4. Albrecht Ritschl, *Geschichte des Pietismus* (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1884), II.126.116.121.

or was he a religious enthusiast whose ideas about spiritual equality bordered on the heretical?

Raised in a Lutheran home, young Spener read a range of devotional writings, including some by English Puritans.⁵ As a teenager, he matriculated at the University of Strasbourg where he received several degrees in theology, completing his doctorate in June 1664. Instead of an academic profession, however, Spener's life took a different turn in 1666 when Johann Schutz recommended Spener as a candidate for the position of senior minister to a Frankfurt city council member, leading to a ministerial call from the city.⁶ Spener was only thirty-one years old at the time, making him substantially younger than the other Frankfurt ministers.⁷ He became the administrator of a group of pastors that included eleven other clergy, overseeing most of Frankfurt's 15,000 inhabitants. Responsibilities included supervising the clergy, preaching every Sunday morning at the Barfüsserkerche (Church of the Discalced), hearing confession and giving absolution, administering the Lord's Supper, communicating for the clergy, ordaining and appointing preachers, announcing betrothals, registering marriages, preparing prayers, calling clergy, and serving as the mediator between the pastors and the municipal council that oversaw religious matters in Frankfurt.⁸

During his twenty-year ministry in Frankfurt, Spener tested many of his reforms—such as alternative preaching styles, catechism for all ages, and small group Bible studies—before he published his proposals for broader implementation. In 1675 Spener wrote his most famous work, *Pia Desideria*, as a call for reform in the Lutheran Church. On March 11, 1686, Spener received a call to Dresden as chief chaplain to the elector, making him a member of the consistory and ecclesiastical court.⁹ Dresden was considered the most important preaching post in Lutheran Germany at the time.¹⁰ However, the extravagant court lifestyle clashed with Spener's moral sensibilities, leading to conflict with the elector. In

5. Philipp Jakob Spener, "Das Leben der Gläubigen," in *Die Werke Philipp Jakob Spener Studienausgabe*, ed. Kurt Aland and Beate Koster (Giessen: Brunnen-Verlag, 1996), 24–25.

6. Theodore G. Tappert, introduction to *Pia Desideria*, by Philipp Jakob Spener (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 4; Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 73–74.

7. Spener, "Das Leben der Gläubigen," 41–42.

8. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 76–77.

9. Spener, "Das Leben der Gläubigen," 48. Although Spener's own report of biographical material ended in the early 1680s, his first biographer, Baron von Canstein, completed the *Lebenslauf* narrative for Spener's funeral.

10. Spener, "Das Leben der Gläubigen," 48–49.

1691 Spener relocated to Berlin, much to the relief of both parties.¹¹

The position in Berlin was a clear demotion, but the situation suited Spener much better because the Reformed elector, Frederick III of Brandenburg (1657–1713), granted Lutherans a great deal of freedom. In Frederick III, Spener found a patron who had similar views regarding the Christian life, leading to much soberer court behavior than Spener had found in Dresden. On January 7, 1692, the elector forbade all anti-Pietist preaching in Brandenburg-Prussia. While in Berlin, Spener remained optimistic about the prospects for reform.¹²

Until the end of his life, Spener continued to deal with emerging controversies over Pietism. In his 1695 *Thorough Defense (Gründlichen Verteidigung)*, Spener suggested abolishing the name “Pietism” and the fable of a new sect in an attempt to create peace with other Lutherans. Spener preached his last sermon on June 8, 1704, and died February 5, 1705.¹³ Shortly before his death, Spener had requested that he be buried in a white coffin because he had mourned too much in life and wished to be optimistic in death.¹⁴

Spener’s life was full of controversy generated by his ideas for reform within the Lutheran Church. Yet Spener repeatedly proved himself a skilled politician and managed to have an influential career, despite opposition from his fellow ministers, the councils and electors who appointed him, and the most prominent theological faculties of the day. His reforming legacies in catechism, preaching, and theological education lasted well into modernity. While some of his contemporaries were ousted from the church because they called for more radical reform, Spener managed to keep the debate over Pietism within the church. The seminal statement of his reforming position is his 1675 work, *Pia Desideria*.

Introducing the Idea: *Pia Desideria*

Pia Desideria: Or a Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform of the True Evangelical Church, Together with Several Simple Christian Proposals Look-

11. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 85.

12. Johannes Wallmann, “Philipp Jakob Spener in Berlin 1691–1705,” in *Theologie und Frömmigkeit im Zeitalter des Barock: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995), 306–10.

13. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 85.

14. Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 85–86.

ing towards *This End* formally initiated Spener's Pietist movement. Realizing that reform proposals could become controversial, Spener quoted extensively from more than thirty authors, including Luther, in order to enlist the support of as many pastors, theologians, and academics as possible.¹⁵ A fundamental difference, however, existed between the problems Luther faced and the problems of Spener's time—namely, Luther had to fight against a church that privileged works over faith, whereas Spener addressed a church that was oblivious to the value of works.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Spener always denied that his ideas were innovative, insisting that he followed in a long line of Lutherans who wanted to complete the Reformation vision.

Pia Desideria opens with Spener's analysis of the myriad problems plaguing the Lutheran church. He lamented that ministers had allowed the church to fall into worldly behaviors. In Spener's eyes, pastors bore both the blame for the church's degenerate condition and the responsibility for correcting the condition. Spener adopted a medical motif to diagnose the problems in the church, describing the body of Christ as in "distress and sickness."¹⁷ Thus he shifted from jeremiad to diagnosis to prescription. Spener's proposals for reform presented one attempt to heal the diseased church with a set of prescribed remedies. The clergy had to work toward healing the church, a process that included consultation among specialists (pastors and theologians) to develop the best treatment plan.

Spener's most stringent criticisms targeted the text's primary audience—ministers. He criticized pastors for exhibiting "a worldly spirit, marked by carnal pleasure, lust of the eye, and arrogant behavior and so it is evident that they have never taken even the first practical principle of Christianity seriously, namely, denial of self."¹⁸ For Spener, reforming the church began with reorienting Lutheran leaders to focus on sanc-

15. Manfred Kohl, "Spener's *Pia Desideria*: The *Programmschrift* of Pietism," *Covenant Quarterly* 34, nos. 1–2 (1976): 62; Johannes Wallmann, "Pietas contra Pietismus: Zum Frömmigkeits Verständnis der Lutherischen Orthodoxie," in *Pietas in der Lutherischen Orthodoxie*, ed. Udo Sträter (Wittenberg: Edition Hans Lufft, Dreikastannen Verlag, 1998), 7; Johannes Wallmann, "Geistliche Erneuerung der Kirche nach Philipp Jakob Spener," in *Theologie und Frömmigkeit im Zeitalter des Barock: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995), 221.

16. Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener*, 85.

17. Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 31–32.

18. *Ibid.*, 45.

tification.¹⁹ He also criticized temporal leaders for not fulfilling their God-given role as “foster fathers and nursing mothers.”²⁰ Drawing on these traditional images of rulers’ responsibility to nurture their subjects, Spener saw these magistrates as negligent parents. In his estimation, civil authorities exhibited more interest in debauchery than in adequate care for their subjects, particularly in the spiritual realm where they obstructed church reform and prevented Christians from living faithfully under their rule.²¹

Although Spener stated that “most of the deterioration in the church has its source in the two higher estates,” he additionally criticized the laity because “none of the precepts of Christ [were] openly observed” among them.²² He aimed his criticism at all Christians, regardless of gender, occupation, or education. He lamented that the laity did not perceive drunkenness as a sin, treated each other miserably, failed to live Christian lives, and harmed the Lutheran witness to misguided religious groups, such as the papists.²³ According to Spener, this unchristian behavior appeared predominantly in the preponderance of lawsuits and dishonest trade relationships. His discussion of occupations further highlights his emphasis on social sins: “If we look at trade, the crafts, and other occupations through which people seek to earn their living, we shall find that everything is not arranged according to the precepts of Christ, but rather that not a few public regulations and traditional usages in these occupations are diametrically opposed to them.”²⁴

By locating these problems in the bar, courtroom, and shop, Spener largely omits women’s activities in his castigations. While some women engaged in excessive drinking, it was largely treated as a male sin in this period.²⁵ Women frequently found jobs in taverns and in the liquor trade, but they were not the ones typically associated with drunkenness. Further, women had limited opportunities to appear in legal cases and were typically represented by men—fathers, sons, or husbands. While

19. Manfred Kohl, “Pietism as a Movement of Revival,” *Covenant Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1975): 7.

20. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 43.

21. *Ibid.*, 44.

22. *Ibid.*, 44, 57.

23. Allen Deeter, “An Historical and Theological Introduction to Philipp Jakob Spener’s *Pia Desideria*,” (unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1963), 170–75.

24. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 59.

25. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and the Devil* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

women frequently assisted in their husbands' shops and even ran family businesses while their husbands were away on trips, they were only treated as proxies of their husbands. In very few cases were women actually able to maintain their own businesses. Typically, this only occurred when widows assumed business ownership for a limited time after their husbands' deaths.²⁶ Thus the public sins Spener addressed fell mainly in the court of male activity.

Despite this emphasis on public sins, Spener clarified that his critique went beyond these concerns to the heart of what a Christian is:

We cannot deny—on the contrary, daily experience convinces us—that there are not a few who think that all that Christianity requires of them (and that having done this, they have done quite enough in their service of God) is that they be baptized, hear the preaching of God's Word, confess and receive absolution and go to the Lord's Supper, no matter how their hearts are disposed at that time, whether or not there are fruits which follow. . . .²⁷

Spener wanted a reform of life to accompany proper religious affection. This most serious problem of misunderstood Christianity is the one that applied to all Christians because it reached Spener's central concern: people claimed to be Lutheran but were only going through the motions. The combined effect of these corruptions included strengthening the Jews, Catholics, and heretics in their unbelief and placing all Christians in danger of being seduced by the world.²⁸

Nowhere in the first section of *Pia Desideria* did Spener identify specifically female behavior as a symptom of corruption in the church. While the spiritual equality of men and women meant that women were included in Spener's general discussion of corrupt characteristics, he did not raise the issues of vanity, prostitution, or gossip—all sins traditionally associated with women at this time. Several plausible reasons could explain Spener's lack of explicit attention to women. As Spener directed the text toward the clergy and focused predominantly on their faults,

26. Merry Wiesner Wood, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 2 (1981): 12.

27. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 65.

28. *Ibid.*, 68–70.

women were not his primary audience. Second, the social hierarchy of his time placed responsibility on the *Hausvater* (housefather) as spiritual supervisor.

As early as 1667, Spener explained in a visitation report that church attendance was an issue. While pastors partially controlled the attendance of housefathers, women's church attendance was not subject to the same control. Women apparently evaded church attendance, in part, because there were no consequences for their behavior. Spener's proposal to remedy the situation was to censure the *Hausvater* if his wife did not attend church because the women lacked spiritual supervision.²⁹ In a 1668 report discussing the condition of the Sunday service, Spener stated,

In place of aspiring on Sunday to virtuous godliness applied to God's rule and his blessing, the residents amuse themselves especially during the Lord's Supper by visiting comedies and other stupid fool's games. The shop owners continue in their money-making businesses. Vagabonds, charlatans, and showmen offer free entertainment and regalement, so that no one visits the worship service anymore, or thinks on prayer hours and edification exercises in the home. . . . The handworkers and bakers, butchers, cutter shops and barbershops work even more, as the women in the households themselves do not avoid displaying on Sunday the wash. . . . The brothels have a rush of customers. In the welfare houses opulent banquets are held, which the servants must prepare and also the subsequent rides in land and in water request a certain personal service. So not only are the lords prevented from a spiritual God-consecrated Sunday, but rather they also hinder their servants from visiting the worship service.³⁰

This report provides more insight into why Spener chose not to castigate women. The women he mentioned here work as wives, maids, prostitutes, or in shops and therefore were only the victims of the entertainment activities of the husbands, father, and masters.³¹

29. Taege-Bizer, "Weibsbilder im Pietismus," 116.

30. Spener, "Bereicht des Predigerministeriums an den Rat vom November 1668," partially printed in Richard Grabau, *Das evangelisch-lutherische Predigerministerium der Stadt Frankfurt a.M.* (Frankfurt am Main: Kommissionsverlag der Kesselringschen Hofbuchhandlung, 1913), 335–48.

31. Taege-Bizer, "Weibsbilder im Pietismus," 116.

The bulk of *Pia Desideria* consists of Spener's six proposals for reform. Only the first three proposals relate to Spener's view of spiritual equality and so will be discussed here. His first proposal stressed that the word of God must become a central part of parishioners' lives.³² Sermons could only cover a select portion of the Bible, and church services offered only a limited opportunity for people to grasp the meaning of Scripture. Even though "solitary reading of the Bible at home is in itself a splendid and praiseworthy thing, it does not accomplish enough for most people."³³ Spener prescribed three remedies for this problem. First, the *Hausvater* should read from the Bible every day, or, if unable to read, direct someone else in the family to read from it. Second, Spener advocated private Scripture reading. This emphasis on individual Bible reading diverged from previous Lutheran positions that encouraged people, and particularly women, to read the catechism more so than Scripture. Catechisms tended to be written in simple language for the relatively uneducated. Scripture, on the other hand, required a more learned reader. Thus Spener's program suggested greater confidence in ordinary folk, women included. Churches should also hold public Bible-reading services, catering to people who could not read or did not own a Bible. Finally, he suggested that pastors lead small group meetings, *collegia pietatis*, where people could discuss various Christian subjects. The group would read aloud from Scripture and discuss each verse in order to discover the text's simple meaning and edificatory purpose. Participants could express their concerns and ideas, while the more educated attendees could explain the passage. This proposal aimed to acquaint ministers with parishioners and establish bonds that could help promote spiritual growth.³⁴ Spener optimistically stated, "If we succeed in getting the people to seek eagerly and diligently in the book of life for their joy, their spiritual life will be wonderfully strengthened and they will become altogether different people."³⁵

Spener's second proposal directly addressed the spiritual priesthood of all believers. Spener maintained that all Christians must carry out ministerial functions to their families and neighbors. If all Christians assumed these roles, the clergy would be free from tasks that community

32. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 87.

33. *Ibid.*, 88.

34. *Ibid.*, 89–90.

35. *Ibid.*, 91. These meetings became one of the most problematic parts of Spener's reform movement when put into practice, in part because of women's involvement.

members could perform for each other.³⁶ The establishment and diligent exercise of the spiritual priesthood assumed that “not only ministers but all Christians are made priests by their Savior, are anointed by the Holy Spirit and are dedicated to perform spiritual-priestly acts.”³⁷ As he explained further, “all spiritual functions are open to all Christians without exception. Although the regular and public performance of them is entrusted to ministers appointed for this purpose, the functions may be performed by others in case of emergency.”³⁸ Laypersons could study the word, instruct, admonish, chastise, and comfort neighbors as private rather than public exercises. While some people might worry that they would interfere with the pastor’s role, Spener maintained that ministers could become more effective if freed of these additional tasks. Parishioners would “pay attention to the minister, admonish him fraternally when he neglects something, and in general support him in all his efforts.”³⁹ Spener’s language implied that all Christians shared these roles equally.

His third proposal stressed Christian practice: “It is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice.”⁴⁰ According to Spener, Christians needed to exhibit love for other Christians and for all humanity in order to create a powerful Christian witness to the world.⁴¹ Despite Spener’s concerns about living sanctified Christian lives, he seldom prescribed specific morals, instead urging each person to find his or her own guidance from Scripture.⁴²

Nowhere does *Pia Desideria* propose a particular role for women or mention women explicitly.⁴³ Spener apparently did not foresee some of the attacks that would occur because of women’s involvement in independent Bible reading or the conventicles. In fact, one scholar has commented that the resulting participation of women caused Spener to moderate his position in hindsight to conform more fully to societal conventions.⁴⁴ While I agree that Spener certainly did not seem to anticipate that women

36. Deeter, “An Historical and Theological Introduction,” 192.

37. Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 92.

38. *Ibid.*, 93.

39. *Ibid.*, 94.

40. *Ibid.*, 95.

41. *Ibid.*, 96.

42. Allen C. Deeter, “Pietism, Moralism, and Social Concern,” *Covenant Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1975): 34.

43. Albrecht, “Frauen,” IV:524.

44. Martin Friedrich, “Philipp Jakob Spener: Vater des Pietismus,” in *Theologen des*

would use the notion of spiritual equality so independently, the moderation of his views appears to correspond to the difference between his own public and private communication. Even as he wrote tracts that minimized the activity of women in the Pietist movement and asserted views that corresponded to traditional views of women, largely to fend off accusers, he engaged in regular correspondence with women, providing advice about leading family devotion time and reading the Bible—even discussing theological matters.⁴⁵ Also, if anything, Spener's correspondence to women substantially increased over the course of his life. Thus throughout his life he consistently adhered to the notion that developing a more involved laity would result in an improved church, and he recognized that women were part of that laity. While publicly conforming to many social conventions, privately Spener regularly encouraged women's activities in his correspondence.

Several of Spener's proposals in *Pia Desideria* directly affected women who became involved in Pietism. Spener's strong encouragement of Bible reading for all Christians included women. For centuries, reading Luther's catechism had trumped reading Scripture itself, but Spener thought that all Christians should read the Bible. He even wrote instructions for his young sister-in-law on how to read the Bible correctly. He did not reject the catechism, and, in fact, he was adamant about using the catechism as a teaching tool. He did, however, see the importance of the catechism accompanying rather than replacing Scripture reading. The idea that women should not only practice private Scripture reading but that they could also potentially speak about their readings with other Christians was also a new idea that opened up possibilities for women's meetings and even mixed-gender meetings.

The idea of the spiritual priesthood of all believers included women in the private ministerial aspects of the church. As such, women were recognized for much of the Christian ministry they already performed—caring for the sick, visiting others, teaching their children, and so forth—as

17. und 18. Jahrhunderts: *Konfessionelles Zeitalter-Pietismus-Aufklärung*, ed. Peter Walter and Martin H. Jung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003), 117.

45. See Philipp Jakob Spener, *Briefe aus der Frankfurter Zeit, 1666–1686*, ed. Johannes Wallmann, et al., 5 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992–2010); Philipp Jakob Spener, *Briefe aus der Dresdener Zeit, 1686–1691*, ed. Johannes Wallmann, et al., 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003–2017).

well as granted increased possibilities. Spener often praised women for their efforts at social work and care for the poor, actions that exemplified his emphasis on living the Christian life. His emphasis on practice reinforced the available, though limited, role of women in his vision of a collected pious group that could reform the church and the world. Nevertheless, all of these tasks performed by women remained firmly within the private realm. Women were not engaged in public teaching or sacramental roles. All of this took place within a patriarchal system ruled over by the man of the house or the minister. Spener did not suggest a change in the church structure but instead reinforced the existing patriarchy by advising extensive ministerial oversight, even in the homes of parishioners for small group meetings. It was a spiritual priesthood, but a priesthood that always operated under the careful oversight of a watchful clergyman.

Expanding the Idea: *The Spiritual Priesthood*

The spiritual priesthood was the first of Spener's reforming ideas to require a rigorous defense. Only two years after the publication of *Pia Desideria*, Spener was compelled to write a treatise entitled, *The Spiritual Priesthood* (1677). Apparently some readers misinterpreted his intentions, either purposefully or accidentally, and charged Spener with wanting to eliminate the clergy. Thus Spener set out to defend what he meant by the phrase "spiritual priesthood." In his apology he outlined seventy points on the spiritual priesthood in a question and answer format that resembled contemporary catechisms and therefore could double as an instructional tool. While *Pia Desideria* received criticism for relying too heavily on supporting citations from Lutheran and non-Lutheran sources, in this treatise Spener supported almost every claim with biblical texts. This argumentation style made him vulnerable to the accusation of proof-texting, but it also addressed the complaint that he did not adequately ground his ideas in Scripture.

Spener pointed to 1 Peter 2:9 as the biblical foundation for the spiritual priesthood: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Spener claimed that he used the term in the same way as this verse, which explicitly called the Christian community a priesthood. He further legitimated the idea on specifically Lutheran grounds, invoking Luther's definition "by which not only ministers, but also all Christians have been made priests

through their Redeemer, anointed with the Holy Spirit, and consecrated to spiritual priestly functions.”⁴⁶ Thus Spener employed both Scripture and traditional authorities to support his use of the “spiritual priesthood.”

Spener differentiated between private ministerial roles open to all Christians and public duties that required clerical supervision. According to Spener, the papacy had eliminated the role of the laity by placing so much emphasis on clerical leadership, thus weakening lay involvement in Christian life. While ordained ministers served distinct roles, the ministry of instructing, admonishing, reproofing, and comforting others belonged to all believers.⁴⁷ He described the common spiritual priesthood as “the right which our Savior Jesus Christ has purchased for all men, and for which He anoints all believers with His Holy Spirit, in virtue of which they may and shall bring sacrifices acceptable to God, pray for themselves and others, and severally edify themselves and their neighbor.”⁴⁸ All baptized believers participated in these priestly tasks. In fact, every Christian was obliged to

Offer prayer, thanks, good works, alms, etc. for himself and what pertains to him, but also to study the Word of the Lord earnestly and to teach, reprove, exhort, convert, edify others, especially those of his own house as grace is given to him, to observe their life, to pray for all, and as much as possible to have a care for their salvation.⁴⁹

For most Christians, these activities would have occurred primarily in the home and involved caring for people in the same household. Spener thus maintained a distinction between private roles assumed by all and public roles fulfilled by clergy.

Who are the spiritual priests? Spener described them as “all Christians

46. Phillip Jakob Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, trans. A.G. Voigt (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1917), 11. I have used two English translations of this text as well as the critical German edition, “Das Geistliche Priesterthum,” in *Die Werke Philipp Jakob Speners Studienausgabe, Band 1: Grundschriften, Pt. 1*, ed. Kurt Aland and Beata Köster (Giessen: Brunnen, 1996), 425–552. When the title of the work appears in italics, it is from the Voigt translation; when in quotation marks, it is from Erb’s translation: Spener, “The Spiritual Priesthood: Briefly Described according to the Word of God in Seventy Questions and Answers,” in *Pietists: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Peter Erb (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 93–114.

47. Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, 15.

48. *Ibid.*, 15.

49. *Ibid.*, 13.

without distinction, 1 Peter 2:9, old and young, male and female, bond and free, Galatians 3:28.”⁵⁰ In the spiritual realm, men and women had the same rights and obligations because they gained membership to the Christian community in the same way and shared the same promises of salvation. Indeed, Spener maintained that all Christians should be referred to as priests.⁵¹ Thus Spener affirmed the notion of spiritual equality of all men and women, espoused by Luther himself.

What does the spiritual priesthood do, and what are the implications for women as spiritual priests? According to Spener, the spiritual priesthood contained three offices: sacrifice, praying and blessing, and the divine word.⁵² Sacrifice concerned the desire to serve God before serving self. The practical manifestation of this sacrificial posture was to “offer our bodies for God’s glory rather than for sinful activities, by suppressing their evil desires.”⁵³ In other words, the Christian must forego the evils of drinking, inappropriate sexual activity, dancing, and even overeating in submission to Christ. This statement cast submission as a universal Christian virtue rather than a particularly feminine one. An emphasis on Christian submission could help universalize that virtue, but the emphasis on sacrifice could also reinforce existing social hierarchies. Encouraging sacrifice could urge women into a more submissive role or bolster existing class structures.

The second office of the spiritual priesthood was praying and blessing. The Christian interceded on behalf of others through prayer.⁵⁴ Christ prayed for the future church, and so Christians also needed to pray for each other and for their fellow humans.

The third office involved “spiritual priests... let[ting] the Word of God dwell richly among them.” What exactly did this mean? Here too Spener differentiated between public and private offices: “To exercise the office [of preaching] publicly in the congregation before all and over all requires a *special call*.”⁵⁵ Preaching required the approval of the official institutional structure as recognized through the avenues of calling and ordination. If someone attempted to preach outside this approved struc-

50. Ibid., 16.

51. Spener, “The Spiritual Priesthood,” 51.

52. Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, 17.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 19–20.

55. Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, 20, emphasis original.

ture, it would be sinful.⁵⁶ As Spener elaborated, “some are teachers and others hearers whose respective duties toward each other are treated in the *Table of Duties*.”⁵⁷ Women were restricted to the category of “hearers” who should not and could not take part in the public office of the divine word.

Instead of preaching, all Christians should read Scripture or hear it read.⁵⁸ Scripture reading aimed to provide the laity with a working knowledge of the faith, so that they did not base their faith on the preacher but rather on the word he preached. Therefore, Christians should study Scripture together in groups. According to Spener, even his uneducated contemporaries could understand Scripture because the apostles wrote predominantly to uneducated people.⁵⁹ He did warn that some parts of the Bible were difficult, but “the principal points of doctrine and rules of life are given in the Scriptures so clearly and according to the letter that any uneducated man can learn and comprehend them as well as the learned.”⁶⁰ Moreover, the Holy Spirit would help the simplest Christians understand Scripture. Spener even urged all Christians to learn Hebrew and Greek, while simultaneously acknowledging that Scripture was translated into the vernacular so anyone could gain knowledge of Christianity.⁶¹ He left open the possibility that women too could learn biblical languages, again putting much greater trust in women’s ability to learn than had previous generations of Lutheran clergy.

Spener described a method for Bible study in detail: pray for the Holy Spirit’s aid in understanding, read with an eye to self-application and edification, apply what is clear, pass over what is incomprehensible and return to it later, humbly receive whatever God reveals, and speak about Scripture with godly ministers and other Christians.⁶² This technique relied on a progressive understanding of Scripture in which God revealed the truths of Scripture to the believer over time. Spener warned that if Christians studied the Bible in other ways they might harm themselves by relying too much on reason.⁶³ Spener also addressed the question of

56. Spener, “The Spiritual Priesthood,” 54.

57. Ibid.

58. Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, 20.

59. Ibid., 21.

60. Ibid., 22.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., 24.

63. Ibid., 25.

whether such Bible study among all Christians could possibly lead to disorder. He reassured his readers that only if the study aimed at carnal knowledge or focused on disputations, rather than developing knowledge, could it cause disruption.⁶⁴ He did not imply that women studying Scripture would be directly disruptive in any way. However, he also stated that Christians must not neglect their appointed secular duties in order to study Scripture.⁶⁵ Men should not quit working and cease providing for their families out of their desire to study Scripture. Women should not neglect their tasks at home and let their children run wild. These responsibilities were God-given, and therefore the Christian fulfilled his or her duty by accomplishing these tasks.

Spener affirmed that the primary applications of Scripture, “teaching, correcting, and disciplining,” were appropriate activities for all Christians.⁶⁶ But he again asserted a strong separation between public and private ministerial roles, noting that women should perform those tasks “privately rather than publicly.”⁶⁷

Women as (Private) Spiritual Priests

Spener directly addressed women’s involvement in sections fifty-nine to sixty-one of *The Spiritual Priesthood*. He first posed the question: Should all Christians teach, convert, admonish, reprove, comfort, and so forth? He answered, “Yes, and that too not only in the sense that fathers and mothers should faithfully do these things among their children and domestics, but that every Christian has the power and right to do these things among his brethren on other occasions, as the passages referred to prove.”⁶⁸ Honing in on the spiritual equality of men and women, Spener then asked, “But do women also share the priestly offices?”⁶⁹ He answered:

Assuredly; for here is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus, Gal. 3:28. In Christ, therefore the difference between man and woman, in regard to what is spiritual, is abolished, since God dignifies

64. Ibid., 26.

65. Ibid., 27.

66. Ibid., 29.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid., 30. Spener points to Deuteronomy 6:6, 7; Ephesians 6:4; and 2 Timothy 3:15.

69. Ibid., 31.

believing women also with his spiritual gifts, Joel 2:28–29; Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5, the exercise of them in proper order cannot be forbidden. The apostles themselves make mention of these godly women, who worked together with them and edified them, for this they accorded them love and praise for it, Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:1–2, 12; Phil. 4:2–3; Titus 2:3–5.⁷⁰

Spener affirmed women's spiritual equality, citing Galatians 3:28. He additionally acknowledged that women are recipients of spiritual gifts and refers to women in Scripture who worked with—not under—the apostles. Spener appears to support a cooperative vision in which the majority of men and women share gifts and work to support ministry. However, the subsequent question restricted the extent of women's ministry, asking, "But are women not forbidden to teach?" Here the division between public and private spheres governed. It is true, Spener said, that women are forbidden to teach "in the public congregation," marshaling 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 as scriptural support.⁷¹ Thus Spener's view of the spiritual priesthood—and spiritual equality of men and women—ultimately reaffirmed existing constructions of women's roles within the church, limiting women to private activity.

It is at this point in *The Spiritual Priesthood* Spener addressed the role of women within the conventicle, one of the hallmarks of Pietism. In *Pia Desideria*, he had suggested that "several good friends sometimes meet by appointment to go over a sermon together and recall what they heard, to read in Scripture, and to confer in the fear of the Lord how they may put into practice what they read."⁷² Such gatherings complicated the confining of women's priestly duties to the private sphere. A conventicle took place in the private sphere, but it appeared to be a public meeting. This blurring of the dividing line between public and private posed difficulties. If women were permitted to teach in private, could they teach at these gatherings? Perhaps even teach men?

The answers to these questions are complicated by Spener's letters to Pietist women and his public defense of their leadership. In his letters to noblewomen, he encouraged them to establish devotional exercises in their homes, and he was aware that they often led such meetings.⁷³

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. See for example Spener, *Briefe aus der Frankfurter Zeit*, I:554, II:391–92, II:110.

In 1677, the same year he wrote *The Spiritual Priesthood*, Spener was involved in defending his friend Anna Elisabeth Kissner for leading a conventicle in her home and for reportedly preaching. Spener defended her in writing as an honest, pious, and sensible woman who would not challenge church authority.⁷⁴ He seemed generally opposed to women leading conventicles, but on the other hand was willing to defend women who did. His underlying concern that such leadership should not lead to separatism is on full display in *The Spiritual Priesthood*, where he specifies that the conventicle gatherings “*should not be large*, so as not to have the appearance of a *separation* and a *public assembly*. Nor should [the people], by reason of them *neglect* the public worship or *condemn it or disdain the ordained ministers*.”⁷⁵ Clearly, Spener here indirectly addressed the fact that a conventicle in Frankfurt that contained many of his own friends and co-religionists had begun to exhibit separatist tendencies. Thus Spener wanted to defend the practice while simultaneously rejecting the activities that were presenting conflict in the church.

Rather, he insisted that no one should neglect their jobs as parents and workers or set themselves up as teachers.⁷⁶ Moreover, Spener made clear that uneducated persons should not take up the deep questions and difficult passages of Scripture.⁷⁷ Here he did not offer the laity a new role and again attempted to head off further accusations that the *collegia* would be unsupervised.

What becomes increasingly clear is that Spener wanted to reassure his clerical readers that if they adopted his reform proposals, they would not find themselves in a world where laity overran clergy and disorder reigned. As he stated, “If *proper care* is not exercised to *keep all within bounds*, this, like every other good thing, may by the fault of men result in harm. But this is not to be feared if *both* the ministry and the *spiritual* priests perform their duty according to the rules of Christ.”⁷⁸ In his effort to ensure that the spiritual priesthood did not upset contemporary notions of social order, Spener clearly outlined the roles of women in a way that reflected and reinforced patriarchal norms that focused on

74. Philipp Jakob Spener, “Letztes Theologisches Bedenken,” *Schriften*, ed. Erich Beyreuther (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1984–2001), XV/2, 185.

75. Spener, “The Spiritual Priesthood,” 63, emphasis original.

76. Spener, *The Spiritual Priesthood*, 32.

77. Spener, “The Spiritual Priesthood,” 63.

78. *Ibid.*, 64, emphasis original.

the spiritual rather than practical equality of women. While a generous reading certainly reveals places where the possibility for expanded activity for women in the church is mentioned, the overriding need to reinforce order ultimately won the day.

Spener's *Spiritual Priesthood* formulated guidelines for women's behavior characterized by a juxtaposition of encouragement and restriction. His position on women's involvement in the church did not differ drastically from Luther's. Yet there is something new here. Spener expanded the private sphere to include a variety of activities such as traveling, interacting with men and women, and even studying the Bible. He maintained a widespread correspondence with both men and women. In his letters he frequently encouraged women both to engage in personal Bible study and, particularly noblewomen, to lead devotions in their homes. He also supported women's written opinions because he did not consider written work a violation of the teaching prohibition; rather, he fundamentally supported women in publishing their works as a private act. While the works he encouraged were generally devotional in nature, such as hymns or piety manuals for children, he saw these as works produced for an individual and then brought to others. In his own work, *Nature and Grace*, he included an appendix composed by his friend Anna Elisabeth Kissner, which compared quotations from German mystics to his own writing.⁷⁹ He acknowledged that Johanna Petersen's written works had produced fruit, even while lamenting her Philadelphian eschatological ideas.⁸⁰

In the sixteenth century, religious practice and the family were both public matters. The church and state were involved routinely in the administration and observation of religious and familial activity.⁸¹ Yet the seventeenth century saw a shift toward what, by the end of the early modern period, would become a clearer delineation between public and private spheres.⁸² That Spener stands in the midst of this shift is evi-

79. August Nebe, "Aus Speners Dresdener Breifen an eine Freundin in Frankfurt am Main," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 106 (1934/35): 279, 282; "Aus Speners Berliner Briefen an eine Freundin in Frankfurt," *Jahrbuch für Brandenburgische Kirchengeschichte* 30 (1935): 125.

80. Nebe, "Aus Speners Dresdener Briefen," 290.

81. Merry Wiesner, "Women's Response to the Reformation," in R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The German People and the Reformation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 164.

82. Anna Clark, "Comment," *Journal of Women's History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 115–16.

dent in the fact that his descriptions of public and private life appear at times to conflict. His ambivalence reflects a larger societal shift toward decreased observation of private activities, provided they did not create social disruption.

Conclusion

Spener provided parameters for women's activity in the church, stressing their spiritual equality and exercise of the spiritual priesthood within the private sphere.⁸³ He did not allow women access to preaching, teaching, or sacramental roles, upholding the traditional position of the church. His proposals about women reading the Bible were joined by the injunction that they not neglect their household tasks. Spener's overriding concern when dealing with women in his published writings was to assure his readers that he did not intend to create any sort of disruption in either the ecclesial or social sphere. In all his statements, he was clearly concerned with upholding the contemporary patriarchal system with only minor adjustments made for women to take part in limited new ways, but always in a fashion that did not threaten to disrupt the patriarchal system or the societal hierarchy. Ultimately, as Stein suggested, Spener was a man of his times when it came to his public dealings with women and the piety that he encouraged. However, by broadening the scope of private religious activities, he provided some new opportunities, some unforeseen, for women in early modern Europe. In this way, his encouragement of the spiritual priesthood of all believers went beyond the expectations of his time in recognizing and appreciating a greater variety of roles laywomen could fulfill in the church.

83. Albrecht, "Frauen," 524–26.