

# The Standard Bearer

A Reformed semi-monthly magazine

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## Reformation issue

The French  
Reformation

### A letter of comfort to believers

Pierre Viret

### Lessons from the Reformation in France

Prof. Russell Dykstra

### Geneva's influence on the French Reformed churches

Rev. Jonathan Langerak

### Moïse Amyraut and hypothetical universalism

Rev. Martyn McGeown

### Calvin and the Nicodemites

Rev. Kenneth Koole



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#### On the cover: St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre

Eye-witness portrayal by Francois Dubois (Huguenot refugee, c. 1529), depicts Admiral Coligny's body hanging out of a window at the rear to the right. To the left rear, Catherine de Medici is shown emerging from the Château du Louvre to inspect a heap of bodies. The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572 was a targeted group of assassinations, followed by a wave of Roman Catholic mob violence, both directed against the Huguenots, during the French Wars of Religion. Traditionally believed to have been instigated by Catherine de Medici, the massacre began on August 23, 1572, two days after the attempted assassination of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, the military and political leader of the Huguenots. The king ordered the killing of a group of Huguenot leaders, including Coligny, and the slaughter spread throughout Paris. Lasting several weeks, the massacre expanded outward to other urban centers and the countryside. Modern estimates for the number of dead vary widely, from 5,000 to 30,000.



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## Meditation

Pierre Viret, 1511-1571

# A letter of comfort to believers\*

To all those who suffer persecution for the name of Jesus, greetings.

Grace, peace, and mercy from God our Father through Jesus Christ our Lord, who desires to comfort and strengthen you by His Holy Spirit in the midst of the trials and afflictions of this miserable world, in order that you might not faint, but instead persevere with great steadfastness of heart in the grace in which you were called, casting the anchor of your hope upon Jesus, who reigns in heaven at the right hand of the Father Almighty, who does not allow a single hair of our head to fall to the earth apart from His will (Matt 10:29-31). He alone does all He pleases, and wills nothing which shall not serve to His own honor and glory and to the salvation, edification, and consolation of His elect, for whom He makes all things work for good (Rom. 8:28).

My dear brethren, seeing that we are members of Jesus, we must not be surprised or astonished if we are partakers of His cross and suffering. For if we desire to reign with Him we must likewise suffer with Him (II Tim. 2:12). Seeing that He is our Head and we His members, the Head cannot travel by one road and the members by another, but the entire body and all its members must follow the head which guides and governs it.

If then our Head was crowned with thorns, we cannot be a member of His body if we do not feel their pricks and if their pain does not pierce our heart. If our King and sovereign Master was naked and bloodied, covered with reproaches, disgrace, and blasphemies, and nailed to and hanged upon the cross, we must not expect to slumber ever at our ease in this world, and to be exalted with honors and dignities, dressed in purple, velvet, and silk (as the wicked rich man), having all our carnal pleasures and sensual delights met in this world below (Luke 16:19).

If the Lord Jesus in His great torments, after having

shed His blood, being near to commending His spirit to His Father, was not even given water to drink, but instead His thirst was quenched with nothing but vinegar, gall, and myrrh, are we surprised if we do not daily enjoy rich and sweet wines and sumptuous meats to satisfy the carnal desires of our flesh?

There are precious few things we could endure that would come close to what the Lord Jesus suffered for us, who, recognizing the weakness of our flesh, does not place upon our shoulders a weight too great or pressing for us to bear. For as the apostle said, “God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able” (I Cor. 10:13), but will give a good end to the trial, which shall yield a goodly fruit. The heavenly Father who holds us in His safekeeping and protection knows and understands what we lack better than we ourselves, and when He visits us with adversities and gives the rein to tyrants to afflict us, He only allows or permits this for our great good in order that our faith—which is more precious than gold (I Pet. 1:7)—might be tested and well proved in the fire and furnace of tribulation, in order that the dross and all false metal might be separated.

We know also that, just as the fire consumes the rust if it is not put to use, so likewise the Church and believers immediately become corrupted and prone to slumber in this world if they are not roused and exercised by sufficient troubles. For the flesh is always flesh, and possesses no cure within itself, and thinks no further than of itself and its carnal pleasures, forsaking heaven to remain on earth, and preferring the worldly pleasures which suddenly perish over heavenly and eternal goods. Therefore the Lord wills through many ways to test and prove us, to reveal to us our true selves and all the evils and miseries of this world, that we might not rest our heart and hopes upon it, nor make it our paradise, and that our flesh might not be intoxicated with it, but to the contrary that we would recognize that all is corruptible and fleeting, that nothing is permanent, but that all passes away as the wind and vanishes as a vapor, that man’s life (which is much worthier of being called *war* and *continual death* than *life*) passes as a shadow. We must seek another life; we must set our hearts on

\* Taken from *Letters of Comfort to the Persecuted Church*. Pierre Viret. R.A. Sheats, transl. (Monticello, FL: Psalm 78 Ministries, 2015). Used by permission. For more on this man and his labors on behalf of the French Reformation, see Rev. J. Maatman’s article, page 56.

high, and with Abraham lift our eyes from the earth to fix them upon heaven, and there seek a permanent and eternal city in which there is no change, poverty, misery, tears, weeping, grief, worry, or sorrow, but eternal happiness and bliss, where the Lord dries and wipes away all tears from the eyes of His children and servants, where there is no night, and the sun never sets (Is. 25:8; Rev. 7:16-17, 21:23).

This, my well-beloved brethren, is a lesson which must be learned in the school of persecution and in tyrants' prisons and dungeons, from which the children of God learn and profit more than the students of the philosophers and sophists in their schools....

My brethren, let us thus regard the afflictions and persecutions that we endure in this valley of misery, for they are great blessings of God to instruct us how to mortify our flesh, to crucify and put off the old man in order that the new might be endued with greater vigor, and to humble our sensual and carnal flesh—so prideful and rebellious against the will of God—that we might be made obedient and subject to the Spirit (II Cor. 5:1-5, 14-15).

Indeed, if persecution were not a singular blessing of God, we would be constrained to look upon God our

Father as bitter, harsh, and severe toward His children because He allowed His servants the prophets, apostles, and martyrs—indeed, even His own Son Jesus Christ the King and Ruler of all—to be thus treated by wicked and unbelieving men.

Although the flesh complains because it knows not to await life in death and blessing in cursing, nevertheless faith teaches and persuades us, and by experience we recognize and see that though we are forsaken by all the world and humbled to the very gates of hell, we feel the powerful hand of God reclaiming us, which makes our blood cry out as that of Abel, and terrify the murderers (Gen. 4:10; Matt. 23:34-35), declaring that those who suffer and die for Him do not die at all, but instead conquer death and become victors, and with Samson kill more by their death than by their life (Judg. 16:30). Their death is stronger and more powerful than the life of the wicked and reprobates, who live trembling upon the earth as Cain, fearfully awaiting the judgment of God as the worm of their conscience continually gnaws away at them, driving them to despair, so much so that quite often they are (like Judas) their own executioners and murderers. They seek death, and it flees from them.

## Editor's notes

What comes to mind when you hear (or read) of “the French Reformation”? Most, I suspect, have little knowledge of this aspect of the sixteenth-century Reformation that began in Wittenberg (Luther), and spread through many countries in Europe. The great majority of our readers come from a European context (ethnically and theologically) other than France. Many are tied to the Reformation in the Netherlands by blood lines. Theologically, we connect with Martin Luther in Germany and John Calvin in Geneva. A very small group has ties to French Huguenots (the term used to identify Reformed believers in France). Consequently, France is mostly remembered as the country *from which* came better known Reformation figures like Farel, Calvin, and Beza. Another factor in this vacuum of knowledge on the French Reformation is that there is no church in France today that exists in number or theological strength (that is, orthodoxy) that one could even recognize as a Reformed church.

This issue of the *Standard Bearer* is intended to fill some of that vacuum. The Reformation in any country is worth knowing. For, first, the church is one, and that makes the Reformation anywhere, including in France, part of our history. Second, reformation is a work of Jesus Christ who gathers, defends, and preserves His

church in that time and place. We can and we ought to rejoice in the work of Christ. As you read on, you will learn of the unique events and characteristics of Christ's work of reforming His church in France.

This issue contains several short articles—intentionally so. We asked three men to limit their material to one page. And they came close, though with much struggle and anguish on what had to be omitted. We appreciate their strenuous efforts. Many thanks to all the writers for their well researched and well written articles.

I wish to thank Erika Kiel for her excellent work on the design. Erika is our go-to designer for all of our special issues. Although a busy wife (to Bryan) and mother of three young children, when we give her a topic, she goes to work finding pictures and ideas for the magazine. We appreciate Erika's zeal and hard work, and trust that the reader will take note of her enhancement of the issue.

And finally, a work of thanks to our book editor, Charles Terpstra, for providing the bibliography on the French Reformation. If this issue piques your interest, this list of books will serve as an excellent guide to further reading.

With that, we offer to you the annual Reformation Day issue of the *Standard Bearer*—the French Reformation.

## Timeline of the French Reformation

- 1489—Birth of William Farel near Gap, France.  
1509, July 10—Birth of John Calvin in Noyon, France.  
1519, June 24—Birth of Theodore Beza in Veزالay, France.  
1521, August 3—The French Parliament prohibits anyone to possess Luther's works.  
1525—The French Parliament authorizes the arrest of those suspected of being Reformed believers.  
1533, November 2—Disguised as a farmer, Calvin flees Paris.  
1534, October 18—The Affair of the Placards.  
1540, June 1—Francis I issues the Edict of Fontainebleau (against Protestants)  
1541—The first French edition of Calvin's *Institutes* is published.  
1547—The burning chambers are created to punish Protestants.  
1551, June 27—Henry II issues the Edict of Châteaubriant (against Protestants).  
1555—First Reformed congregation in France is openly organized.  
1557, July 24—Henry II issues the Edict of Compiègne (against Protestants).  
1559—First French Reformed national synod is held in Paris.  
1561, January 28—Edict of Orleans (somewhat tolerant of Protestants).  
1561, October 9—Colloquy of Poissy (conference between Catholics and Protestants) concludes.  
1562, January 17—Edict of St. Germain (somewhat tolerant of Protestants)  
1562, March 1—Massacre of Vassy.  
1563, March 19—Edict of Amboise. Ends the first religious war; somewhat tolerant of Protestants)  
1570, August 8—Peace of St. Germain. Ends the third religious war; reiterates the rights of Protestants.  
1572, August 24—St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.  
1593, July 25—Henry IV becomes a Roman Catholic.  
1598, April 13—Edict of Nantes (very favorable to Protestants)  
1620s—The Huguenot rebellions  
1629, June 28—The Peace of Alais ends the religious wars, grants some favors to the Huguenots, but restricts their political rights.  
1685, October 18—Edict of Fontainebleau (revokes the Edict of Nantes).



### Editorial

Prof. Russell Dykstra, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

## Lessons from the Reformation in France

The Reformation is the work of God, not man. God reforms His church. God raises up men of understanding, courage, and strength for the purpose of using these men for church reformation, just as God raised up judges in the Old Testament. But even then, reformation begins in the heart of such men. The Spirit works a personal conviction of sin and unworthiness, a strong faith in Christ, and the assurance of salvation. The Spirit works in these men godliness and integrity. And God uses them in His time and way. No reformer sets out thinking that he is God's instrument who will lead the reformation. When Moses thought that, God sent him to the wilderness to tend sheep for forty years. In most instances, reformers are most reluctant men whom God virtually drags into the conflict. That was the experience of Martin Luther and John Calvin. But use them God does, as *He* graciously reforms His church.

The great sixteenth-century Reformation in France

confirms the reality that church reformation is God's work. From a human point of view, reform was impossible. In the early 1500s, France was a staunch supporter of the church of Rome. The French nobility and many church offices—bishops and archbishops—were intertwined. It was not unusual that an archbishop, himself from an aristocratic family, passed his office on either to the highest bidder, to a relative, or to both. Historically, France had close links with the papacy. For seventy years in the fourteenth century seven popes forsook the city of Rome and sat on the papal throne in the French city of Avignon, which city was yet in the sixteenth century a center of financial power and dreadful corruption in the church. In 1516, the pope and the French king struck an agreement (Concordat of Bologna) that gave to the king the right to appoint bishops in France and granted to the crown a portion of the church's income in France. Clearly, there was

little incentive for the king of France to support the Reformation.

In addition, the leading theological university in Europe was the Sorbonne in Paris. When a significant theological conflict arose, the Sorbonne was considered the authority. The Sorbonne condemned Luther in 1521 as an enemy of the church of Christ who “vomited up a doctrine of pestilence.”

And finally, the dreaded Inquisition had been well used by church officials and kings to remove “heretics” in France and to gain the wealth of the condemned.

That the Reformation could in any way gain a foothold in France is due to the sovereign grace of God that changes hearts.

### God’s providence

A second lesson from the history in France is that God’s providence serves the good of reformation. From a negative viewpoint this is seen in the kings of France. Their quarrels with other Catholic rulers (especially Charles V) prevented them, at times, from concentrating on the eradication of Protestants from France. Other times, God removed violent persecutors from the throne (such as Henry II, who died from a wound suffered in a jousting match), which left only young sons to rule—sons who clearly could not exercise full power for a time, allowing some breathing room for the Protestants in France.

On the positive side, God converted particular individuals in France who, because of their position or extraordinary abilities, served the cause of the Reformation. Once such individual was Marguerite of Angouleme. Marguerite was the sister of the king (Francis I) and queen of the region of Navarre. A convert to Protestantism, she was able to give aid and protection to many Protestants.

And then there were the notable French ministers—William Farel, John Calvin, and Theodore Beza, to name but a few. These men expended tremendous efforts for the

Reformation in France. And though persecution in France drove them to Switzerland, they retained a keen interest in the churches in France and did all they could to promote the cause. Calvin wrote more letters to French Protestants than to any other group. His 1526 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—and every edition thereafter—included a masterful letter addressed to Francis I, demonstrating that the Protestants were loyal subjects who maintained the doctrines of Scripture. Calvin dedicated his commentary on Daniel “To all the pious worshippers of God who desire the kingdom of Christ to be rightly constituted in France.” His concern for the Reformation there is obvious (see box). God also used Theodore Beza to strengthen the Reformation in France. Beza made numerous trips to France to help guide the churches.

### Calvin’s “Dedication” begins:

“Although I have been absent these six-and-twenty years, with little regret, from that native land which I own in common with yourselves, and whose agreeable climate attracts many foreigners from the most distant quarters of the world; yet it would be in no degree pleasing or desirable to me to dwell in a region from which the Truth of God, pure Religion, and the doctrine of eternal salvation are banished, and the very kingdom of Christ laid prostrate! Hence, I have no desire to return to it; yet it would be neither in accordance with human nor Divine obligation to forget the people from which I am sprung, and to put away all regard for their welfare. I think I have given some strong proofs, how seriously and ardently I desire to benefit my fellow-countrymen, to whom perhaps my absence has been useful, in enabling them to reap the greater profit from my studies. And the contemplation of this advantage has not only deprived my banishment of its sting, but has rendered it even pleasant and joyful.

“Since, therefore, throughout the whole of this period I have publicly endeavored to benefit the inhabitants of France, and have never ceased privately to rouse the torpid, to stimulate the sluggish, to animate the trembling, and to encourage the doubtful and the wavering to perseverance, I must now strive to the utmost that my duty towards them may not fail at a period so urgent and so pressing. A most excellent opportunity has been providentially afforded to me; for in publishing the Lectures which contain my Interpretation of the Prophecies of Daniel, I have the very best occasion of showing you, beloved brethren, in this mirror, how God proves the faith of His people in these days by various trials; and how with wonderful wisdom He has taken care to strengthen their minds by ancient examples, that they should never be weakened by the concussion of the severest storms and tempests.”

### Church government

The third lesson is that the French churches understood the importance of proper church government. They looked to Theodore Beza for personal help and adopted a church order modeled after the church ordinances written by John Calvin for Geneva. The churches understood the need to be unified, not independent; to be governed by elders, not bishops and popes. By the year 1559, the French Reformed churches held their first national synod.

### Confessional

The fourth characteristic of note is that the French Reformation was confessional. The churches adopted the French Confession of Faith written by John Calvin. Later, when the Dutch churches were torn apart by the Arminian controversy, Pierre du Moulin was a staunch defender of the Reformed doctrine of sovereign grace and of the Canons of Dordrecht. (See Rev. M. DeBoer’s article for more on this, page 63.)

## Christian education

And fifth, the Reformed churches in France understood the importance of education. They maintained Christians schools for children, universities for higher education, and seminaries for training pastors. Their Romish opponents also understood their value, for one of the first restrictions placed on the French Huguenots was the outlawing of their schools.

## Negative lessons

On the negative side, three warnings sound out from the Reformation in France. Exactly because God uses men and because all the members of the church are sinners, mistakes and failures happen, some of which are costly, some deadly.

## Rashness

First, rash activities can hurt the cause of the truth. Such was “the affair of the placards” in 1534. In Paris and other major cities, men took it upon themselves to post placards against “the horrible abuse of the papal mass.” One such placard was attached even to the door of the bed chamber of King Francis. Up to this point, the king had indicated that he was not in favor of the Reformation, but he was not actively persecuting Protestants. This rash act, however, led him to initiate violent persecution against them. Boldness for truth does not mean foolish, rash acts that simply infuriate the enemy with little profit, as did attaching the placard to the bedroom door of the king.

## Wrong response to persecution

Like most other Protestants in that age, French Huguenots experienced persecution for their faith. The Lord told His church to expect this, and His Word tells His people how to respond to persecution, namely, to endure it patiently. Surely, thousands of Huguenots did endure patiently the loss of possessions, liberty, and even life. But many responded improperly. In this history are two wrong responses. The first was to hide their faith. Though they secretly confessed the Reformed truths, these believers continued to attend worship services in the Romish church. They gained the name “Nicodemites.” John Calvin wrote much in opposition to this response to persecution. (See more on this in the article on “Calvin and the Nicodemites,” page 67.)

The other wrong response was taking up arms. The French Reformation was irreparably damaged by the taking up of the sword. The opposition to the Reformation and even violent persecution of Protestants did not accomplish what the Roman Catholics hoped. For several decades, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. The movement grew and spread throughout France until there were over 2,000 congregations. But

then, in the late 1550s Huguenots opted for resistance, resulting in religious wars between Protestants and Roman Catholics. When the Huguenots took up arms, they lost the status of a persecuted church. When subsequently they turned to English Protestants for help, more Frenchmen turned against them.

But the real issue and lesson is that the cause of Christ is not advanced by force of arms. So long as the Protestants promoted the Reformation by means of preaching and teaching, the church flourished, in spite of fierce persecution. But when the church involved itself in politics and war, its growth ceased and the church declined. “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit; saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

Two needed lessons for us today. The church is not called to arm herself for self-defense against persecution. The authorities who come to arrest believers must not be met with gunfire. Nor may we try to blend in with the world or the false church, so as to escape notice, and thus to avoid persecution.

## False doctrine

The final lesson to be learned is how important it is that the church vigorously maintains the truth. This latter warning arises from the period when there was some relief from persecution because of the Edict of Nantes. In this period, a theologian of the Reformed churches named Moïse Amyraut began to spread his doctrine of hypothetical universalism. This is a form of Arminianism, though Amyraut insisted that he rejected Arminian theology. Perhaps one could say that it was an attempt to find a position between Arminianism and the Calvinism set forth in the Canons of Dordt, which then is a compromise of the doctrines of grace. Amyraut insisted that he was maintaining election and the efficacy of grace. But he taught a universal love of God, a general grace to all, a gracious offer of salvation in the preaching, and a death of Christ that was for all but only effective in those who believe. This teaching has much similarity to the conditional covenant idea, in which God promises salvation to every baptized child, on the condition of faith.

Many ministers issued strong protests against Amyraut’s teaching, but three different synods failed to condemn his views. One expert on the controversy maintains that by 1650 “Amyraldian theology had won the day in France” except for small pockets of resistance.<sup>1</sup>

The sad result of the wars of religion and the depar-

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<sup>1</sup> Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 7. For more on this heresy and its effect, see the article on Amyraut on page 64.

ture from the Reformed truth was that the Reformed faith virtually disappeared in France. Particularly, the departure from the truth brings God's judgment on the church. The church that does not defend the truth over against the lie soon loses the right to exist.

We must learn from the Reformation in France. The church is the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim.

3:15). The church exists to promote, defend, and proclaim the truth of the Bible. For a time, that truth shone brightly in France. The Huguenots practiced biblical church polity, had a thoroughly Reformed confession, and maintained Christian schools. The Reformation in France is a call to be diligent in maintaining these Reformed practices, but above all, to uphold the truth.



## Pierre Viret: The angel of the Reformation

Rev. Jacob Maatman, pastor of Southeast Protestant Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan

Pierre Viret (1511-1571), known as “the Angel of the Reformation,” a worthy epithet for a man about whom his friend Farel wrote, “I can say that never have I found in him anything but a sincere affection for Christ and His Gospel, a character devoid of all harshness, a truly Christian soul, walking in love and seeking peace.”<sup>1</sup> He has also been called the “forgotten Reformer,” and inasmuch as we have, it is to our loss.

Viret was born in Orbe, Switzerland, a city of Vaud, the region in which he principally worked. When a young man, he was delivered from the darkness of the papacy and given the light of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Then he met the indomitable Farel. It comes as no surprise to the reader acquainted with Farel that he succeeded in convincing Viret, at age twenty, to take up the ministry. God would use Viret mightily for the cause of the gospel not only in his native country and France, but, through his writings, the world over.

In 1534, Viret went to Geneva, where he and Farel sowed the seeds of the Reformation, but not without risk. His back had already been scarred by a priest's sword; in Geneva he was poisoned, almost fatally. But he survived, and the city was won to the Reformation. For a long time he labored in Lausanne, not only attending to the duties of the ministry, but seeing to the establishment of the Lausanne Academy, where Beza taught for a time and such conspicuous names as Ursinus, Olevianus, and deBrès studied.

But there was trouble. The magistracy of Bern refused to give ecclesiastical discipline to the church, in spite of Viret's earnest pleadings that the church have

her due. The issue culminated in 1559, when Viret obtained permission from Lausanne to postpone the Lord's Supper rather than celebrate it with unworthy communicants, though Bern had ordered the administration to proceed as usual. Irate, ungrateful for the Reformer's tireless labors for the church, and with an high hand, Bern deposed Viret and the others. The exiles made an exodus to Geneva.

Viret worked together with Calvin for only a couple years. He was compelled to leave Geneva to seek a climate in southern France more conducive to his health, where he continued his labors in several cities. Although better for his health, France was worse for his safety, where the specter of persecution loomed large. A decree banning foreign ministers eventually brought him to Bearn, where he ministered under the auspices of Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre. The conflict met him here as well, when Catholic forces invaded the territory and, among others, imprisoned the Reformer, sending shockwaves through the Reformed community. But he was released, and continued at Bearn until his death in 1571 when, having faithfully labored in the church of God to the advantage and salvation of many, this devoted servant of the Lord departed this world of tumult and suffering and entered into his rest, receiving a crown from the King.

What kind of a man was Pierre Viret? The words of Farel quoted above do tell. And his peace-seeking spirit was recruited more than once to mediate troubles and disputes in the church. He wanted peace in the church, but never at the expense of the truth: “But when the heritage of the truth must be defended, let us break the silence lest we appear to betray the Church by keeping quiet!”<sup>2</sup> And remember that when the church was

1 R.A. Sheats, *Peter Viret: The Angel of the Reformation* (Tallahassee, FL: Zurich Publishing, 2012), xvii. Principal source for this article. A must-read biography, containing a captivating exchange of letters between Viret and Calvin.

2 Sheats, *Peter Viret*, 149.



threatened by the lordship of Bern, Viret chose rather to be deposed than to fold. So many are the testimonies to the character of this angel, but space is wanting. The high demand for Viret by the Swiss and French churches is one—Calvin himself importuned to have him. For another, read the intimate, personal, and even frank letters exchanged between Viret and Calvin, two men knit together with cords of deepest love.

Viret belonged, with Farel and Calvin, to what Schaff calls “the triumvirate of the founders of the Reformed Church in French Switzerland.”<sup>3</sup> Comparisons drawn

3 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1910), 252.

between the three are illuminating. As regards their preaching, Beza says of Viret that he “possessed such winning eloquence, that his entranced audience hung upon his lips.”<sup>4</sup> D’Aubigne, comparing them along broader lines, says, “The ardent Farel was the St. Peter of the Swiss Reform, the mighty Calvin the St. Paul, and the gentle Viret the St. John.”<sup>5</sup> We need all three. Thank God for His gift to the church of Pierre Viret.

4 John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), xxix.

5 Merle d’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of Europe in the Time of Calvin*, vol. 3: France, Switzerland, Geneva (London: Longmans, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1864), 268.



## The history of the French Reformation

Prof. Douglas Kuiper, professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

Bloodshed. That one word sums up the history of the Reformation in France. In Luther’s Germany and Calvin’s Geneva, most princes and civil leaders supported the Reformation. In France, most opposed it. The French kings often tried to exterminate the movement by killing Reformed believers. At one point, Reformed believers in France also shed blood, taking up the sword to defend their cause, with many of them dying as a result.

These Reformed believers in France are known as Huguenots. The story of the French Reformation is the story of Jesus Christ gathering these Huguenots into His church and defending them from Satan’s unceasing assaults against them.

### Francis I (1515-1547): Toleration and opposition

Francis I was king of France during the years that God was using Martin Luther to reform His church in Germany (1517-1546). When Luther’s teachings spread into France, Francis initially appeared willing to tolerate them.

One reason for this willingness is that his sister Margaret, to whom Francis was close, became a committed Protestant. A second reason is that he appreciated the advances in learning and art that the Renaissance had made—advances that had paved the way for the Refor-

mation. Third, he was an ardent foe of Charles V, king of Spain and a loyal Catholic. Francis considered the possibility that the Protestants might become allies in his wars against Spain.

Francis’ wars with Charles V took him away from France for an extended time. In 1521, while Francis was away fighting, the theological faculty of the University of Paris condemned the writings of Luther and the Parliament of Paris prohibited the possession of Luther’s works. In 1525 the Parliament and Bishop of Paris authorized men to arrest those suspected of tolerating the Reformed faith and seize their possessions.

Francis did not immediately join this opposition to Protestantism. In 1533 he favored calling a meeting of Catholics and Protestants to discuss, and hopefully resolve, their differences. His mind changed after the “Affair of the Placards.” These placards were posters on which were written condemnations of the popish mass. On October 18, 1534, residents of five major French cities awoke to find these placards posted around town, and Francis awoke to find one posted to *the door of his bedroom*.

As often happens, a rash zeal for a good cause hurt that good cause. From that time on, the king approved the persecution of French Reformed believers, and these persecutions increased in severity. In 1540 Francis issued the Edict of Fontainebleau, which declared Protes-

tantism to be high treason against God and Protestants to be worthy of death. The Waldensians were destroyed *en masse*, and their villages burned; the destruction of the village of Mérindol in 1545 is one example.

Yet God gathered His church in France and from France. For one thing, by the power of the Holy Spirit, many believed the fundamental truths of sovereign grace that the Reformers proclaimed. In addition, several men who were influential in the Reformation (William Farel, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and others) were born in France. These left France for other regions, but did not forget the French believers. One could argue that the headquarters of the French Reformation was located just outside France, in Calvin's Geneva.

### The French Reformed churches (1547-1598)

Several factors in the Reformation's growth in France trace back to Geneva. First, Calvin published the first French edition of his *Institutes* in 1541, with a preface to Francis I. Second, Calvin sent letters, Bibles, and other tracts to the Reformed believers. Third, by 1564 over one hundred Frenchmen had trained in Geneva and returned to France to preach the gospel.

As king, Henry II (1547-1559) continued the persecution of the Reformed believers. The year he took office, a burning chamber was created to burn "heretics," and in 1551 he pronounced the Edict of Châteaubriant, which forbade the printing and sale of any book not approved by the theological faculty of the University of Paris.

In such soil, God planted His church. The first Reformed congregation in France was openly organized in 1555, and within seven years more than two thousand congregations were organized, with an estimated total membership of well over one million. This rapid growth had at least two explanations. First, many had already become convinced of the Reformed faith but did not meet openly as congregations. Like a widespread underground fungus that suddenly sprouts mushrooms in many places, the church in France had been gathered invisibly and, when the time was right for congregations to organize openly, they multiplied. Second, that many congregations could organize openly *at this time* was due to the fact that many French nobles supported the Protestant cause.

The first French Reformed national synod was held in Paris in 1559. This synod adopted the French (Gallic) Confession as the doctrinal basis of the French churches. (Two years later, Guido deBrès used the French Confession as a template to write the Belgic Confession.) The churches in France were Reformed in doctrine, in worship, and in church government.

The presence of so many churches and believers led the

French government to realize that their efforts to destroy the Reformed faith were not working. In 1561, during the reign of Charles IX, Reformed and Catholic men met at the Colloquy of Poissy to discuss their differences. That nothing was resolved comes as no surprise to us. The Edict of St. Germain, published in January 1562, permitted the French Reformed believers to possess church buildings and hold worship services, but required them to worship outside of cities and to give up any property that they owned in the cities. The king's mother was influential in issuing this Edict, not because she loved Protestantism but because she realized that it was not politically expedient actively to oppose the Reformed faith.

Although the government no longer sanctioned persecution, ardent Catholics continued it. In March 1562, a congregation of Huguenots was attacked while worshipping in a barn near Vassy. This began a decades-long period in the history of the French Reformed churches that was darker than any period of persecution, for the Huguenots resorted to the sword both to defend themselves and to fight offensively. One notable and sad moment in the war was the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of August 1572, when thousands of Huguenots were slaughtered. That the Huguenots had been using weapons to defend themselves was one reason for this attack on them.

During this dark period, hope flickered briefly and died. When Henry III (1574-1589) died, Henry IV (1589-1610) took the throne. Henry IV was raised a Protestant, and many hoped that he would defend the Protestant cause. However, having married a Catholic woman and realizing that France was too steeped in Catholicism to tolerate a Protestant king, he thought it expedient to become a Catholic himself.

That Henry IV still had sympathy for the Huguenots was evident when he issued the Edict of Nantes in April 1598. This Edict declared Catholicism the official religion of France but gave the Huguenots freedom to live anywhere in France, to hold some public offices, to educate their children as they thought best, to receive higher education, to worship in certain designated districts of France, and to sell books in these same districts. It also ended the thirty-plus years of war between Catholics and Protestants. By issuing this Edict, Henry acknowledged that the Huguenots were a numerous and powerful force, and also showed them gratitude. He wrote to the Duke of Luxemburg, "I have been too well served and helped by them in any need to neglect their interests; and were I to neglect them, I should introduce into my kingdom troubles more dangerous than those of the past."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Janet Glenn Gray, *The French Huguenots: Anatomy of Courage* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 210.

After a long, bitter struggle, the churches in France had peace. However, they were weakened. Death and apostasy from the Reformed faith had reduced their numbers, and their readiness to use the sword left them spiritually weaker.

### Henry IV and Louis XIII (1598-1643): Relative peace

The Huguenots had a measure of peace during the rest of the reign of Henry IV, although the government still regulated them closely. Because Louis XIII (1610-1643) did not always defend their rights, the Huguenots fought three wars against the crown in the 1620s. In these wars the Huguenots fared poorly. The Peace of Alais in 1629, in which the provisions of the Edict of Nantes were for the most part ratified, brought the wars to an end. Yet the Huguenots were not permitted to live in certain districts of France, and Louis XIII favored making any Huguenot whom he disliked a galley slave. Galley slaves rowed ships, usually as punishment for criminal activity, but at times for the crime of being Protestant. Although the French tolerated the Huguenots, popular opinion was that they were a nuisance and disturbers of the peace. However, they enjoyed peace until the end of Louis XIII's reign.

### Louis XIV (1643-1715): Reversal

During Louis XIV's early years the Huguenots enjoyed their earlier privileges, but in the 1660s the king developed his philosophy of *un roi, une loi, une foi*—that France should have “one king, one law, and one faith.” For two decades he chipped away at the rights

of the Huguenots. Finally, in 1685 he issued the Edict of Fontainebleau, which revoked the Edict of Nantes completely. Protestantism became illegal, Reformed ministers had to leave France, Protestant schools had to close, and Huguenot parents had to have their children baptized by Romish priests.

But the church Louis XIV could not destroy! Many Huguenots left France for other European countries, the American colonies, and the East Indies. Other Huguenots stayed in France, especially in the south, and maintained their faith and worship at a cost; for one hundred years (1685-1789) they were known as the “Churches of the Desert,” both because southern France was arid and because they were in a spiritual wasteland.

The history of the Reformation in France is one of bloodshed. It is also one of triumph. That the Huguenots used the sword does not explain this triumph, for it was not an earthly triumph. It was the triumph of the cause of Christ—a spiritual triumph, always in spite of the sins of God's people. Its explanation is that Christ gathers, defends, and preserves His church in every nation, tribe, and tongue, also in France. Our Savior keeps His promises: “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper” (Is. 54:17). And, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). Again, “it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). And this: “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Using only the sword of the Spirit, and no earthly sword, may we today experience the fulfillment of the same gracious promises.



## The massacre on Saint Bartholomew's Day

Rev. Joseph Holstege, pastor of Zion Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan

In the morning of August 24, 1572, the body of a Frenchman fell lifeless from the window of the Paris residence where he was staying. It was neither suicide nor accident. His name was Gaspard de Coligny, the nobleman who took charge of the Protestant cause in France. Moments before his body was dumped out the window, Coligny was killed in cold blood by assassins, triggering the brutal campaign of persecution known as the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

The Reformation in France struggled against vehement persecution from the beginning. John Calvin was among many Frenchman who lived as a refugee, having fled France in 1533 to take up residence in Geneva in 1536. But Calvin never forgot his homeland. For years, French-speaking Protestant pastors who studied Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* quietly invaded France with the Reformation truths many were hungrily seeking. The Protestant faith grew in France

as a result, but so did the opposition to it—often *bloody* opposition. In 1562 the French Duke of Guise attacked a Huguenot worship service and massacred the congregation. This act was so savage it provoked an armed response from French Protestants and a decade long civil war broke out.

A resolution to the bloody conflict seemed to present itself in a marriage alliance between the Protestant nobleman Henry of Navarre and Marguerite de Valois, the sister of King Charles IX. On August 18 the heavily Roman Catholic city of Paris was packed with Huguenots who came to witness the wedding ceremony. Prominent among them was the leader of the Huguenot resistance, Gaspard de Coligny. But if a resolution seemed to present itself, appearances are often deceiving. Catherine de Medici, mother of King Charles, was vehemently opposed to the Huguenot cause. So vehement was Catherine in her opposition to Protestantism that she arranged an assassination of Coligny on August 22, which *failed*. Coligny was shot in the hand by the bullet which was meant for his heart. The failure alarmed Catherine, who feared the assassination attempt had alienated the Huguenots and would provoke more serious rebellion on their part. Having convinced her son King Charles of a Huguenot conspiracy in Paris, she began to push for a mass killing. Charles is reported to have sworn in response to his mother’s pleas that “not only the leaders, who alone were implicated, but all the Huguenots of France should die, so that no one might remain to reproach him for the deed.”<sup>1</sup>

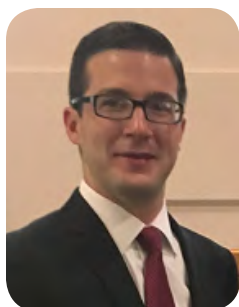
The successful assassination of Coligny on Au-

gust 24, therefore, was not an isolated incident. The bloody death toll on St. Bartholomew’s Day in Paris alone reached to 8,000. For four more ruthless days, 20,000 more French Protestants were butchered in the surrounding French countryside. Not only the strong younger men who fought in the battles, mind you, but women, children, and the aged were cut down as well. When the pope heard the news in Rome, he called for a ringing of the cathedral bells in celebration, and for a medal to be made commemorating the event.



In some ways the legacy of St. Bartholomew’s Day is a vivid fulfillment of the Lord’s words to Peter on the night before the cross: “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matt. 26:52). Many who took up the sword against the king of France for the Protestant cause also died by the sword. Nevertheless, the unnecessary butchery of the Huguenots in 1572 goes down in church history as an act of unspeakable cruelty and violence against those who simply sought to worship and serve their Lord in peace. Many of the martyred souls who cry out to God for vengeance (Rev. 6:10) had their blood shed in the massacre of August 24, 1572, St. Bartholomew’s Day.

1 John H. Kurtz, *Text-Book of Church History*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1892), 123.



## Geneva’s influence on the French Reformed churches

Rev. Jonathan Langerak, pastor of Heritage Protestant Reformed Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota

The church in Geneva, Switzerland had a significant place in the formation and continuation of the Reformed churches in France. Geneva supported and nurtured the work of the French Reformed churches “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for

the edification of the body of Christ” in France to the glory of the God of grace (Eph. 4:12). The Reformed in France recognized and appreciated the place God gave Geneva in their history and development.



and by the venerable Academy of Geneva, whose rules we follow as much as possible.”<sup>4</sup>

### Personal involvement

In addition to the recruitment and training of pastors, many of the ministers who served in Geneva during the early 1560s went personally to France to encourage and support the Reformed churches. These included Farel and, especially, Beza. In 1560, Beza secretly traveled to France and preached in the court of Navarre, a small principality in the south of France. His hope was to persuade the “powers that be” in Navarre to support the Reformed churches. These efforts were not generally successful. Beza was invited back to France in 1561 by the perfidious Catherine de Medici, then-regent of France and inveterate enemy of the Reformed faith. Beza defended the French Confession of Faith of 1559 at the Colloquy of Poissy, a gathering of Reformed and Roman Catholic leaders with the goal to establish a united French church. The Colloquy was a resounding failure. Instead, Beza bore agonized witness to the outbreak of the first of eight bloody “Wars of Religion” as Huguenots took up arms, first to defend themselves against the militant forces of Rome and then to take the offensive to the Romanists. The wars ground on across France from 1561-1598. Throughout his life, Beza heavily and tirelessly (and sometimes illegally) involved himself in public and private efforts to support Reformed believers in France.<sup>5</sup>

### “The cradle of theology”

“The institution of the church was the cradle of theology.”<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit worked among the Reformed believers in France to form that cradle for the theology of the Reformation. Calvin dedicated his commentary on Daniel “to all the pious worshippers of God who desire the kingdom of Christ to be rightly constituted in France.”<sup>7</sup> Out of that desire, the newly established congregations adopted the institutional framework of the church in Geneva with its pastors, elders, and deacons. Then, they went beyond Geneva

4 Otto H. Selles, “The First Sermon of Antoine Court (1695-1760)” in *The Theology of the Huguenot Refuge: From the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes to the Edict of Versailles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 265; emphasis added.

5 S. Manetsch, “Beza and the Crisis of Reformed Protestantism,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 38-54.

6 J. Olson, “The Cradle of Reformed Theology” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 9.

7 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Daniel*, 2 vols., trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 1:lix.

and established *colloquies* (equivalent to the Dutch classes) and synods. The first national Reformed synod was held at Paris in 1559, and laid the theological and constitutional foundations of the French Reformed Churches by adopting the Confession of Faith and a church order, in English entitled the “Ecclesiastical Discipline.” The “Discipline,” as it was called, was expanded and clarified by subsequent synods, but its basic principles remained unchanged through the rest of the sixteenth and well into the seventeenth centuries.<sup>8</sup>

### City of refuge

Geneva, “the capital of French Protestantism,” also served as a city of refuge for Huguenots fleeing war and persecution in France. The years 1549-1560 saw an especially high number of refugees arrive at Geneva, and a fund was set up exclusively for their support. Calvin, a permanent refugee himself, was instrumental in establishing and soliciting for this fund, and advocating their cause. After the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre on August 24, 1572, during which thousands of French Protestants were brutally killed in Paris and other major French cities, Beza welcomed another wave of refugees to sanctuary in Geneva.

In 1598, the French King Henri (or Henry) IV proclaimed the Edict of Nantes. This was not a declaration of toleration for the Reformed faith, but a peace settlement after the Wars of Religion (1561-1598). But it did grant the Huguenots the right to worship in certain places in France, to establish schools and academies, and convoke their colloquies and synods. This Edict was in force until 1685 and for almost a century Huguenots experienced a measure of relief. But in 1685, Louis XIV, the so-called “Sun King,” revoked the Edict, and declared that all Huguenots must convert to Romanism or leave the country. An exodus of some 200,000-300,000 Huguenots ensued, and Geneva opened her arms to over 7,000 of “the least of these.”<sup>9</sup>

### Equals, not inferiors

For all the books, pastors, personal support, and refuge Geneva supplied to the French Reformed churches, it is important to recognize that “the French Reformed churches...neither considered themselves daughters of Geneva nor took orders from Geneva. In fact, their

8 Theodore G. Van Raalte, “The French Reformed Synods of the Seventeenth Century,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 58.

9 J. Olson, “The Edict of Nantes and Its Revocation: A Balanced Assessment?” in *The Theology of the Huguenot Refuge*, 9-10, 28.

synods issued a few orders to Geneva.”<sup>10</sup> The acts of the French Reformed synods bear this out. The Protestant churches in France officially referred to themselves as “Reformed,” not “Calvinist.” In the annals of the Huguenot synods, we find them censoring Genevan printers for errors discovered in printed Bibles shipped to France; admonishing the Genevan consistory for Psalters bearing traces of Romanist superstition; requesting that Geneva’s pastors and professors undertake no new translations of the Bible into French without seeking advice from France; and refusing the request of the Genevan consistory to return two Genevan-born pastors on the grounds that these pastors were lawfully called and ordained in their respective French congregations and could not be transferred by a synod.<sup>11</sup>

10 T. Van Raalte, “French Reformed Synods of the Seventeenth Century,” in *Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, 61; emphasis Van Raalte’s.

11 T. Van Raalte, 67, 89, 95-96.

### One final evidence

Still, the influence of Geneva on the Huguenot churches and the appreciation by the French Reformed churches of Geneva’s influence is significant. One final example will bear this out. After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the Huguenots who remained in France went underground as the “Church of the Desert.” Seeking some direction in the chaos of their situation, they directed their attention to Geneva. Among other things, they (re) adopted the Genevan regulation restricting the length of pastor’s sermons to an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes at most, “conforming to the practice of the church of Geneva and what the Reformed churches of France had formerly done.”<sup>12</sup> It is a small evidence; but sometimes the smallest gestures show the strength and character of a relationship.

12 Pauline Duley-Haour, “The Churches of the Desert, 1685-1789” in *Theology of the Huguenot Refuge*, 79-80.



## The Synod of Dordt, Arminianism, and Pierre du Moulin

Rev. Matthew DeBoer, pastor of Edgerton Protestant Reformed Church in Edgerton, Minnesota

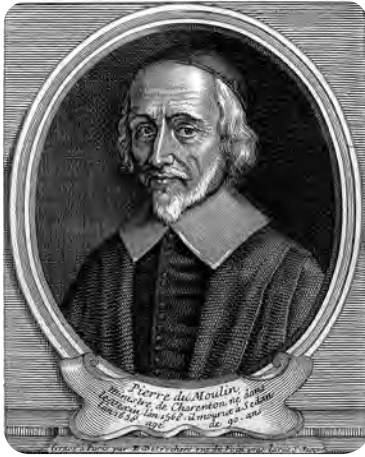
When the leading theologians at the Synod of Dordt are spoken of, Pierre Du Moulin’s name is not mentioned. While Du Moulin was not allowed to attend the Synod, God did use him to promote the Canons and to preserve the truth that has been passed to us.

In the early 1600s, the Calvinist-Arminian controversy spread throughout Europe. The controversy was over predestination and related topics, such as free will and the extent of Christ’s atonement. The debate began in the Netherlands as a result of the teachings of Jacob Arminius. After Arminius died, his supporters summarized his views in the Five Articles of the 1610 Remonstrance. These articles were debated throughout Europe in the following decade.

Questions about Arminianism soon came to Pierre Du Moulin (1568-1658), pastor of the Reformed Church of Paris. Du Moulin was a recognized leader of the French Reformed churches, and he stood against Ar-

minianism. In several letters written from 1615-1618, he argued that the Arminians made election dependent on the will of man, destroyed God’s grace, exalted man, and took away the certainty of salvation. While his letters condemned Arminianism, he did show weaknesses theologically. Du Moulin taught that the cause of God’s decree of reprobation is sin, when in reality the cause of His decree of reprobation is His sovereign good pleasure. Also, Du Moulin disliked the language of irresistible grace that many Reformers used. He believed that the elect could resist grace for a time, but eventually they would relent.<sup>1</sup> Last, Du Moulin was weak on the doctrine of limited atonement, arguing that those who

1 Donald Sinnema, “The French Reformed Churches, Arminianism, and the Synod of Dort (1618-1619),” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches: From Henri IV to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, ed. Martin I. Klauber (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 135-136.



taught a universal atonement spoke some truth and could be reconciled with those who taught that Christ died for the elect alone.

In 1618, the States General of the Netherlands sent letters to the government leaders of several European countries, including France, inviting them to send Reformed theologians to

help the upcoming synod at Dordt deal with the Arminian crisis. A Synod of Reformed churches in France chose Du Moulin as a delegate. However, King Louis XIII, a Catholic, would not allow it and threatened execution for disobedience.

Since Du Moulin could not attend the synod, he sent a 16-page statement explaining his views of Arminianism.<sup>2</sup> It is not certain how much influence this had on the Canons. The statement was publicly read on the floor of the synod on April 27, 1619. Afterwards, the synod expressed thanks for Du Moulin's careful work and for his agreement with them in doctrine.<sup>3</sup> How-

2 Sinnema, 113-114.

3 Sinnema, 113.

ever, this was after the Canons had been written the previous month and approved on April 23. Since Du Moulin originally forwarded his statement to Jean Didot, a delegate from Geneva who was on the drafting committee of the Canons, it is possible that Du Moulin's statement was consulted while they were writing.<sup>4</sup>

At the first national synod of the Reformed churches in France after the Synod of Dordt, Du Moulin led the French Reformed churches to adopt the Canons as a confessional standard. The pastors and elders in the churches were to remain faithful to the Canons, and would be disciplined if they departed. The French Reformed churches were the only churches outside the Netherlands to adopt the Canons.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that God wisely controlled Du Moulin's life and the church of his day, causing all things to work for the good of His people. The Lord kept Du Moulin from attending the Synod of Dordt and kept his doctrinal weaknesses out of the Canons. While Du Moulin had weaknesses, we are thankful for his work in promoting and defending the Canons, and leading the churches in France to adopt the Canons. God used him for the good of His children in France, some of whom are our ancestors.

4 Sinnema, 114.

5 Sinnema, 134.



## Moïse Amyraut and hypothetical universalism

Rev. Martyn McGeown, missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland, stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland

Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664) intended to study law, but Philippe de Mornay, who had founded the Huguenot university and seminary *L'Académie de Saumur* in 1593, persuaded him to study theology. Amyraut was appointed by the provincial synod of Anjou to the chair of theology in 1633, where he remained until his death in 1664.

Amyraut's life was largely uneventful, as he labored as a pastor and theological professor in the city of Sau-

mur for some thirty years; but his theology engendered intense controversy within French Protestantism and weakened the Reformed Church in France. The controversy began with the publication in 1634 of Amyraut's *Brief Traité de la Prédestination*.

Scholars differ on the reason for Amyraut's publication of the *Traité*, although elsewhere Amyraut explains his motivation and method:

A man of quality who recently came to our confession...



has been accustomed to saying among his acquaintances that the doctrine of predestination, such as is taught in our churches, horrifies him.... I esteemed the best method [to clarify this matter] would be to present this doctrine in a manner, which, without denying the justice or the freedom of God, would highly recommend His mercy.<sup>1</sup>

Amyraut's doctrine of predestination is an attempt, therefore, by emphasizing God's mercy, to soften the perceived harshness of the dogma in order to win converts from Roman Catholicism and to prevent defections from the Huguenot churches. Nevertheless, Amyraut fatally compromised the doctrine of predestination.

### The teaching of the *Brief Traitté*

One quote from the *Brief Traitté* captures the essence of Amyraldianism:

The misery of men being equal and universal, and the desire that God had to deliver them from it by such a great Redeemer, which proceeds from the compassion that He has on them as His creatures fallen into such great ruin [being also equal], since they are equally His creatures, the grace of redemption which He offered must also be equal and universal, provided they are found equally disposed to receive it. And until that point there is no difference between them. The sacrifice that He offered for the propitiation of their offenses is equally for all, and the salvation that He received from His Father to communicate to men in the sanctification of the Spirit and in the glorification of the body is intended equally for all, provided, I say, that the disposition necessary to receive it is equal in the same way (94).

For Amyraut the key word is "equality." Man's misery is *equal and universal*; God's saving desire is *equal and universal*; God's mercy, which is the source of His saving desire, is *equal and universal*; and Christ's redemption, which flows from God's saving will, is *equal and universal*. One ingredient, however, is missing: the disposition necessary to receive God's salvation must also be *equal and universal*. Amyraut's theology, therefore, is conditional: "*pourvu que*" (provided that) is a favorite phrase of his.

Elsewhere, Amyraut writes:

God's love is immeasurable to give salvation to men, provided that (*pourvu que*) they do not refuse it. These words, then, "God wills the salvation of all men" are necessarily limited thus: provided that (*pourvu que*) they believe. If they do not believe, He does not will it; this will to give the grace of salvation [being] universal and common to all men, is so conditional that, without the accomplishment of the condition, it is entirely inefficacious (96).

Amyraldianism is often called "hypothetical universalism," which captures the convoluted nature of his teaching. Amyraut posits a hypothetical, universal decree of predestination embracing the whole of humanity, which decree is conditioned on man's response of repentance and faith. According to that hypothetical, universal decree Christ died equally for all, but Christ's redemption, likewise, is conditioned on man's response. Since God knew that nobody would fulfill the condition, His counsel includes a second decree, a decree to grant the gift of saving faith to the elect so that they fulfill the condition. So there is a particular decree within a hypothetical, universal decree. "One must," Amyraut writes, "carefully distinguish predestination to salvation from predestination to faith," about which one historian writes, "the latter is absolute and the former is conditional" (102). Amyraut explains:

Predestination to salvation being conditional and concerning the whole human race equally, the human race being universally corrupted by sin and incapable of accomplishing that condition on which salvation depends, it necessarily occurs, not by any vice in predestination itself, but by the hardness of heart and obstinacy of the human spirit, that this first predestination is frustrated for those who have no part in the second (103).

Amyraut, then, teaches universal, divine love displayed in the gospel universally offered on the condition of faith. Amyraut perceives a problem, really two problems, which he addresses in his *Brief Traitté*. First, how can God genuinely offer salvation to men who are unable to receive it, or how can this offer be reconciled with the Reformed denial of free will? Second, given that the heathen die without hearing the gospel, how can they be condemned for not believing it, and how is God sincere in seeking their salvation if the means of salvation are denied them? In his answers to those questions Amyraut further compromises the doctrines of sin and grace.

The unbeliever perishes because he refuses to believe in Christ. To the objection that the unbeliever cannot

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<sup>1</sup> François LaPlanche, *Orthodoxie et Prédication: L'Oeuvre d'Amyraut et la Querelle de la Grâce Universelle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 88. This work, written by a French Jesuit theologian in the French language, contains a wealth of information and citations from primary sources on Amyraut and his contemporaries. Unless otherwise stated, the references are to this work and the translation from the French is mine.

believe, Amyraut distinguishes between a *natural inability* and a *moral inability*. Man is unable to believe, not because he lacks the capacity to believe, but because he is *not willing to believe*. Simply put, if the unbeliever *would*, he *could* believe. The same natural ability to believe and the consequent inexcusability for this unbelief apply to the heathen, although they have less revelation to which they might respond. They, too, *could* be saved, if they chose to believe (since they possess understanding and will, which are necessary for the production of the act of faith), but because of the depravity of their hearts, they remain unbelieving:

It is not at all to be doubted that, if in whatever nation of the world that there might be, even where the name of Christ is unknown, someone might be encountered, who, touched by the testimonies of the mercy that God presents everywhere in His administration of the universe, is truly converted to Him to obtain the salvation of His grace (and we shall see below what faculties or powers there are in man to be thus converted) He would grant him the enjoyment of it. That is to say, although he has not known distinctly the name of Christ, and although he has learned nothing of the manner by which [Christ] has obtained redemption for us, he would not, however, be deprived of the remission of his sins, the sanctification of the Spirit, and glorious immortality (95).

Behold the teaching of Amyraut: the universal, salvific will and love of God; universal, hypothetical predestination and universal, hypothetical redemption (with a secondary particular decree to save the elect with a secondary particular redemption of the elect); salvation conditioned on faith, which, although within man's natural ability, is something of which man is morally incapable; and the distinct possibility, if only they are willing, of the salvation of the unevangelized heathen! These teachings somehow made the Reformed doctrine of predestination more palatable to Roman Catholics. And do not forget, Amyraut published his *Brief Traitté* just fifteen years after the conclusion of the Synod of Dordt!

### Controversy over the theology of Saumur

Amyraut's *Brief Traitté* sparked a firestorm in the French Reformed Church, with Amyraut's allies and foes becoming quickly entrenched in their respective positions. The matter came for adjudication to the National Synod at Alençon (1637), at which synod Amyraut was examined. Sadly, the synod exonerated Amyraut, merely admonishing him to avoid certain offensive phrases:

Although the Assembly is satisfied, it decrees that this

phrase, "Jesus Christ dying equally for all," should be subtracted, because this expression, "equally," has been, and could again be, a stone of stumbling for many (159).

Pierre Du Moulin, one of Amyraut's most ardent theological adversaries, warned the Swiss in a letter, "The assembly has healed the hurt of the church slightly" (166), a reference to Jeremiah 6:14. Du Moulin was correct in his analysis, for the compromise of Alençon failed to secure peace. Although the synod had tried to stifle debate by prohibiting further writings on these subjects, except if Amyraut was required to defend himself, the writing of polemical letters continued. Amyraut was exonerated again at the National Synod of Charenton (1644) and finally at the Synod of Loudon (1659), which met five years before Amyraut's death in 1664.

Unchecked by discipline—even emboldened by the lack of discipline—and continuing as theological professor of Saumur, Amyraut was able to influence a whole generation of new Reformed pastors. Thus Amyraldianism spread like a leaven through the French churches. So alarming was this that certain foreign churches declined to entrust their students to Saumur, lest the new theology should corrupt them. In October 1685, twenty-one years after Amyraut's death, King Louis XIV declared Protestantism illegal within the kingdom of France, revoking the celebrated Edict of Nantes of April 1598, ending eighty-seven years of religious toleration for the French Huguenots. The king ordered the destruction of Protestant churches and schools, the expulsion of Protestant pastors, and the conversion of the Protestant people. Sadly, Amyraldianism had so weakened the French churches that many embraced Rome rather than suffer persecution, while the expelled pastors brought Amyraldianism with them.

Amyraldianism is so similar to Roman Catholicism *in its essential theology* that many Huguenots saw no need to resist the pressure to return to Rome once the protections of the state had been removed. Many Reformed people might be surprised to hear that: surely Roman Catholicism and Amyraldianism are poles apart! The Reformers, however, recognized that the difference between Rome and the truth is not in externals, such as purgatory, the pope, and the place of Mary—important matters to be sure. The essential difference between Rome and the truth is *grace*—the necessity, the nature, the extent, and the efficacy of grace. On those points, Amyraut and Roman Catholicism were in essential agreement.

Amyraut's theology was more subtle—and, therefore, more dangerous—than Arminianism. No wonder Amyraut has been called "the gravedigger of the

French Reformed Church.”<sup>2</sup> Amyraut dug the hole with his theology, while with the Revocation of the Edict of

Nantes the carcass of the Huguenot church was shoved into the grave prepared for it by the compromised theology of Saumur.

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Nicole quoting Georges Serr in *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 54 (Fall, 1992), 396.



## Calvin and the Nicodemites

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

The Reformation penetrated France along with the rest of Europe as the writings of Luther were distributed far and wide. Many a Frenchman, as well as their families, was converted from Catholicism to the biblical, apostolic faith. The outstanding case, of course, was the conversion of the young *Jean Calvinus* himself in the 1520s to the “Calvinistic” faith, by which we mean, to confessing salvation by grace alone, sovereign and irresistible, and the Scriptures as the final authority in all matters of doctrine and life. The papal mass was to be condemned as an accursed idolatry and meritorious work-righteousness rejected as a return to the Pelagian lie from hell.

In France the Reformation took root in the lives and confessions of those who would become known as Huguenots, numbering at high tide, it is estimated, a tenth of the French population—2,000,000 souls. For a time, the Reformation movement flourished in France; but not for long, and from its beginning, not without fierce and even brutal opposition. French society was dominated by the Romish church. Papal authority, promoted by ambitious cardinals and bishops, was deeply embedded in French politics.

The Protestant religion was seen as a threat to Rome’s dominating role in France. Already as the Protestant movement began to take root, persecution of its adherents took place in various locations with imprisonments, loss of property, and threats of death. The youthful Calvin himself was reported to the authorities for promoting and defending the ‘new faith’ and found it necessary to flee to Germany, though he was ‘waylaid’ by Farel in Geneva, and got no further than Switzerland as a result.

It was this threat and reality of fiery persecution that served as the occasion for Calvin’s addressing what became known as “Nicodemite practices,” and to his having to take sharp issue with its practitioners, issuing sharply worded warnings and rebukes.

As the publishers of a volume containing Calvin’s “Anti-Nicodemite” writings point out in their introduction:

The temptation to compromise the [Protestant] faith was significant among those who embraced reformed doctrine. Anyone who ceased to attend Mass, or opposed Romish worship, made himself conspicuous among religious and civil authorities. In order to avoid being ostracized, or to keep from being persecuted for renouncing popish worship, some would-be Protestants hoped to maintain their social standing by outward conformity to Romish rituals and worship; these dissemblers claimed that it was lawful to attend the outward ordinances of Romish worship, so long as they did not inwardly receive the heretical tenets of Rome.<sup>1</sup>

The label ‘Nicodemites’ was taken by Reformed sympathizers in an attempt to justify keeping their Protestant convictions secret by appealing to Nicodemus, who came to Jesus under cover of night to avoid detection by his fellow Pharisees. If such a man could be considered godly, a believer and a disciple of Christ, while he continued to pretend to be a Pharisee in public, why could not they be considered such, though publicly they adhered to Romish worship and ceremonial observanc-

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Come Out from Among Them: ‘Anti-Nicodemite’ Writings of John Calvin*. Seth Skolnitsky, tr. (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001), 2.



es? After all, does not Scripture teach that it is not the outward appearance that God regards but the inward matters of the heart that He judges and approves?

As this mentality took root and began to spread, especially in aristocratic circles (amongst those who had the most to lose if thought to

have Protestant sympathies), questions were put to Calvin whether such could be justified. Fearing that such practice would become commonplace as the hostility to the Protestant religion intensified, Calvin was compelled to write a number of treatises refuting its justification. Calvin refused to concede that these dissemblers really even had the right to the name “Nicodemites.”

Writes Calvin:

In short, Nicodemus came to Jesus Christ by night during the time of his ignorance. After being instructed, he confesses him openly, in the daylight; even at the time when it was more perilous than ever. Therefore, they who hide behind his example do him a great wrong.<sup>2</sup>

As Calvin pointed out later, at great risk to himself, Nicodemus maintained “in the assembly of the wicked” that the Sanhedrin should not condemn Jesus without a hearing, and then at Christ’s burial openly identified himself with Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin was thrown into the controversy when friends in France asked his counsel about the practice of these professing Reformed Christians. In his response, entitled “Letters to Some Friends,” Calvin, while expressing great sympathy for people living in the midst of great danger and facing threats of unspeakable suffering, rebuked such a practice. In his letters he made clear what was at stake, namely, the purity of the worship of Jehovah God, which he viewed as important as the doctrine of salvation itself. Because *how* God was worshiped was so important to Him, Calvin was convinced sincere believers were required to testify against all forms of Rome’s ceremonies, as these defiled God’s holiness and corrupted Christ’s name, gospel, and once-for-all sacrifice for sin and sinners.

As for those who sought to justify their participation in the Romish Mass, arguing that there was yet some reference to Christ’s atoning sacrifice for sin in Rome’s

sacrament and that they did not really believe it to be Christ’s body and blood when they genuflected, Calvin responded:

For I consider the popish Mass a pure abomination which is disguised with the title of Supper in just the way the devil transforms himself into an angel of light.... [Some] maintain that the man who fears God only goes there to share with the Christians in prayers and invocations and to honor God by remembering his sacrament....

This does not seem solid to me. For, as the prophet says, “He keeps himself from idolatry, who does not partake of sacrifice to idols” (Ps. 16:4). Now it cannot be denied that the Mass is an idol set up in the temple of God. Therefore, whoever attends it, gives an example to the simple and ignorant that he holds it in reverence as good: and he is thus guilty before God of the ruin of the one whom he deceives in this manner.<sup>4</sup>

Calvin’s rebuke of these ‘dissemblers’ was not well received by many. He was charged with being insensitive to the plight of those facing loss and perhaps even martyrdom for any open display of their Protestant convictions. Pamphlets were written criticizing Calvin for his harshness. Additional arguments were adduced to justify disguising one’s inner ‘convictions’ and participating in Romish ceremonies without being judged so harshly by God.

In the quote above, notice Calvin’s contention that whoever attended the Romish Mass was guilty before God of “the ruin” (the blood) of the ignorant, those whom the Nicodemites left in their deception.

This was part of Calvin’s refutation of the Nicodemites’ reference to the I Corinthians passage in which Paul did not condemn Christians for eating things offered to idols. As the apostle states in I Corinthians 8:4, “[W]e know that an idol is nothing in the world.” The Nicodemites argued, the same could be said about themselves. They knew Rome’s Mass was not *really* Christ’s body and blood; therefore, they were not guilty of worshiping bread as if it were God.

Calvin pointed out, first, that it was one thing to purchase at the marketplace meat offered to an idol in a pagan ceremony and eat it. Of that the apostle did not disapprove. “An idol is nothing.” It was another if those newly converted Christians continued to attend pagan ceremonies, bowed before the idols, and then ate the meat sacrificed. Astutely, Calvin points out, if the argument of the Nicodemites had merit, what did this say about Daniel’s three friends, who refused to bow

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, “Answer to the Nicodemites” in *Come Out from Among Them*, 119.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Come Out from Among Them*, 40-41.

before Nebuchadnezzar's image on pain of death? Who can deny these are for our example? Can any imagine that God would have approved if they had decided to save their skins by joining the pagan crowd and bowing down also? They would have denied Jehovah as the one, true God.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Calvin upbraids them for being an offense to their fellow worshiper, contrary to the apostle's reproof. As Calvin points out to those Christians who tried to excuse their participation in pagan, idolatrous feasts, the apostle rebukes them:

[F]or by their example they induce others to worship idols. He says [in effect], "Will not the weak man who sees you think that you have some regard for the idol, and be encouraged to do the like?... But if you have a good understanding in your heart, must he for whom Christ died perish for the credit of [that is, how he perceives] our knowledge?" By this response, does [the apostle] not reject all excuses of which many today wish to avail themselves?<sup>6</sup>

Not easily deterred, the Nicodemites responded with the example of Naaman, the Syrian general healed of his leprosy in the Jordan. According to I Kings 8, having assured Elisha he would henceforth serve only Jehovah, the God of Israel, Naaman yet pleaded not be to condemned when he was required to go with his king into Syria's temple and kneel before their idol. Elisha granted him permission. Why then should Protestants not be permitted to do likewise in Romish cities?

Calvin reminded the dissemblers of the vast difference between the knowledge (revelation of truth) that New Testament believers had in comparison to Naaman. Unlike Naaman, they had "the whole word of God like a great and well-traveled road." Calvin pointed out:

It is no wonder if Naaman was sent away by the prophet with such permission, seeing that he had only a small glimmer of truth. Should you, however, who have quite another measure of understanding, take your rule from [this case], as if you were not more expected to confess your faith than he? [To such people] I say that they falsely wrest the scripture, when all is duly considered.<sup>7</sup>

And then Calvin clinches his argument by reminding the Nicodemites that neither did the prophet demand that Naaman be circumcised. "Would you use that as an excuse not to receive baptism?"<sup>8</sup>

The answer is obvious. The exceptional history of

Naaman is not to be used as the model for what is permissible for believers in the New Testament age.

Calvin's early French treatises were soon translated into the languages of Europe—German, Dutch, Italian, and even English. This occasioned a flood of responses that became the occasion for Calvin to preach four sermons on the issue in 1552, which were then printed for distribution in various countries and translated.

The heart of these sermons stressed how important, even essential, for true Christianity and godliness, faithful, biblically-prescribed worship was. The sermons were an expansion of the central point of a treatise Calvin had written earlier, "The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church." As the editors of the collection of Calvin's anti-Nicodemite writings point out, "The book came at a critical period during the Reformation, when some would-be Protestants were content to address the subject of justification, without going forward to consider the matters of worship."<sup>9</sup>

Calvin rebuked such a mentality:

Those, therefore, who...abandoning the worship of God, urge the other head only [that is, *justification*], have not yet learned what true religion is. If anyone objects, that a principal part of divine worship is comprehended in faith and its exercises, I admit it; but to debate about the mode in which men obtain salvation [that is, *by faith alone*], and say nothing of the mode in which God may be duly worshiped, is too absurd.<sup>10</sup>

To Calvin the subject and mode of worship was equal in importance to the doctrine of justification itself. Corruption of worship meant corruption of the gospel—salvation based on Christ's one, only sacrifice. The sacraments were to underscore this truth.

It was biblically-prescribed worship with its means of grace that protected this gospel from corruption. This was what was at stake in the Nicodemite controversy and the attempt of many to minimize the manner in which one worshiped God. God was not pleased with Israel when, under Jeroboam, they sculpted a golden calf and claimed it was worshiping God through this image, contrary to the second commandment. Rather, God brought judgment on northern Israel for this sacrilege. So it was and would be if Christians persisted in claiming to worship God under Rome's sacrilege.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, we note that Calvin's controversy with

5 Calvin, *Come Out from Among Them*, 56-57.

6 Calvin, 57-58.

7 Calvin, 69-70.

8 Calvin, 69.

9 Calvin, 26.

10 Calvin, "The True Method" in *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 3, Henry Beveridge, tr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1958), 260.

11 Calvin, *Come Out from Among Them*, 59-60.

the Nicodemites is not simply a piece of interesting antiquity. It is relevant for our own day and age. First, because contemporary worship has become pluralistic to the extreme. Whatever seems good in men's eyes and can attract attenders, especially, it is hoped, the youth, is deemed as proper and appropriate. Calvin's treatises against the Nicodemites and their participation in Romish worship underscore again and again that, when it comes to worship, it is not only a matter of *whom* we claim to be worshiping, but also *how* we worship the Holy One, namely, according to His Word.

[S]ince God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly an abomination, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' 'In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the

commandments of men' (I Sam. 15:22; Matt. 15:9).<sup>12</sup>

Twenty-first century Christendom does well to pay heed.

But Calvin's counsel also becomes increasingly relevant as the days of fiery trials and persecutions fast approach. The temptation will be to compromise our identity to escape detection, and then try to justify it. Calvin's treatises remind us we cannot claim to stand with the 'heroes of faith' if we deny our true spiritual identity. It is one thing to flee persecution (as Calvin and many others did); it is another to deny our identification with the apostolic faith if, to save our skins, it means bowing the knee to Baal (Antichrist) and denying Christ's Lordship.

As Christ declared, "He who will be my disciple, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

12 Calvin, "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 1, 128-29.

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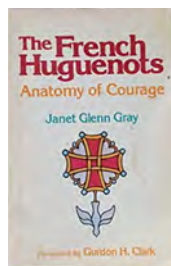
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Compiled by Charles J. Terpstra, Librarian

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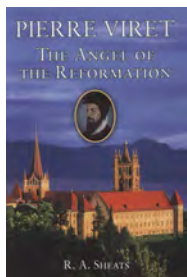
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## Announcements

### Wedding anniversary

With thanksgiving to our faithful, heavenly Father, we celebrated the 50th wedding anniversary of our parents and grandparents, **John and Judy Bouma** on October 13. We are thankful for the years our Lord has given them together and we praise God for His covenant blessings given to them in their generations. We are blessed by the godly example in their marriage and our prayer is that our Lord will continue to bless them now and in the years ahead. “The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children’s children and peace upon Israel” (Psalm 128:5, 6).

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Jared and Taylor Cammenga

Phillip, Jonathon and Charlie

Brent and Shelli Klamer

Grant and Jessica Lenting

Dan and Brooke Dykstra

Joshua, Kodie and Ethan

Sheila, Brittney, Cali and Bethany Zylstra

Kristian and Rachel Chayer

Amy Bouma

Jason and Michelle VanderMeulen

Grace, Brady and Tyce

Hudsonville, Michigan



### Reformed Witness Hour

[reformedwitnesshour.org](http://reformedwitnesshour.org)

#### Rev. W. Bruinsma

- November 1—“Hidden Wisdom Revealed”  
I Corinthians 2:7, 8, 10
- November 8—“The Spiritual Man Versus the Natural”  
I Corinthians 2:12, 14
- November 15—“The Church: God’s Husbandry”  
I Corinthians 4:15
- November 22—“Thanksgiving Unto God’s Glory”  
I Corinthians 2:1-5
- November 29—“Take Heed How One Builds”  
I Corinthians 3:10-15

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