

The Sad Case of Francesco Spiera

By Wes Bredenhof

There was a time when the name of Francesco Spiera (or Francis Spira) was well-known throughout the Reformed churches of Europe. His story frightened, inspired, and motivated many. It was a story repeated numerous times in all the languages of Europe. His story caught the attention of John Calvin and many other Reformed theologians. Spiera became an example and a warning. Yet today his name is all but forgotten. I'd never heard of him until recently coming across a reference to him in a book written in the seventeenth century. I doubt that you've heard of him. But I think you should know, because his life and death are still instructive, as are the reactions that followed.

The Life and Death of Francesco Spiera

Francesco Spiera (ca. 1504-1548) was an Italian. We know nothing about his childhood or upbringing. What is written about him focuses entirely on the last years of his life. He appears out of the blue as a lawyer working in the region of Venice. He was an intelligent man with a solid reputation and a faithful Roman Catholic. He was married and had eleven children.

Spiera's world was turned upside down in the early 1540s when Reformation writings appeared for sale in his area. He apparently purchased some of these writings. He compared these writings with the Bible and became convinced that Reformation theology was biblical. Moreover, he didn't keep his new faith to himself. He taught it to his family and his friends and to whomever would listen.

In November of 1547, some of his neighbours denounced him to the Roman Inquisition. The Inquisition existed to stamp out heresies and errors and whatever challenged the authority and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Spiera was put on trial in Venice in May of 1548. Among other things, his possession of an Italian Calvinistic classic, *Beneficio di Cristo*, was evidence that he had set out on a road away from Rome. The trial lasted into June of 1548 and at the end he was commanded to retract his Protestant beliefs publicly and to buy an altar-piece for his local Roman Catholic Church building. He appears to have followed these instructions.

Problems set in almost immediately afterwards. Spiera had second thoughts about his abjuration. He reportedly heard the voice of the Son of God accusing him for having denied the gospel and telling him that he was now a reprobate condemned to hell. He fell ill and spent most of his time in bed suffering from physical pain and emotional despair. Friends and family tried to reason with him. Roman Catholic theologians and priests made an effort to convince him, and when that failed, they attempted to exorcise whatever demon was tormenting him. Spiera continued to despair. He died in that condition on December 27, 1548. Some say that he died of despair, others that he took his own life.

The Danger of Apostasy

We live in a comfortable age at the moment. Stories such as the one about Spiera seem entirely disconnected from our reality. We would never face an Inquisition for being or becoming Reformed. At least not at the moment. However, we should not assume that things will always continue to be the way they are. A day could come when you are dragged before a court and pressured to repudiate the gospel and your Saviour. Spiera's story reminds us that betraying our Saviour comes at a cost.

The story of Francesco Spiera was used by both Protestants and Roman Catholics to advance their agendas. Roman Catholics used Spiera's story to warn their people about the dangers of even departing from Rome in the first place. Protestants used the story to warn people what could happen if they were to abjure their biblical faith. Historians recognize that the historical accounts are coloured by these agendas. Yet both Roman Catholics and Protestant reports of Spiera's demise highlight the enormous suffering and despair that he endured because he did not stand strong one way or another. I think we can say with certainty that this is a historical fact and it's something instructive for us.

Protestant Reflections on Spiera

It's also instructive to survey the different ways in which Protestants have treated the case of Francesco Spiera. One of the earliest commentaries comes from John Calvin. In 1549 Calvin wrote a preface to an account of Spiera's despair. Calvin used Spiera as an example in his struggle with the Nicodemites. The Nicodemites, like Nicodemus, were secret believers. They were people who held to Reformed theology, but continued to remain in the Roman Catholic Church. Spiera was an example of what could happen to such people. But Calvin went further than this and explicitly declared judgment on Spiera. Calvin referred to him as an example of the reprobate who "never fail to proceed from one sin to another." His despair was God's justice on him, a justice that came to full fervour after his death. Calvin essentially asserted that Spiera had been consigned by God to eternal destruction and his betrayal of the faith gave evidence of his reprobation.

Subsequent Protestant theologians and authors took a similar line. The English Reformer and martyr Hugh Latimer (ca. 1487-1555) asserted that Spiera had sinned against the Holy Spirit – committing the unpardonable sin. In 1865, a book of poems was published by the Englishman James Hain Friswell. The first one is about Francesco Spiera and its opening lines clearly indicate where the author believes Spiera ended up:

The words of Francis Spira, man of Law,
 A man in sin begotten and conceived,
 Reaping damnation, which he much deserved,
 Dying with friends about him whose vain words
 Would comfort him whose doom is fix'd past help!

Similarly, on a couple of occasions the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) referred to Spiera and compared him to Judas Iscariot. While he did not come right out and declare that Spiera was reprobate, there is a hint of it.

Another Line

However, there is another line in Protestant reflections on Francesco Spiera. It's found both among Reformed writers and Lutherans during the seventeenth century. The post-Reformation was far kinder and sympathetic to Spiera's case than many before and after.

Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) is one of the giants of the Reformed faith in the seventeenth century. He taught theology at the University of Utrecht. He is remembered for his deft blending of serious academic thought with warm-hearted commitment to Christ. Some of his books were written exclusively for an academic audience. Others were written for the common Reformed person. One of those was a book entitled *Spiritual Desertion* (*Geestelijke Verlatigen*), first published in Dutch in 1646. In this book (which has been translated into English), Voetius mentions the case of Spiera twice. The first time is in a discussion about the circumstances that most frequently accompany a feeling of desertion by God. He mentions persecutions, diseases as well as considerable physical weakness which leads to death. And he writes that an example of this is what happened with Spiera. He adds, "This history ought to be read and can be read, since it available in more than one language."

He comes back to Spiera later. Voetius notes that when it comes to judging what happened to Spiera, he is in agreement with the assessment of the English Puritan William Perkins, the German Reformer Wolfgang Musculus, and even Arminius. Voetius writes:

For certainly one must not give credence to their cries or confessions of despair, because that voice is not a voice of credibility or truth but of weakness; it is not making a statement but expressing a doubt...Finally, even if it were the case that they were not restored inwardly before their death but departed during a severe attack of insensibility and temptation, nothing certain could be concluded about their final and total impenitence and unbelief. This could be done only if it were first established that actual, particular, and always ensuring repentance and remorse (renewed after every sin) is absolutely and indispensably necessary to salvation. (*Spiritual Desertion*, 53)

According to Voetius then, it is inappropriate to claim that Spiera was reprobate because of the manner in which he died.

Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617-1666) was a disciple of Voetius. Voetius actually never finished writing *Spiritual Desertion*, so he commissioned Hoornbeeck to complete it. Hoornbeeck wrote a lot more about Spiera, but it was all along the same lines as that of Voetius. A short quote will give you an idea of what he thought:

[Spiera] did want to return to God but thought that he could not do so. We silently pass by the judgment that others have pronounced. On the basis of his burning desire and his heartfelt longing for God and his grace (longing that he frequently displayed), we consider ourselves duty-bound to suspend our judgment – if not to speak in his favour. (*Spiritual Desertion*, 86)

Hoornbeeck considered Spiera to be a “frightening example” but yet he believed that Spiera’s despair and spiritual struggle could not be evidence of reprobation. After all, the reprobate give no care to their standing before God.

The last author I can mention is Johannes Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688), an orthodox Lutheran theologian from the seventeenth century. He discusses Spiera’s case in an important academic work entitled *Theologica Didactico-Polemica*. It comes up in a discussion regarding the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is what Quenstedt concluded:

Spiera must be held least of all to have sinned against the Holy Spirit, because: 1) he defected to the papacy, not from malice, but from weakness; not by his own will and initiative, but through the persuasion of friends. 2) He did not impugn or blaspheme the doctrine of the Gospel, but he was greatly pained that he had defected from the truth. It was therefore assuredly despair, but not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit... (*Theologica Didactico-Polemica* (1715), Vol. 1, 1064, translation mine)

Thus also Quenstedt regarded Spiera as a sad case, but not one in which observers can make a definite conclusion as to the Italian’s eternal destiny.

The Take-Aways

The post-Reformation period showed a remarkable degree of mature, biblical analysis of the Spiera case. There was much more hesitancy to jump to conclusions regarding Spiera’s ultimate destination, whether that be heaven or hell. Instead, the post-Reformation theologians that we’ve surveyed believed that Spiera suffered despair, even a sort of depression. While he brought it on himself through his betrayal of the faith, the fact that he was in so much pain up till his death does not disqualify him from the kingdom of God.

As mentioned above, today we don’t face the immediate possibility of persecution. Yet there are still countless people in our churches who suffer with despair and depression. Sometimes, sadly, we even hear about those who take their own lives – as Spiera may have done. Spiera’s story and the way the post-Reformation writers worked with it teach us to be careful when making judgments about someone’s spiritual state. Struggle, doubts and difficulties are not indicative of reprobation, even when they culminate in suicide.

Sometimes the post-Reformation is wrongly described as a period of aridity in Reformed theology, as a low point in our heritage. The story of Spiera indicates that there is much that we can still learn from men like Voetius, Hoornbeeck and even Quenstedt (Lutheran that he

was). These were men who valued faithfulness and precision in their theology, but it never came at the cost of passion for Christ and compassion for those who suffer. One can only hope that we'll see more post-Reformation material coming into English translation.