

Pierre Viret, die onbekende Hervormer

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1. Pierre Viret: The Unknown Reformer

By Rebecca A. Sheats

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God works mysteriously, often concealing His purposes and plans from the wondering eyes of men. Even as we seek to understand and search out His ways, we find our sight limited and our knowledge incomplete. Much is veiled from our view. In like manner the visible history of Christ's church is often hidden in clouds of obscurity. For reasons known only to God, He often chooses to conceal some of His greatest treasures, awaiting their rediscovery by the church in His perfect time. Thus it has been with Pierre Viret, a forgotten giant of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Pierre Viret was born in 1511 in Orbe, a small town in the Pays de Vaud (present-day French Switzerland), to a devout Roman Catholic family. His father Guillaume was a tailor. Of his childhood, Pierre later noted, "I was naturally given to religion, of which however I was then ignorant."¹ His schoolteacher, Marc Romain, was a follower of Luther; thus Viret, while still a lad, was exposed to the teachings of the Reformation.

Viret's parents soon noticed their child possessed an aptitude for learning and sent him to Paris to study for the priesthood. While at college, Viret was converted to the Protestant faith, and fleeing the persecutions rampant in the Roman Catholic stronghold of Paris, he returned to his hometown, Orbe.

Early Ministry

Upon his return to his native village, Viret, at the age of twenty, was implored by William Farel to begin preaching in the town church. Viret, of a naturally "timid and modest disposition,"² was quite unwilling to accept such a post. At Farel's continued prodding, however, Viret at last conceded, preaching his first sermon May 6, 1531. Crowds flocked to hear the young preacher, marveling at the eloquence and wisdom of the man they had known from childhood.

Many souls were converted under Viret's preaching, but of greatest importance to the young pastor was the conversion of his two Roman Catholic parents. As he noted later, "I have much occasion to give thanks to God in that it hath pleased him to make use of me to bring my father and mother to the knowledge of the Son of God ... Ah! If he had made my ministry of no other use, I should have had good cause to bless him."³

Throughout the next three years, Viret regularly traveled between several of the surrounding villages to further the work of the Reformation. Accompanied by Farel, he journeyed first to Grandson, a small town just north of Orbe, which was quickly won to the gospel under the Reformers' preaching. Later that year Viret preached in Payerne, a small village bordering the Catholic canton of Fribourg. It was perhaps here that the young preacher met with his deadliest opposition.

The city was strongly Roman Catholic and violently protested the preaching of the "new faith." Viret, knowing that his teaching was no more than the truth of the Word of God, begged for a public disputation in which he would be permitted to prove his case from Scripture. The Council of Payerne at last acceded to this request and a date was fixed. The night before the disputation, however, Viret, returning home, was ambushed in a solitary field by a priest from the Payerne Abbey. The would-be murderer gravely wounded the young preacher with his sword and left him for dead, thus seeking to douse the Light against which he could not dispute. Discovered by his friends, Viret, half-dead, was slowly nursed back to health and soon continued his work in another city: Geneva.

Reformation in Geneva

In 1534 Viret journeyed to Geneva to again assist Farel in his Reformation work. Geneva was at first quite hostile to the teaching of the new preachers, and another murderous attempt awaited the young men.

At the instigation of the Catholic authorities, a woman, Antonia Vax, was persuaded to eliminate both Farel and Viret by serving them a poisoned spinach soup. Farel, declaring the soup to be too thick, asked for something else to eat. Viret, however, still pale and weak from his sword wounds, was assured by Antonia that the soup would aid in the restoration of his health, and trustingly ate an entire bowl of the poisoned dish. He grew dangerously ill and lay for some time at the point of death.

Upon hearing the news, the townspeople of Geneva mourned the impending loss of their beloved Reformer, exclaiming, "Must the Church be robbed of such a pearl?... Poor Viret! Poor reformers!... Sword-cuts in the back, poison in front ... Such are the rewards of those who preach the Gospel!"⁴

This episode, though so detrimental to the Reformers, also brought much damage to their adversaries as many now looked with suspicion and contempt upon the perpetrators of such a base crime. The priests and monks were henceforth regarded with grave doubt and misgiving, and little more than a year later, through the indefatigable labors of Farel and Viret, the General Council of Geneva officially accepted the Reformation.⁵

Two months after this event, John Calvin entered Geneva, simply planning to remain for the night. Farel, accompanied by Viret, visited Calvin's lodgings at the Bear Inn and persuaded him to remain to preach in the city. It was this threesome-Farel, Viret, and Calvin-this Triumvirate, as these three Reformers were often termed, that God mightily employed to further His work of Reformation in French Switzerland.

Lausanne Disputation

Soon after Calvin accepted his post in Geneva, Viret was providentially brought to the city of Lausanne, capital of the Pays de Vaud, which had just come under the authority of Bern, a Protestant canton of Switzerland.⁶ Bern, desirous of winning their newly acquired city to the gospel, organized a public disputation in which the principal elements of the faith would be discussed. All Catholic clergy were required to be in attendance. The defense for the Reformed was offered primarily by Farel and Viret, who ably championed the cause of Christ. Calvin also attended the debate, speaking twice throughout its course. At the close of the week-long disputation, Lausanne declared for the Reformation, and Viret was appointed pastor of the city.

Founding of the Lausanne Academy

Though Lausanne was now officially Reformed, it was still heavily steeped in Catholicism. To rectify the ignorance rampant among the priesthood, Viret determined to begin an academy for the training and education of young men for the ministry. Under the oversight of the Bernese authorities, the Academy was founded in January of 1537 and was the first Protestant and Reformed academy of the French-speaking world.⁷

The Lausanne Academy boasted learned instructors from Italy, Germany, France, and Switzerland. Theodore de Beze, future successor to Calvin in Geneva, was principal of the Academy for nine years.

Many renowned men of the faith received their training at Viret's Academy, including Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, authors of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1562, and Guido de Bres, author of the Belgic Confession of 1561.⁸

Viret and Calvin

A year after the commencement of the Lausanne Academy, Viret met with a singular joy when the Lord provided him a godly bride. On Sunday, October 6, 1538, Viret and Elisabeth Turtaz, a lady of Orbe, were married. Farel presided over the ceremony.⁹

Two months following these celebrations, Viret was recalled to Geneva after Calvin had been banished from that city. Viret's loving spirit and gentle character had made him a favorite among the Genevans, and they longed to again have him as their pastor. Known as the *Smile of the Reformation*, Viret worked in Geneva "to rebuild the ruins, to dress the wounds, to reconcile the divers and opposing elements."¹⁰

Viret remained a year in Geneva, during which time he urged the Council upon several occasions to recall the exiled Calvin. At Viret's continued appeals, the Council sent to call their former pastor home.¹¹ Calvin, however, was in no way eager to return to the trials and troubles that awaited him in that city, and at first rejected the proposal to return, writing Viret,

I read that passage of your letter, certainly not without a smile, where you shew so much concern about my health, and recommend Geneva on that ground. Why could you not have said at the

cross? For it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented again in that place of torture. Therefore, my dear Viret, if you wish well to me, make no mention of such a proposal.¹²

While refusing to return to the troubled city of Geneva, Calvin simultaneously harbored hopes of the city's reformation after learning of Viret's arrival there. Writing to Farel in February of 1541, he expressed his assurance of the salubrious effects of Viret's influence on the tumultuous population, "It was a singular joy for me to learn that the Church of Geneva is endowed with the arrival of Viret ... I now foresee that the matter is out of danger."¹³

Viret, however, could not be dissuaded from calling his friend back to his duty and exerted his utmost influence to convince the reluctant Calvin to return. Writing again, Viret described the transformation of the city and the people's willingness to receive the gospel,

You cannot imagine the attentiveness with which they listen to my discourses, and what a crowd of men they attract ... such tranquility reigns in the republic, it is completely transformed, and has taken on a wholly new appearance ... The Lord has offered us a most favorable moment. If you neglect it, Calvin, the Lord will certainly punish you for neglecting the Church, and not you only, but also those who restrain you.¹⁴

After many such appeals, Calvin was at last persuaded to return; Viret joyfully assisted him in his reentrance. Having finally restored his friend to his post, Viret at once desired to return to his pastorate in Lausanne, but he was persuaded to remain for several months to aid Calvin. Farel, writing to the pastors of Zurich, noted the importance of Viret's presence in the city of Geneva at this crucial time, "If Viret is recalled [to Lausanne], then surely Calvin and the Church of Geneva shall fall again into ruins!"¹⁵ Calvin also shared this opinion, as is noted by historian Michael Bruening,

Three days after his return, Calvin told Farel, "I have also kept Viret with me, whom I absolutely would not allow to be taken away from me." Now it was Calvin who sought to persuade Viret that he was needed in Geneva. He explained to Farel, "If Viret leaves me, I am completely finished; I will not be able to keep this church alive. Therefore, I hope you and others will forgive me if I move every stone to ensure that I am not deprived of him."¹⁶

A Friend Indeed

Viret's selfless assistance of Calvin was not overlooked by the elder Reformer. The friendship of these two men expanded significantly during this time and showed itself in a beautiful brotherly relationship growing and deepening throughout the course of their lives.

Viret finally returned to Lausanne in 1542. His absence had been very detrimental to the health of the church, which he found in a terrible state. Writing to Calvin upon his return, he mourned, "I came, I saw, I was dumbfounded (*veni, vidi, obstupui*). If only what we had heard about the state of this church were not so true."¹⁷

Despite Lausanne's manifest need for Viret, Calvin still desired to have his fellow Reformer at his side, and in July of 1544 he urged the Council of Geneva to write to the Bernese lords, requesting permission to permanently retain Viret at Geneva. Upon hearing of the letter, however, the Lausanne counselors and pastors immediately sent their own ambassadors to Bern, begging the lords to reject Geneva's request. Meeting with such a desperate appeal from Lausanne, Bern declined to grant the transfer and ordered Viret to remain in Lausanne. Upon hearing that Geneva's request was refused, Viret wrote to Geneva to express his devotion to the city, assuring them of his love, "As for me, if you so desire, you will always have me as your humble servant, no less than if I were present with you, as truly I am in spirit, though I am distant in person; I will also be joined with you in body as soon as it is the good pleasure of Him who has called us in His service."¹⁸

Though now serving in separate locations, Calvin and Viret continued their friendship through a plethora of letters. A regular correspondence passed between them upon every subject. As one historian noted,

At Calvin's return [to Geneva] Viret joined him as a colleague, and the sweetest epistolary relationship was enjoyed between the two. During nearly twenty years continual messages passed from Geneva to Lausanne. Everyday news, events involving the Church or State, household troubles, memories, plans, confidences, all are found in this friendly correspondence, which never closes without feeling and emotion, filled with testimonies of the truest affection. The two friends never laid the pen aside except to visit each other, and what a time was their every meeting! "Someone told me," wrote Calvin, "that you are inclined to come to Geneva. I have seized the hope with as much fervor as if you were already here. If such is truly your intention, come Saturday. Your arrival could not be more timely. You will preach for me Sunday morning in the city so that I can preach at Jussy, and join me after dinner. We'll take a visit to Monsieur de Falais; then, crossing the lake, we'll enjoy the pleasures of the country together at the home of our friends Pommier and Delisle, and we shan't return until Thursday ... Above all, you can count on the warmest reception."¹⁹

The Shadow of Death

In 1545 Viret's life was disturbed by another great tragedy. His wife Elisabeth fell ill, and despite Viret's desperate efforts to revive her failing health, she died in March of the following year. Writing of her death to a dear friend, Viret wrote, "The Lord has dealt me such a painful blow ... in the death of my well-beloved wife. He has taken half of myself ... I am so afflicted by this blow that I appear to myself a stranger in my own house."²⁰

Viret's sorrow was so great that Calvin was terrified lest his friend perish under the weight of the blow. Writing his comrade, Calvin begged Viret to come to Geneva for a time: "Come to distract yourself, not only from your sorrow, but also from all your troubles. You need not fear that I will impose any work on you. I will take care that you enjoy your own pleasure in tranquility. And if anyone bothers you, I will deal with them."²¹

Knowing Viret's reluctance to leave his work in Lausanne, Calvin continued to press his dear friend, so much so that Viret could at last refuse no longer, and leaving his pastorate for a short time, Viret journeyed to Geneva to enjoy the company and consolation of his fellow Reformer.

The wonderful harmony and brotherly love existing between these two Reformers is truly an example for all ages. Though each man was called individually and fashioned in a particular way quite distinct from the other, God saw fit to bring these tools together, separately crafted, but each endued with the same vision: to engage in the work of the Kingdom of Christ. Writing of this holy friendship in a book dedicated to Viret and Farel, Calvin wrote,

It will at least be a testimony to this present age and perhaps to posterity of the holy bond of friendship that unites us. I think there has never been in ordinary life a circle of friends so heartily bound to each other as we have been in our ministry.²²

Battles with the Magistrates

Viret, seeking to further the Reform in Lausanne, did his utmost to turn the formerly ignorant populace into a Christian people. The political structure of the times, however, added great difficulty to this task. The Council of Bern—the political head of Lausanne—reserved to itself much of the church's jurisdiction. One matter of constant concern to Viret was church discipline. This, he rightly believed, was a tool pertaining solely to the church authorities, not the civil government. The lords of Bern, on the other hand, reserved this right to themselves alone, requiring Viret and other pastors to submit all requests for discipline to the Bernese for either approval or rejection.

Throughout his pastorate at Lausanne, Viret made numerous journeys to Bern to request the magistrates to cede him the authority necessary to establish and build the church. Viret pled with the Bernese lords, assuring them that a true church *must* be permitted to govern its members. Bern, desirous of retaining its power, refused to relinquish such authority to the church, declaring that it was the state's prerogative to govern all.

Viret knew well that a lack of discipline would result in no church at all. Pastors, he stated, must be allowed to enforce "this discipline, by which we can distinguish between swine, dogs, and sheep, according to Christ's teaching."²³ "Discipline," he noted, "can be abandoned, if the administration and use of the Word of God and the sacraments are also abandoned, for the Word and the sacraments cannot be properly administered without it."²⁴

Despite the continued appeals, Bern refused to allow Viret to exercise church discipline or restrict the Lord's Table. They stated that all must be permitted to participate and any pastor who refused to administer communion was to be immediately discharged. The Lausanne pastors, following Peter's initiative (Acts 5:29), sent numerous letters to Bern in which they stated their obligation to follow God rather than men:

We have not been called to this charge [the ministry] to close our eyes, to keep silent, to conceal vice, and to cover the scandals of those who have been entrusted to us, but to be on guard, to be attentive, to unceasingly lift our voice with strength, when needed ... We must do this to discharge our duty in good conscience.²⁵

The dispute finally came to a head in 1558. Writing to Calvin on August 24, Viret confided, "I have more bitter worries than anyone. I am between the anvil and the hammer, and know not where to turn ... I pray that God does not withhold His directions from me."²⁶

As Christmas communion approached, Viret announced that he could not in good conscience administer the sacrament without first being permitted to examine and instruct those who wished to partake. Going before the Council of Lausanne, he begged a seven-day postponement of the communion service to provide the time necessary to examine the communicants. After much debate, the Council agreed to grant the pastors the stipulated time.

When news of the ruling reached Bern, however, the magistrates were outraged at this usurpation of their authority. They sent immediately to Lausanne to countermand the decision of the Council and to dismiss and expel Viret and his colleagues.

Thus ousted, Viret and his associates were ordered to pack their belongings and leave the city. A refuge was soon found in the neighboring town of Geneva, where Calvin welcomed his friend with the warmest affection.

After Viret's dismissal, Bern appointed other ministers in his stead, but those nominated to fill his place refused, preferring rather to join Viret in exile than submit to Bern's demands. Numerous professors and students of the Academy also followed the expelled ministers, vastly swelling the numbers of the exiles. Johannes Haller, a contemporary, noted that "over a thousand people migrated from Lausanne to Geneva."²⁷ The significance of this exodus from the city of Lausanne can scarcely be overstated, for the city's population at the time was little more than five thousand.²⁸

Of the host of distinguished refugees exiting Lausanne, many of the professors, including Valier, Berault, Merlin, Tagault, and Chevalier, found a work prepared for them upon arrival in Geneva.²⁹ Within five months of their displacement, Calvin founded his Genevan Academy, employing as its core faculty the outcasts who fled Lausanne. Thus the Lausanne Academy of twenty-two years was relocated, becoming the world-acclaimed Genevan Academy.³⁰

Ministry in France

Geneva's joy at receiving their former pastor again after a "loan" to Lausanne of twenty-two years was unimaginable. The city welcomed the exiled Viret with acclamation and open arms, while the Council declared that Viret would be "received as a minister here and given 400 florins a year and two casks of wine."³¹ Calvin even good-humoredly noted that the house provided to Viret was larger and better furnished than his own.³²

Viret was immediately assigned the Church of St. Germain in which to preach, but the multitudes that pressed in to hear his sermons were so numerous that a new location had to be found to accommodate the crowds. The Council therefore determined to move Viret's preaching to the larger church of St. Pierre, which would provide ample room for the masses desirous of attending the sermons.³³

Viret's time in Geneva was cut short, however, due to a serious illness. In April of 1561 he fell dangerously ill and, fearing that this sickness would soon bring him to the grave, drew up his will on April 12. Concerning this time, he later wrote, "I fell into an illness whereby my body was so debilitated and brought so low that in my judgment I could expect nothing else but to be

lowered into the grave. I had never before had a sickness that had brought me so close to death, not even when I was poisoned by the art and cunning of the enemies of the Gospel."³⁴

During the summer months Viret's health was partially restored, but as winter again approached, his doctors urged him to seek a warmer climate in southern France. He therefore left Geneva in early September.

Viret's reputation was so great that the moment he set foot on French soil, he was given immediate authority in the Reformed French churches wherever he chose to go. "Offers poured in requesting Viret to come to such places as Orleans, Avignon, Montauban and Montpellier."³⁵ "When Viret arrived in France, churches from all over the country sought him out. The churches in Nimes and Paris even sent delegates to Geneva to ask officially for his services."³⁶

Viret arrived in Nimes on October 6; the city received him with the greatest warmth.³⁷ Indeed, the churches were not large enough to contain the crowds that sought to hear him; Viret was therefore compelled to preach in open fields and pastures. The multitudes responded eagerly to the Word of God, and on January 4, 1562, in a service lasting six hours, Viret administered communion to over eight thousand believers.³⁸

Friend and foe alike were drawn to the sweetness and gentleness of Viret's preaching. As he preached one day in a field in the Vaunage, the very prior and monks themselves came to listen to the man's words. As Viret explained to his listeners the wonders of the gospel and the blessedness of the Redeemer, his words did not return void: "The success was complete. The priests, the officers,... became Protestant, and the abbey consecrated half its revenues to evangelization, and the other half to aid the poor."³⁹

While in Nimes, Viret preached every Sunday and Wednesday to increasingly swelling crowds. He was also employed as a professor of theology at the local Academy, as well as doubling as a peacemaker in several church squabbles. His presence was sought everywhere; he presided over both provincial and national synods of the French Reformed churches in 1562⁴⁰ and 1563.⁴¹

As Viret's leave of absence from Geneva neared its conclusion, the Council of Nimes grew terrified of losing their pastor. In an effort to retain him, they sent a delegation to the Genevan Council, writing, "The harvest surpasses belief, and the famine is intolerable ... We need reapers ... In the name of the God you honor, we beseech and beg with our greatest affection that you leave [Viret] with us."⁴² Despite the desperation of the letter, the Council of Geneva did not grant the request. Indeed, they were so flooded with letters begging for Viret's presence that they at last decided to let Viret himself decide where to proceed. Requests again poured in from Montpellier, Montauban, Orleans, and even Paris. Viret at length decided upon Montpellier; he entered that city in February of 1562.

As with Nimes, Viret's efforts met with exceptional success. "Spectacular results followed with large numbers being won to the side of the Reformed Faith, including nearly the entire faculty of the famous medical college of Montpellier."⁴³ After a short stay, Viret accepted a call to Lyon in late May, where he remained for the next three years. The City Council of Lyon, in writing to the Council of Geneva, expressed their indebtedness to Viret in November of 1562, "We derive

more aid and assistance from his learned and holy teaching than from our entire army."⁴⁴
 "Without his presence it would be impossible for us to hold our soldiers to their duty."⁴⁵

In March of 1563 Viret's ministry was severely threatened by the issuance of a royal edict forbidding all foreign-born pastors from ministering in France. Because of Viret's renowned Christian character, however, he was exempted from the edict by request of the Catholics themselves.

A Lasting Legacy

Although the work of the ministry demanded much of Viret's time, he still found opportunity to write. His scholarly production was immense; he was a prolific author, writing over fifty books. His works were bestsellers in his day and were translated into many languages including German, Italian, English, Dutch, and Latin.

Though Viret's works display great depth in their treatment of theological subjects, he nevertheless wrote in an informal, easy-to-understand style. It was often noted that in him was found a theologian who was not afraid to stoop to the ignorant, to use rusticity with the rustics, and to lisp with the children. Indeed, his style of treating deep theological truths made his books beneficial to both the newest convert and the most learned theologian.

While at Lyon, Viret completed his greatest literary work, his three-volume *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel*. Theologian Jean-Marc Berthoud writes of this theological masterpiece,

[I]f Calvin is incomparable as a dogmatic exegete and polemicist, Viret largely surpasses him as ethicist and apologist. His strength was a domain often neglected because of its complexity: the application of the Word of God to every aspect of life. His *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel* of 1564 is unquestionably the best commentary on the Ten Commandments that the Christian Church has ever known.⁴⁶

After a difficult-though fruitful-life spent in service to his God, Pierre Viret died in early 1571 at the age of sixty. Like the site of his death and burial, which remains unknown to this day, the life and theological greatness of Pierre Viret remains unknown to the church at large. Is this also the work of God? Has He thus withheld His Reformer, perhaps awaiting the time when, in His providence, Viret's life and thought shall be most needed for His church?

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19. "Les Amitiés de Calvin," *Bulletin de la Société de L'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* (Paris, 1864), 93. Author's translation.
20. Viret to Watteville, March 8, 1546, quoted in Doumergue, *Lausanne au temps de la Réformation*, 46. Author's translation.
21. Calvin to Viret, quoted in Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 315. Author's translation.
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23. J. Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Réformateur Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), 118. Author's translation.
24. Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chrétienne* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2008), 348. Author's translation.
25. Letter of July 15, 1555, as quoted in Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 445. Author's translation.
26. Cart, *Pierre Viret*, 123-124. Author's translation.
27. As quoted in Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground*, 254.
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32. Robert D. Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," *Christian History Magazine*, Issue 71 (2001), 37.
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34. Viret, *Instruction Chrétienne*, 83. Author's translation.
35. Robert D. Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva, 1964), 43.
36. Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," 194.
37. Cart, *Pierre Viret*, 133.

38. Barnaud, Pierre Viret, 565.
39. Frédéric Lichtenberger, *Encyclopédie des sciences religieuses, Tome XII* (Paris, 1882), 407. Author's translation.
40. Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 569.
41. Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret*, 244.
42. Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 567-568. Author's translation.
43. Linder, *Political Ideas*, 43.
44. Lyon Council to the Council of Geneva, November 18, 1562, quoted in Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 588. Author's translation.
45. Lyon Council to the Council of Geneva, November 22, 1562, quoted in Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, 588. Author's translation.
46. Jean-Marc Berthoud, *Des Actes de L'Eglise* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1993), 54. Author's translation.

Topics: [Biography](#), [Church History](#), [Reformed Thought](#)

Rebecca A. Sheats

Rebekah Sheats is the author of several historical works, including a biography of Pierre Viret, the Swiss Reformer, entitled *Pierre Viret: The Angel of the Reformation*. She is also engaged in translating Viret's writings. Her latest work, *Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Plea for Life*, is a translation of Viret's commentary on the sixth commandment. Other translations include *Letters of Comfort to the Persecuted Church*, *The Christian and the Magistrate: Roles, Responsibilities, and Jurisdictions*, and *Simple Exposition of the Christian Faith*.

Rebekah is grateful for the godly home-education she received, and has designed several curricula to assist parents in the education of their children, including *Biblical Greek* and *Biblical Hebrew for Children* (Psalm 78 Ministries).

2. Pierre Viret: A Forgotten Giant of the Reformation by Jean-Marc Berthoud

By Lee Duigon

February 28, 2011

Usually it's wise not to judge a book by its cover; but in this case, the book's cover has something important to tell us about its subject.

Artist James Mathewuse, commissioned by the Pierre Viret Association (www.pierre-viret.org), worked from centuries-old woodcuts and engravings to reconstruct the face and posture of Pierre Viret (1511-1571). The result is greater than the sum of its parts.

Look closely, and you'll see more than just a typical, grim, Reformation figure in black robes, black scholar's hat, and long, black beard. Look closely at Pierre Viret's portrait. Now can you see the twinkle in his eye? Can you see that he is just about to break into a smile? It's as if he has some pleasant thought in mind, which he is about to share.

The portrait is an excellent introduction to the word-portrait of Viret drawn up by Jean-Marc Berthoud in this handsomely produced little book (just 85 pages, not counting the appendix). Now open it and meet the man.

Bringing Him Back

First, why is Viret "forgotten"? Viret has been called "the Angel of the Reformation," but most Christians have never heard of him. Yet he was a great scholar and teacher with copious writings to his credit, who "brought the Reformation to Geneva and the rest of French Switzerland" and was one of John Calvin's dearest friends (p. viii).

The biggest problem is that Viret's works, more than 50 books, have not been translated into modern languages. The Pierre Viret Association has launched an ambitious program to rectify that.

Viret's books, according to the Association, "were penned in a style of French in some ways comparable to King James English. Because of the plethora of differences existing between sixteenth century and modern French, an expert in the French of that period must first edit Viret's works in order to annotate the text and explain the archaic language so as to render it accessible to present common usage. After this process is completed, the books may then be translated into English ... The work of translating Volume I [of Viret's *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel*] has been proceeding for well over a year. Andrew Muttitt of Scotland is currently employed with this work, and hopes to complete this first volume by the end of the year."¹

In the meantime, Berthoud has written his book to introduce Viret to modern readers. That is his book's purpose, and he succeeds admirably: it makes us want to know more about Viret and his teaching.

A Winsome Style

"Pierre Viret was undoubtedly (with Martin Luther) one of the finest popularizers of the Christian faith in the sixteenth century," writes Berthoud (p. 23). Quoting Philip Schaff, "His sermons were more popular and impressive than those of Calvin, and better attended" (p. 16). Quoting from contemporaries of Viret, "His speech was so sweet that he would continually hold the attention and the interest of those who heard him. His style, which married strength to harmony, was so caressing to the ear and to the intelligence that even those of his hearers least

interested in religious matters ... would hear him out without difficulty and even with pleasure." And, "By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out" (p. 20).

Calvin himself praised Viret for his "joyful and pleasant manner," and said of Viret's impact on his listeners, "in their very amusement they receive instruction" (p. 22). Of Viret's instructional dialogues, Calvin said, "the reader will both draw solid and excellent instruction, and find good occasion for laughter," and so on (pp. 22-23).

But Viret had more to offer than just a pleasant and humorous style. He was, says Berthoud, "the finest ethicist and the most acute apologist of the sixteenth century. His monumental *Instruction chrétienne* ... [*Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel and in True Christian Philosophy and Theology, Both Natural and Supernatural*] is without a doubt his major theological work, and can well bear comparison, in its own domain, with Calvin's *Institutes*" (p. 24). Berthoud also cites a scholar who compares it to R. J. Rushdoony's *Systematic Theology*: "[I]t grapples theologically in a very concrete manner with the problems that contemporary men struggle with today" (p. 24).

Ironically, the fact that Viret wrote in the French of his own time, making his work accessible to any literate person of his day, is what has made him a "forgotten giant" to later ages. If only he had written in Latin! His works would have been translated into English long ago.

Viret's Wisdom

Berthoud devotes chapters to Viret as Reformer, ethicist, apologist, economist, and philosopher, demonstrating that Viret was all of those things and more.

Viret's *Christian Instruction*, writes Berthoud, includes "the finest exposition of the Law of God that it has been my privilege to read" (p. 27), comparing it to Rushdoony's *The Institutes of Biblical Law* in its "detailed application of God's Word to the practical problems of Christian living in every aspect of personal and social life" (p. 28). In Viret's own words:

"This Law stands far above all human legislation, whether past, present, or *future*, and is above all laws and statutes edicted by man ... This law, if it is rightly understood, will furnish us with true Ethics, Economics, and Politics" (pp. 28-29).

Viret, says Berthoud, was more thorough-going than Calvin in his application of Biblical law to every aspect of life. He provides intriguing selections of Viret's writing and reasoning: for instance, Viret's ability to relate counterfeiting money to the counterfeiting of God's Word itself (pp. 43-45). Viret chose to do this in the form of dialogues, a device that makes for fairly lively reading and must have been quite impressive when delivered in a sermon.

As an apologist and an observer of nature, "Viret reasons in a thoroughly Biblical way as a man who has not been intellectually and morally emasculated by what we can call epistemological surgery." Berthoud follows up with a trenchant observation of his own:

"Such mental impoverishment results from the common acceptance, first by the world and then by the Church, of the cultural domination of our whole culture by a purely mathematical model of the universe (the so-called scientific worldview, valid in fact only in its strictly limited domain, that of the measurable) as normative of every aspect of reality."

This is wisdom. We can hear echoes of it in C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. For instance: "You will notice that we have got them completely fogged about the meaning of the word 'real' ... The general rule which we have now pretty well established among them is that in all experiences which can make them happier or better only the physical facts are 'real' while the spiritual elements are 'subjective'; in all experiences which can discourage or corrupt them the spiritual elements are the main reality and to ignore them is to be an escapist ... Your patient, properly handled, will have no difficulty in regarding his emotion at the sight of human entrails as a revelation of Reality and his emotion at the sight of happy children or fair weather as mere sentiment."²

How much damage has been done, and how much unhappiness brewed up, by this paganish division of God's world into "matter versus spirit," "real versus unreal," or some such thing? Viret stands for the Biblical proposition that man, like the rest of God's creation, is an indivisible whole consisting of matter *and* spirit. Pierre Viret, C. S. Lewis, R. J. Rushdoony, and Jean-Marc Berthoud see and share in a much vaster reality than that allowed by so-called science, an alias for mere materialism. It's a "science" of only one aspect of reality, and hence no science at all. Dare we say, as Viret himself might say, that it's not *real* science?

Viret's Insight

"Pierre Viret's great respect for God's law endowed him with an extraordinary lucidity and discernment in the field of economic analysis," Berthoud writes, blending an understanding of economics "some two hundred years in advance of its time" with "theocentric conservatism" (p. 61). Viret wrote of "deformed Christians," not "reformed," who worshiped wealth and tried to use their new liberation from Rome as an excuse for amoral greed (p. 62). In his own words:

"The greatest evil that can be imagined is when the public purse is impoverished and individual men are wealthy. This is an evident sign that the commonwealth is in an unhealthy condition, that public policy is in weak and incapable hands and that the state is under the domination of thieves and bandits who make of it their prey" (pp. 63-64).

Does that sound familiar? In the driver's seat of the all-powerful state are thieves and bandits. Yes, it sounds depressingly familiar.

Viret addressed the theme of "the State's financial voracity, its desire to tax every aspect of human activity" (p. 67). "Since the beginning," wrote Viret, "this tyrannical system of universal taxation has never decreased but has rather constantly grown. For princes and nobility alike never consider the ordinary revenues and taxes at their disposal as a necessary limitation to their style of life, projects, and ambitions. Rather they only consider the fulfillment of the ambition they cherish, not examining whether their actual revenues are able to sustain such utopian dreams" (p. 71).

Are we sure he was born 500 years ago?

[More, Please!](#)

Berthoud concludes, "It is, in my modest view, high time that the Church (and through her teaching all our nations) comes once more to listen to what Viret has to say of God's immutable purposes for men and our present most distressing condition" (p. 85).

Berthoud has given us a taste of Viret's teaching and left us eager for more. We can't bring the man back to life, but at long last we can bring back his books, so that "he being dead, yet speaketh."

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1. <http://pierreviret.org/transla...>
 2. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996 edition), 167-169.

Topics: [Christian Reconstruction](#), [Church History](#), [Dominion](#), [Education](#), [Government](#), [Reformed Thought](#), [Theology](#), [World History](#)

Lee Duigon

Lee is the author of the [Bell Mountain Series](#) of novels and a contributing editor for our *Faith for All of Life* magazine. Lee provides commentary on cultural trends and relevant issues to Christians, along with providing cogent book and media reviews.

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3. Pierre Viret and the Total Sovereignty of the Word of God

By Jean-Marc Berthoud

February 28, 2011

In this short article, I will examine the contribution to the ongoing growth of the Kingdom of God by a little-known French Swiss Reformer, Pierre Viret. I shall briefly endeavor to show his application of the Word of God over every aspect of reality.

Background

Now Pierre Viret, Calvin's most intimate friend,¹ known under the name of the Angel of the Reformation, was by no means a minor or insignificant figure, as most Reformed histories of the Reformation would lead us to imagine. In 1537 Viret founded the first truly Reformed Academy in Lausanne and gave much of his time to the teaching of theology to students who flocked from every corner of Europe. This Lausanne Academy (and not the Genevan, as is too often thought) became the model of all future Reformed academies. By the time of the expulsion of Viret in 1559, the Academy enrolled nearly a thousand students.

But this mild and gentle Christian, a man of the highest spiritual mettle, was also one of the great preachers of the Reformation.

Jean Barnaud writes:

His speech was so sweet that he would continually hold the attention and the interest of those who heard him. His style, which married strength to harmony, was so caressing to the ear and to the intelligence that even those of his hearers least interested in religious matters, those most impatient of other preachers, would hear him out without difficulty and even with pleasure.²

Melchior Adam remarks of his preaching:

In Lyon, preaching out in the open, he brought thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out.³

But in addition to exercising such great gifts, Viret was in his own right a prolific writer, author of some fifty books.

He wrote a small number of treatises in Latin, but the immense majority of his books were written in French, in a familiar style and in the popular form of dialogues.

Pierre Viret was undoubtedly (with Martin Luther) one of the finest popularizers of the Christian faith in the sixteenth century. But his deep concern for the spiritual needs of the common people never led him (as is all too common today) to debase the content of his theological teaching. It is impossible, in the brief space assigned to this paper, to do proper justice to the astonishing

achievements of this extraordinary Christian. If his good friend, John Calvin, was the consummate dogmatician and the prince of exegetes, Pierre Viret must be considered as the finest ethicist and the most acute apologist of the sixteenth century. His monumental *Instruction Chrétienne En La Doctrine De La Loi Et De l'Evangile Et En La Vraie Philosophie Et Théologie, Tant Naturelle Que Supernaturelle Des Chrétiens*⁴ (*Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel and in True Christian Philosophy and Theology, Both Natural and Supernatural*) is without doubt his major theological work and can well bear comparison, in its own domain, with Calvin's *Institutes*.

Pages 249 through 674 constitute a complete treatise on the detailed application of the Ten Commandments to every aspect of reality. It is the finest exposition of the law of God that it has been my privilege to read. The only work I know that in any way bears comparison to this masterpiece is Rushdoony's *The Institutes of Biblical Law*.⁵ Not only do we find in Viret a detailed application of God's Word to the practical problems of Christian living in every aspect of personal and social life, but this is done with an admirable sense of theological balance.

In the preface Viret sets forth his central purpose with the utmost clarity.

Thus God has included in this Law every aspect of that moral doctrine by which men may live well. For in these Laws he has done infinitely better than the Philosophers and all their books, whether they deal with Ethics, Economics or Politics. This Law stands far above all human legislation, whether past, present or future and is above all laws and statutes edicted by men. It follows that whatever good men may put forward has previously been included in this Law, and whatever is contrary to it is of necessity evil ... This Law, if it is rightly understood, will furnish us with true Ethics, Economics and Politics.⁶

And Viret concludes his preface with these words:

For as it can only be God Himself who is able to give us such a perfect Law by which we are truly enabled to govern ourselves, likewise it is only He who can provide us with Princes and Magistrates, Pastors and Ministers gifted with the capacity of applying this Law.⁷

Viret's Political Thinking

Here of great value is Robert D. Linder's pathbreaking study on Viret's political thinking. After having described what for Viret was the normative rule of the Word of God for both ecclesiastical and theological matters, Linder defines his thinking in these terms:

The Scriptures also contained statements concerning the state and, insofar as they applied to secular government, they represented God's will for that institution. Thus the secular state was seen by Viret as a de facto creation derived directly from God himself but governed in harmony with the rules and precepts contained in the Holy Scriptures.⁸

For in Viret's eyes,

Viret felt that all laws affecting public morals and related to spiritual values should be drawn directly from the moral law of God. However, he believed that these absolute and eternal laws of

God had to be geared to the times in which people lived and the national temperament of the country to which the laws were to be applied.⁹

Linder states, moreover:

Viret's notion that the prince was below the law is extremely interesting and very different from the absolutist theory placing the king above the law.¹⁰

Viret puts it this way:

For prince and magistrate must be subject to the laws of the land and conform their rule to them. For they are not rulers of the law but servants thereof, as they are servants of God from whom all good laws proceed.¹¹

On the question of extent of the application of the detail of the Mosaic law to our present situation, Viret held a significantly different position from that of Calvin. This is how Linder defines this difference:

Viret, unlike Calvin, was ready to extend openly the authority of the Bible over the State.¹²

Viret's Economic Discernment

In a book on the nature of the study of history in the latter part of the sixteenth century, the Marxist historian, Claude-Gilbert Dubois, pays considerable attention to Viret's Biblical vision of history and in so doing brings to light the remarkable economic discernment of our Swiss Reformer. Dubois' analysis is concentrated on the study of Viret's masterpiece in apologetics, *Le monde a l'empire et le monde de'moniacle*. This book, says Dubois, could well be considered a treatise in economics written some two hundred years in advance of its time. Though in total disagreement with Viret's theocentric conservatism, Dubois was nonetheless outspoken in his admiration of our author's perception of contemporary economic currents. For Viret saw in the anarchical monopolistic capitalism developing before his indignant gaze a growing practical opposition to God's law and the rise of a thoroughly anti-Christian society. Viret saw in the progressive attachment of many of his contemporaries to material wealth (a fascination severed from all sense of stewardship and accountability to God for the use of one's riches) a particularly vile form of idolatry where the rapidity of growth in opulence was in direct proportion to the loss of religion and morality.

Dubois writes:

What is the true character of the social degradation Viret perceives in the history of his time? Its origin is theological in nature, linked as it is to human sin. It manifests itself immorally by the perversion of the created order. But it takes on the modern form of a specifically economic scandal: a perverted economic order, an unethical distribution of riches, provoked by the circulation of wealth in one direction only, its accumulation in the hands of a few. Such are the signs of the corruption that reigns in the world today.¹³

Viret writes:

The greatest evil that can be imagined is when the public purse is impoverished and individual men wealthy. This is an evident sign that the commonwealth is in an unhealthy condition, that public policy is in weak and incapable hands and that the state is under the domination of thieves and bandits who make of it their prey.¹⁴

For Viret, such an egotistical, cumulative concentration of wealth runs completely counter to the Biblical doctrines of stewardship, of charity, and of personal sacrifice. In itself it is a clear indication of the decadence of a society and calls forth future purifying social disasters and divine judgments. For the economic mechanisms that lead to such an unfruitful concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial oligarchy prepare the way for those social and political catastrophes that will inevitably destroy such an amoral and irresponsible ruling class.

Viret saw very clearly that this new oligarchy made abundant use of its monopolistic domination of the apparatus of the state to appropriate the riches of the whole nation by disrupting the natural circulation of wealth in the usual channels of production and exchange. For Viret, this stifling of the economic blood flow of industrial production and commercial exchange by a parasitical oligarchy must be broken if an equitable distribution of wealth is to be reestablished and the economic health of the society restored.

This is a brief evocation of the astonishing life and labors of Pierre Viret, that faithful servant of Almighty God who all his life labored to bring every thought of his contemporaries captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ and of His total Word.

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1. Henri Meylan, "Une amitié au XVI^e siècle: Farel, Viret, Calvin," in *Silhouettes du XVI^e siècle* (Lausanne, 1943), 27-50.
 2. Jean Barnaud, *Pierre Viret, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Saint-Amans, 1911), 539-540.
 3. Ibid., 540.
 4. Volume I; Volume II (Genève, 1564). The third volume was published apart with the title *De la providence divine* (Lyon, 1565).
 5. R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1973).
 6. Pierre Viret, *Instruction chrétienne en la doctrine de la Loi et de l'Evangile* (Genève, 1564), 255.
 7. Ibid., 255-256.
 8. Robert D. Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva, 1964), 55.
 9. Ibid., 58, n. 29.
 10. Ibid., 59-60.
 11. Pierre Viret, *Le monde à l'empire et le monde démoniacle fait par dialogues*, 91-92.
 12. Linder, *Political Ideas*, 63.
 13. Claude-Gilbert Dubois, op. cit., 453.
 14. Viret, *Le monde à l'empire et le monde démoniacle fait par dialogues*, 156.

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→ [More by Jean-Marc Berthoud](#)

4. Pierre Viret: A Christian View of War

By Robert D. Linder

February 28, 2011

The subject of political theory is a vast one, deserving of study and inspiring volumes. It is a discipline that the church has shaped throughout history and must continue to influence. Because political theory and its application have such a profound impact upon our human and social existence, it is critical that the church is always vigilant to speak the Word of God into this important realm.

The unquestionable command that civil government must be limited in its role and jurisdiction is made clear throughout Scripture from Moses to Paul. The socialist/collective experiment imposed by the intellectual and political class of the last century has been concentrated into two essential realms: the welfare state and the warfare state. Time has revealed that these two areas of this new order are the ones most easily corrupted and have led to the dehumanization of man and the bankruptcy of many national treasuries. While the evils of the welfare state have been addressed in recent years by churchmen and various conservative writers, very little has been written concerning the devastating effects of the warfare state.

The French-Swiss Reformer, Pierre Viret, brings his considerable theological wisdom to bear on the modern, inconsistent thinking on war.

Viret: The Forgotten Light

Pierre Viret (1511-1571), Calvin's closest associate, was a prolific writer. Many of his fifty-some books offer a well-developed theology in the issues of church and state, jurisdiction, the Christian duty of the magistrate, and the problem of war. The personal and ministerial experiences of Viret's life fostered his theological development of a comprehensive political theory.

Viret, with Guillaume Farel and Antoine Froment, was in Geneva (1534-1535) in the early days of the French-Swiss Reformation. Under the blessing of the Genevan councils, these three labored with great difficulty to bring the Reformation to this embattled republic.

Later, as the pastor of the Reformed church in Lausanne (1536-1559), Viret continually battled the overreaching arm of the Bernese lords. He spent much time and many trips to Bern dealing with the unwarranted intervention of the magistrates into the affairs of the churches of the Pays de Vaud.

Finally, in 1559 Bern had enough of Viret's resistance and exiled him from his home and church. Viret was never to return to Lausanne. After a brief stay in Geneva assisting Calvin, Viret spent the last ten years of his life pursuing a dynamic and fruitful ministry in France. Though of Swiss birth, upon entering France, Viret became the immediate leader of the French Reformed church-owing to his exemplary reputation.

Nevertheless, his time in France was tumultuous and was further complicated by the circumstances of the French Civil War. Viret's political theory was molded by his observations and of the circumstances and what he believed to be the interventions of Providence. Thus, his theology of war did not come from his library but from his Bible, as he searched for answers to the political issues of his day.

Viret's observations, though over four centuries past, are as timely as if he were peering through a window to our modern age. His timeless and extraordinary wisdom unmasks the accepted political corruption of the present day. Because Viret's reference point is always the Word of God, his gifted insights are as relevant today as they were in his day.

Viret's View of War

Viret was a man who loved peace and hated violence. Viret said, "I have always loved peace and have always held in horror dissensions and troubles."¹ He saw all war as bad and the worst of all possible blights. He described war as a "sickness" that plagues human society, and, from a purely utilitarian point of view, he felt that it generally hindered the spread of the gospel. Viret's letters from Lyon during the course of the first war of religion in France revealed how weary and heartsick he was over the fighting.² His conclusion was that peace was always to be desired over war and that every consideration should be given to maintaining the peace, if at all possible.³ Viret declared, "I desire it to be well considered ... that every war is so exceedingly dangerous and full of hazard that there is nothing of which Christians must have a greater horror than of taking up arms; I mean not solely against Christians, but against all men of the earth; there is nothing which Christians should be more wary to employ nor which is less suited to their profession."⁴

Viret considered ambition, avarice, and covetousness to be the fundamental causes of most wars. Men fought other men in order to plunder, pillage, and seize what was not rightfully theirs. Viret denounced this sort of war and predicted divine judgment would take care of such international brigands. He was not willing to support any kind of politically oriented offensive war against other nations. Even the holy idealism that originally motivated the religious Crusades of the Middle Ages did not constitute a just reason for waging war in Viret's eyes.⁵

Viret did not desire to inspire men by the example of the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews: "We are not in the same state that the people of Israel were in the land of Canaan. We have not the commandment, nor the leaders and magistrates ordained by God, to drive out and kill the papists and our enemies."⁶

Business of War

In general, Viret's attitude toward armies and things military was negative. He hated militarism and detested most mercenaries. He also denounced those who made their living manufacturing military equipment and munitions, because to Viret, profit by the shedding of human blood was particularly vile.⁷ Special targets for his wrath were those who manufactured and used artillery in warfare. He believed that the current instruments of war were horrible enough without resorting to a new and terrible weapon of destruction. He considered artillery an invention of diabolic

origin and warned that it was a threat to the very existence of the entire human race. He censured those who would use it to ruin whole villages, killing and maiming human beings by the hundreds. He held that no true Christian prince would use so terrible and destructive a weapon.⁸ All in all, his long discussion of artillery sounds like a modern-day pacifist denouncing the atomic bomb. Still, he was confident that, in the end, spiritual arms are vastly superior to the dreadful artillery: "For spiritual arms are not only stronger than carnal arms without any comparison, but they are also completely invincible."⁹

In 1566, as Viret reflected on the first war of religion in France, he concluded that it was caused more by non-religious and semi-religious considerations than by genuinely spiritual issues. He observed that differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics had been nourished and deliberately augmented by hateful, ambitious, greedy people who hoped to profit from a war.

Politicians Who Use Religion

Viret said that certain "detestable, villainous" secular rulers and selfish people who "pretended the Christian religion" were exploiting religious differences for their own gain. He exclaimed that he could not understand how these people could "grieve and torment one another like they do over the goods of this miserable life which they should have renounced in order to become *bourgeois* and citizens of the kingdom of heaven."¹⁰ From what Viret wrote, it is clear that a number of secular leaders had joined the Reform for purely social and political reasons. To Viret, there was no room in the ranks of the Reformation for men such as these, especially because they set a bad example before the world of what true Christians were like and "greatly abused the name of God, the Gospel, and the Christian religion."¹¹

Viret on the Just War

It is not that Viret failed to conceive of such a thing as a "just war." There were two conditions, in his view, under which a legitimate war might be waged.

The magistrate or prince could morally resist invasion of his territory as he intervened to stop aggressive violence. Further, and as a last resort, he was justified to engage in a war for defense and pacification.¹² In the second instance, the prince or magistrate might engage in a just war over what Viret called "a good quarrel"-armed conflict in defense and in chastisement of the wicked.

Viret reasoned that if one magistrate or prince was called to defend one or several innocent people, or if the same were similarly called to punish one or several legitimate offenders, then why could not a group of magistrates or princes legitimately defend a thousand innocent people and punish a thousand wicked individuals? It would be better to take the sword than watch Christianity ruined, he argued.¹³ Still, even a "just war" produces undesirable results, Viret admitted, because the above conditions exist as a last resort only, and the taking up of arms remains a serious enterprise. In sum, all possible measures should be taken to avoid war, yet the pursuit of it-in behalf of a Christian duty against forces of evil-can be just.

Viret Was Critical of Corrupt Government

Viret wrote that the magistrate's office was ordained by God, but he was never afraid to criticize or defy unjust action.¹⁴ He was never timid in denouncing kings and princes when they were clearly in the wrong, and he sometimes got in trouble for this sort of thing. He bluntly stated that kings never have the right to steal from peasants, and if they do, they should be treated as a peasant who is caught robbing a king. He called princes who practiced rapine, brigandage, and fiscal corruption "the greatest of robbers." He laid the responsibility for dishonest public officials at the feet of those who appointed them. Viret was never awed by a prince merely because he bore a lofty title, but considered him to be a mortal man like himself, as prone to error and sin as any other human being.¹⁵ But, even when Viret was at odds with a group of magistrates, whether Bernese Protestants or French Catholics, the magistrates never lost their respect for him, because he was clearly a leader of men and he obviously spoke and argued based on his Christian convictions.¹⁶

Conclusion

The prolific writings of Pierre Viret encompass much more than political philosophy, and the reader is invited to explore them. Would that the modern church might study Pierre Viret and his cogent insights again. How revolutionary it might be if the modern evangelical church would embrace a philosophy of war more closely aligned with the well-articulated views of this forgotten Reformer. However, it is as though the modern church has been hypnotized by and has adopted the cheering of a Western war culture that creates enemies, engages in offensive wars, disposes of rulers and nations at will, and, under the guise of democracy, fabricates a worldwide military empire.

Only the church of Jesus Christ, courageously speaking from the authority of the Word of God, can truly address the evils of our modern-day culture of war.

1. Robert D. Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 105.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Pierre Viret, *Remonstrances aux Fidèles*, 342-343.

5. Linder, *Political Ideas*, 105.

6. Viret, *Remonstrances aux Fidèles*, 239.

7. Linder, *Political Ideas*, 106.

8. Ibid., 107.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 109.

11. Ibid., 110.

12. Ibid., 105.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 112.

15. Ibid., 113.

16. Ibid.

Topics: [Biblical Law](#), [Church, The](#), [Government](#), [Justice](#), [Reformed Thought](#), [Statism](#), [Theology](#), [World History](#)

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5. Pierre Viret's Consolation for the Persecuted Huguenots

by Rebekah A. Sheats

Abstract

This article examines the consolation that the Swiss Reformer Pierre Viret offered to the persecuted Huguenots from 1530 to the 1550s. During these years, Viret, living primarily in Lausanne and Geneva, closely followed the persecution of the Protestants in neighboring France, and offered counsel and comfort to the troubled Huguenots. The consolation he offered these suffering believers is examined and summarized through the Reformer's letters and writings.

I. Placards, Jean Morin, and the Shoemaker's Son

On the morning of October 18, 1534, the inhabitants of a predominantly Roman Catholic Paris exited their houses to find placards nailed to their walls and to posts on their street corners. These placards, affixed by unknown hands, denounced "the horrible, great, and unbearable abuses of the popish mass." Violently deprecating the idolatry of the mass, the placards called for all true Christians to abandon the superstition of the Catholic priests and monks (who were declared to be "presumptuous enemies of the Word of God") and begin celebrating the Lord's Supper with its original meaning and simplicity.¹

The Affair of the Placards, as it came to be called, terrified and infuriated the Roman Catholic populace of France. Many of the Protestants themselves disapproved of the inflammatory nature of the act, and feared the strife it would engender. In city after city across the realm, the placards were discovered. Indeed, so bold were the conspirators that a copy of the articles was even affixed to the door of the royal bedchamber. King Francis I, appalled and enraged at the dishonor and affront he deemed had been shown his person, immediately ordered a search to be made for the instigators of such a vile, seditious act.

The hunt for the treasonous conspirators began in Paris. The officer entrusted with the task of searching out the accursed “Lutherans” was a man by the name of Jean Morin, the *lieutenant-criminel* (public prosecutor), who was as well known for his cruelty as he was for his dissolute life. Knowing Morin to be perfectly suitable for the task, the king added an increase in pay as a further incentive to inspire Morin to bend all his efforts toward the discovery of the heretics. Henry Baird notes, “The judicious addition of six hundred *livres parisis* [francs minted at Paris] to his salary afforded him a fresh stimulus and prevented his zeal from flagging.”² With such motivation, Morin was certain of discovering the perpetrators of the dastardly placard affair. Bartholomew Milon, son of a Paris shoemaker, was one of the first who fell prey to the zeal of the *lieutenant-criminel*.

As a young man, Bartholomew had led a profligate life, despising God and living only to satisfy his lusts and sensual pleasures. One day, while engaging in one of his dissolute frolics, Bartholomew broke several of his ribs. The ribs never properly healed, and the young man soon could no longer walk upright. With the passage of time his legs grew weaker, and at last he found himself paralyzed from the waist down.

Embittered by his ruined life and his broken, pain-racked body, Bartholomew sat all day upon his bed within his father’s shop, mocking those who passed by the shop’s window. His jeering one day caught the attention of a man (whose name has been forgotten to history) who paused to address the young cripple.

“Poor man,” the stranger replied to Milon’s mockery, “why do you mock at the passersby? Do you not see that God has broken your body to heal your soul?” The man then drew forth a French New Testament and handed it to Bartholomew. “Read it,” he said—and read it Bartholomew did.

With the Scriptures in hand, Bartholomew drank deeply of the words of life, and was changed forever. Day and night he studied the Word, reveling in the truth contained

therein, and day by day he spoke of Christ, not only to his own family, but to any who would listen.

The astonishing change that marked the life of the paralyzed shoemaker's son arrested the attention of many who daily passed the little shop in Paris, and many were the souls that first heard the gracious words of the gospel from the lips of this young man.

When the placards appeared in Paris and Jean Morin began his hunt for heretics, the *lieutenant-criminel* quickly found his way to the shoemaker's door. It mattered not that Bartholomew's broken frame clearly proclaimed him innocent of having played any part in affixing the noxious placards to the city's walls; he was suspected of heresy, and that was sufficient to condemn him.

It is recorded that Morin, upon entering the shoemaker's shop, turned furiously to where Bartholomew lay. "You," he cried, pointing at the man, "get up!" Despite the deadly peril of his situation, Bartholomew could not restrain a smile at the inquisitor's imperious command, and simply replied, "Sir, it would take a greater lord than you to make me rise up and walk."³

Unable to raise himself from his bed, the shoemaker's son was carried to prison by Morin's soldiers. Bartholomew's crippled condition did not exempt him from the customary harsh treatment received from Morin's hands, but the man bore his handling patiently and with astonishing fortitude. Remaining peacefully steadfast through all, he spent his final days encouraging his fellow-prisoners.

Bartholomew was condemned to be burned over a slow fire, a sentence that was carried out on the 13th of November, 1534.⁴ Carried past his father's workshop on the way to his execution, his courage never faltered. As Jean Crespin noted, "The very enemies of the Truth were astonished at the steadfastness displayed by this admirable servant and witness of the Son of God—both in his life and in his death."⁵

The story of Bartholomew the shoemaker's son was only one of many. Jean Morin's zeal knew no bounds, and hundreds in Paris lived in terror for their lives. Any suspicion was sufficient to convict a man. Indeed, in those days anyone who "didn't bow the knee when the bells of the Ave Maria were heard, forgot to hail the statues of the saints, ate meat on a fast day, or learned Greek and Hebrew,"⁶ was beyond doubt a heretic, and for many long months the fires of martyrdom lit the streets and countryside of France.

II. Pierre Viret's Reaction

News of this new wave of persecution sweeping over France was received with horror and dismay by the believers in neighboring Switzerland. Pierre Viret (1511–1571), a native pastor of the Pays de Vaud (a Canton of French Switzerland) and friend and associate of John Calvin, felt deeply the bloody trials and unspeakable affliction being endured by the Huguenots, his fellow-believers across the border. As a young man, Viret had left his native home in the Pays de Vaud and journeyed to Paris to study for the priesthood. While there he had been converted to the Protestant faith, and was forced to flee the city to save his life. Returning to his hometown of Orbe, at twenty-one years of age Viret was pressed into the ministry by William Farel, the man who would later call Calvin to the same task. In 1534 he journeyed to Geneva to assist Farel in bringing the Reformation to that city. Now, in the midst of his work at Geneva, Viret heard that persecutions had broken out afresh across the border in France, and listened with tears to the deplorable tales of refugees fleeing their native land in an attempt to save their lives from the cruel persecution and death awaiting them.

Deeply moved by the harrowing news of ever-increasing martyrdoms of men, women, and children, Viret bent all his energies to seek a means of relieving the suffering of his persecuted brethren. On August 4, 1535, he and his co-laborer Farel wrote to the churches of Germany and German Switzerland, requesting their aid both by prayer and advice for the believers in France, particularly the Vaudois or Waldensians of Provence.

“The cause of the Vaudois is the cause of us all,” they declared, begging the assistance of their German brothers in behalf of the persecuted Huguenots.⁷ Appeals were also made to the Protestant lords of Bern, who remonstrated with Francis I on the cruel measures being employed against the Huguenots.

In God’s providence, the intercession of Viret and his fellow-ministers obtained its desired effects. Francis I, pressured by the Protestant magistrates of both Germany and Switzerland, published two edicts that moderated the Roman Catholic persecution of French Protestants.⁸

With the dawning of 1539, however, persecutions broke out anew in France. Viret, writing from Lausanne and neighboring Geneva (where he was temporarily stationed after Calvin’s expulsion from that city), wrote his fellow-Reformer in Strasbourg of the disturbing news the Huguenot refugees brought of the present state of France. Calvin replied to one of Viret’s letters on the 19th of May, 1540:

Your letter was a very sad one to me, and all the more so because I can well imagine that cruel butchery to boil over without measure, as always happens whenever it has once burst forth, and there is no way of putting a stop to it. ... Wherefore, unless the Lord open up some new outlet, there is no other way of helping our unhappy brethren than by our prayers and exhortations.⁹

Writing Calvin again in February of 1541, Viret informed his brother of yet more heart-breaking tales brought to him by the Huguenot refugees:

[Geneva, February 6, 1541](#)

We have just had the unexpected arrival of Saunier’s father-in-law (with his other son-in-law, who is also a refugee). They recounted to us how the Lord delivered them, as well as what terrors are still shaking the brethren. No respite has been given the captives; many have been tortured or put to death; those who are still alive live in greatest fear for their lives. You have heard, I think, of the Vaudois minister who, taken by his enemies, denounced a thousand four hundred families, who have all been delivered up to the slaughter.¹⁰

As the persecutions escalated in France, Viret offered assistance to the numerous refugees seeking asylum in Geneva and the surrounding towns. In July Viret and his

associate André Zebédée journeyed to Bern to seek further aid for the suffering Huguenots. Appearing before the lords on the 17th of that month, Viret presented his petition, asking the Bernese lords to again request of Francis I an abatement of the present persecution. The records of the Council of Bern note:

Regarding the request made by Pierre Viret and Zebédée in the name of the other [ministers] their brothers regarding the persecution of the Protestants in France, my lords are of the opinion that, for the moment, it is not expedient to importune the King, seeing that he has written to my lords requesting them to leave him in peace.¹¹

Finding further petitions to the magistrates unavailing, Viret returned home with a heavy heart. Burning with a desire to aid his afflicted, suffering brethren, he was troubled at finding his endeavors to assist them apparently fruitless. But, as he later wrote, “[God] has not particularly declared that he will aid us by this or that means, or by this or that person. ... He holds these matters in his secret counsel.”¹² He therefore did not despair at the refusal of the civil magistrates.

III. Letters of Comfort

Knowing that God employs whatever means please him, Viret turned to yet another method of providing assistance and comfort to the persecuted Huguenots: the use of his pen. During the difficult days of 1541, he published his *Epistre Consolatoire envoyée aux fideles qui souffrent persecution pour le Nom de Jesus et Verité evangelique* (A letter of consolation to the French Protestants suffering persecution for the name of Christ). Within this work, Viret’s pastoral heart is clearly seen in his ardent desire to comfort and console the Huguenot believers.

Beginning his letter with a reminder to the persecuted believers that they were united to Christ and thus of one body with him, Viret called to mind Peter’s advice: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Pet 4:12 KJV).

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 (2 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.¹³

Recognizing that the path of persecution is a way of thorns, Viret reminded his readers that this painful path is also a training ground that will yield much fruit. Though trials and suffering appear grievous and horror-filled for the moment, they are indeed a blessing in disguise, he declared, for they draw the believer to a greater understanding of Christ:

In reading the Scriptures we learn the theoretical, but we are never good theologians until we practice our theology in divine letters, and never shall we comprehend it well without being exercised in it by various trials, by which we come to the true understanding and knowledge of the matters we read of, and taste the goodness and assistance, help, and favor of God. By this we see how blessed they are who trust in Him who shall never forsake them. For apart from this we speak only of the Holy Scriptures as armchair generals, and as those who discuss the war or other matters after only hearing of it, with no understanding or experience of it whatever.

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 (2 Cor 5:1–5, 14–15).¹⁴

Persecutions are one of God's special blessings, according to Viret, who assured the troubled Huguenots that all they were experiencing was for their good. For, as he noted, if afflictions were not for the good of the saints, God could not be a good God:

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.¹⁵

To the contrary, God’s goodness and mercy are openly displayed in the persecutions he brings upon his children, by which he seals them as his own:

The sorrow of the children of God is always turned into a joy and jubilation which shall have no end. They shall laugh when the wicked weep and gnash their teeth (John 16:20–22). It is fitting that each of us drink a part of the cup which the Lord drank, each one his portion. But the wicked and reprobate drink down and swallow the dregs, which shall be terrifyingly bitter. Let us rejoice in our tribulations, and sing praises to the Lord with the disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:41), being assured that the Lord shall never forsake us, but to the contrary, just as He delivered Noah with his ark from the depths and torrents of the flood and delivered the children of Israel from the hard bondage of Egypt, spoiling the wicked persecutors who afflicted His people, so also He shall now be merciful to His Church (Gen 7:1, 17–23; Exod 14:30).¹⁶

As persecutions increased, Viret knew that the temptation to abandon Christ (or at least to conceal one’s adherence to him) would become strong. He knew also that many of those who had openly professed Christ in times of safety would now return to the apostate church and denounce those who suffered for the sake of the gospel. Writing to the Huguenots on a later occasion, Viret warned them of the dangers of following those who sought to worship God without taking up their cross to follow him:

Let us not be like those who said to Jesus Christ, “If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross,” and then we shall believe in Thee. And, “He saved others; let him save himself” (Matt 27:40; Mark 15:29–30; Luke 23:35). There are today many who say the same, and who are quite ready to believe in Jesus Christ as long as they need not be crucified, and as long as they never see the cross and are never betrayed by their enemies as thieves and murderers. All those who desire the Gospel without the cross, without tribulations and persecutions, are Christians such as these.

Therefore beware of ever following the advice and counsel of such persons. But follow God—and Him alone. Follow him who said, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord

Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal 6:14). And also, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” This is “unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks [or the wise of this world] foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 2:2; 1:23–24). And therefore this same apostle says in another place, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 1:16). So also you have no cause for shame.¹⁷

Throughout the decades of the sixteenth century, persecutions in France continued. In August of 1553, Viret wrote Rudolph Gwalther, a pastor of Zurich, “In France the enemies of Christ ruthlessly hold sway with their accustomed ferocity, ... Our times are most certainly evil indeed, and I know of no comfort remaining but prayer.”¹⁸

Though much concern, compassion, and pity for the physical suffering and torments of the Huguenots filled Viret’s heart, he was nevertheless more concerned with the state of their soul than their physical wellbeing. In the midst of persecution, he explained that it was not enough to merely suffer patiently; an inward examination must also be made. Writing to the persecuted Frenchmen, Viret begged them to examine themselves by the light of the Word of God to ensure that they were standing in his path and walking according to his commands. As Viret so aptly noted, true comfort requires a right view of God. Apart from this, all suffering will inevitably lead to deception or despair.¹⁹

Recognizing that lying spirits and wily seducers always prey upon the afflicted church, Viret called the troubled Huguenots to guard themselves against any who sought to draw them from the path of righteousness (and persecution) to walk in an easier, safer way:

And above all things beware lest you fall prey to seducers and false prophets, who alter the path and turn you from the right way. Take heed that they do not hinder your course, and that by this means they be the cause of you losing your prize and crown of glory which is prepared by the just Judge for all who can say in truth with the holy apostle: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7). For not all those who run and fight shall receive the

prize, but only those who run and fight as it has been commanded them (1 Cor 9:24–27; 2 Tim 2:4–5).²⁰

To merely run the race is not sufficient. In his letters, Viret warned that a man's patient endurance under trials would avail him nothing if he were not running the race as God had prescribed for him.

But how was a believer to know that he was walking in the course which God had laid? Viret's answer was simple: there is only one way available by which to know God rightly:

The way we are to inquire at the mouth of the Lord and request counsel of Him to be informed of His will and to have a conscience well assured, is by His Word, by which alone He reveals Himself and communicates Himself to us. Therefore we cannot have a true understanding of His will, nor do anything which might be pleasing and acceptable to Him and which would not be a sin worthy of death and damnation, except as much as we follow the rule He has given us in His Word. For this is the light, the torch, and the guide which directs our steps, which is more necessary to us than the sun is to the world (Pss 17:4–5; 119:105).

For without it, what path would we take? What could we do except stray from the path of life into the path which leads to the depths of hell? Therefore take most careful heed that you never abandon this Guide. For as soon as you turn from it, you shall be lost. You will walk in the night and be enveloped in darkness. ... Take firm hold upon this divine Word. Keep it as your shield, your staff, sword, armor, and weapons (Prov 30:5; Eph 6:13–17). For while you are thus accoutered, you shall be invincible. You shall vanquish and overcome all.²¹

The Word of God is full of promises of comfort for the afflicted Christian, but Viret warned the persecuted believers that these marvelous promises were available only to those who walked according to its rule. As he strove to console the troubled and suffering Huguenots, Viret was poignantly aware of the danger of false assurance, and therefore in his letters called the believers time and again to examine themselves to be certain that they were in the faith. "If you are well established in true doctrine," he

wrote, “persevere in the good until the end, for salvation is only promised to those who persevere, and to no others.”²²

Therefore,

It is necessary first of all that you pay diligent heed to what teaching you follow, and why, and in whose name you receive it, in order that before all things you might lay a sure foundation, and that your beginning might be in the name of God and by His Spirit, as I am assured that it is. For if your foundation is in Jesus Christ and in His Word, and your commencement is in God, you are assured that He who began His work in you shall complete it until the day of the Lord.

And if it please God that you suffer for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, you have this comfort at least (which is indeed not small), that you are assured in your heart that you suffer neither for heresy nor false doctrine, nor as an evildoer, but for a good cause—for the Truth, and for righteousness and the glory of God (1 Pet 4:14–16). Therefore you are certain that you shall be partakers of the blessing and bliss promised by Jesus Christ to those who suffer for His name, and that your sorrow shall be turned to joy, and your temporal afflictions shall be exchanged for eternal and everlasting comfort and joy (Matt 5:10; Luke 6:20–23; John 16:20–22).

But if we are not well assured of the doctrine we follow, and are not well-founded in the certainty of the Word of God, we are deprived of this great comfort and of all consolation. Therefore this is the first and chief matter to which you must take heed and examine yourselves, that you beware of believing every spirit, but test them to see if they are of God, in order that it might not happen to you as it has to many poor people who have fallen into the hands of various dangerous spirits by which they were greatly led astray (1 John 4:1).²³

After dealing with the necessity of examining one’s state before God by the light of the Word, Viret comforted his readers with the blessed assurance enjoyed by true believers:

Let us not fear that [Christ] will fail to give a good account of us to the Father. For He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11). Let us only take care that we are sheep, and then we can enjoy full assurance against the rage of the wolves, seeing that we have as our Shepherd the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; Rev 5:6).²⁴

Indeed, suffering is a grace and an honor that God bestows upon his children:

I can say little to you beyond what Paul wrote, that is, that God has given you the grace “not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). This holy apostle here touches upon a point which is truly worth noting. For he instructs us in a knowledge and a secret which is unknown to the world, and is neither known nor understood by any but the sons of God. For the sons of this world who are Christians only in name and appearance experience nothing but great horror when they suffer, and above all when they suffer for Jesus Christ. Yet they meanwhile appear to bear a great affection for the cross of Jesus Christ which is quite marvelous. In witness to this they adorn themselves with crosses, and honor and reverence them as if they had Jesus Christ within their arms. And yet there is nothing in the world for which they have a greater hatred or abhorrence than the cross of Jesus Christ. For if they must suffer the least thing of the world for it, they think themselves lost. They despair. They are prepared to renounce Jesus Christ a thousand times rather than lose even one of their fingernails for Him, or bear His cross even a short distance. Thus God has not given them the grace to suffer for Him. For this is a great honor that He bestows upon us, to make us companions of Jesus Christ His Son, and causes us to suffer with Him, that we might also reign with Him (Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 3:13–17; Acts 5:41).²⁵

With true assurance of being a child of God, no persecution is to be feared. As Viret wrote in August of 1553, no matter how violent or ruthless the enemies of Christ may be, “that which ever prevails over the fury of the tyrants is the steadfastness and courage of the martyrs of Christ.”²⁶ This steadfastness and courage is found in the understanding that every believer is held and upheld by God himself.

To illustrate this point, Viret reminded the Huguenots that God, like a father, holds each of his children within his arms. From such a position of security, what harm could ever befall them? If a man is truly in Christ, he need fear his enemies no more than the imaginary monsters a child fears in his closet:

Satan, as a magician, seduces and deceives us by his delusions, and it appears to us that he has monsters and horrible and terrifying giants where there is truly nothing but straw and stubble, which the fire of God’s wrath and indignation shall devour in a moment. Let us not fear and let us not be troubled, seeing that we have a Lord, a Captain, and a Father who knows, sees, and

understands all the schemes, counsels, and machinations of our enemies, without whose permission they cannot even move or breathe.

They must first receive His permission before they can work any evil against His servants, even as Satan their ruler and lord, who did not dare lay a hand upon Job before asking permission (Job 1:8–12). Indeed, so limited is his power that he did not even possess the boldness to enter a herd of swine without first asking Jesus Christ’s permission (Matt 8:30–31). Now consider that if the prince of this world, the king of the sons of perdition and of all the wicked and reprobate, does not even possess power and dominion over a single hog, how can his vassals, pages, valets, and courtiers possess any greater power?²⁷

So powerful is God’s protection of believers and so great are the chains he places upon his enemies that Satan himself cannot stir without first asking permission. The Christian’s adversary has already been defeated, and must not be feared. Viret wrote:

We know that we are fighting against enemies who are already beaten and defeated—though they still put up a little fight—who are unable to harm us in any way that we ought to fear. It is the same with them as it is with a snake whose head is crushed, who can no longer strike, but still twitches in death. Therefore Paul spoke with assurance: “The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom 16:20). And John said, “young men ... ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one” (1 John 2:14).

Although those to whom John wrote were still in battle, he nevertheless wrote as if they had already attained the victory, because they were fully assured of obtaining it. And he at the same time declared to them where their power proceeded from, by which they were assured of gaining the victory. For if the Word of God is in them, they do not fight without God, whose word it is, and without faith in Him, which is our victory which overcomes the world, as this same apostle testifies (1 John 5:4). Therefore rest assured in these promises, knowing that the Lord who gave them is faithful.²⁸

Though the rage and power of their enemies might appear invincible, Viret assured the Huguenots that Christ’s power had not waned. Despite all appearances, the Lord still held sway over the Catholic hosts. As in the Garden of Gethsemane, he ruled all according to his good pleasure, no matter how dark the hour appeared:

You can know by this that the Lord holds the bridle of this great murderer and this red dragon, and that He has bound the hands of all your adversaries, just as He bound His enemies in the garden in which He was taken. For though He allowed Himself to be taken by them, nevertheless He so terrified them by His word alone, and so removed from them all power of harm as much as it pleased Him, that not only did He make every one of them fall flat on their faces, but He also bound their hands so tightly that all of them together had not the power to touch a single hair of the head of any of His disciples. For as He said to them, “I am he [whom you seek]: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way” (John 18:8). This word held the same power as an express command, which all His enemies were constrained to obey whether they liked it or not.

Now, if Jesus Christ had such power against His enemies—indeed, in the very hour when He gave Himself up to die by their hands—we can easily judge whether He possesses any power now (while He is reigning at the right hand of God His Father) to hold in check the rage of His present while such is His pleasure.²⁹

With the power of Christ holding sway over his enemies, Viret assured the Huguenots that Christ’s church shall never perish. No matter how many martyrs meet their end at the hands of the apostate church and the haters of God, the believer can rest in the assurance that God remains the same, and his promises will not fail. Evil may momentarily appear to triumph over the truth, but this is no cause for fear. Calling to mind examples of God’s dealings with man throughout history, Viret assured the afflicted believers that God will triumph in the end:

Though Herod killed the children, he did not kill Jesus whom he sought. Though Herod killed James, Peter still escaped until his hour was come, and the cruel tyrant finished his days miserably among worms, lice, and vermin which ate away his flesh, soul, and conscience before he was even laid in the grave (Acts 12:23). Though Jesus was crucified and buried, He did not remain in the place of the dead, nor could Truth remain entombed. Though King Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem after having laid waste the land of Judah, yet he never entered within the city’s gates, but was miserably defeated at what he thought to be his greatest hour (2 Kgs 19:35–37). Pharaoh afflicted Israel in Egypt, but he could not hold them forever, and when he chased after them to

bring them back, he and his army were drowned in the sea, which opened itself before the children of God.

Let us then be as Moses, placing our trust in the Lord—not fearing the Egyptians at all—and the Lord shall fight for us, and we shall see the wonders of God. And, though we may suffer for a time, in His time the Lord will raise us up and shall not allow His people to wholly perish.³⁰

With the assurance of being called of God to the suffering prepared for them, and of being protected and preserved by God in the midst of such persecutions, how then are believers to respond to such persecution and suffering? Viret's answer again is simple: rest in God. Call to mind his past goodness and mercies, and rehearse his faithfulness of old:

Recall to mind the victories He has already fought for you and the battles He has won up till now. Consider David's example: David, coming to fight that great giant Goliath, recalled to mind the victory God had already given him over the lion and the bear he killed when he was a shepherd. And from this he drew great hope that God, who gave him the strength to overcome these called David to fight.³¹

These mighty battles of the past and great Ebenezers of history remind the believer that God has not changed, and that he shall always triumph over his enemies, for it is he himself who fights for his people:

This war being waged in God's name is different from those waged humanly. In wars which are humanly waged, there can be no shout of triumph before the victory is won, for the outcome of such wars is doubtful and uncertain. But it is not so here. We are assured of the victory from the moment our Captain sends us into the battle. For He does not place us there to leave us alone, but He is ever with us, and it is He who fights for us. This is well displayed in Stephen, when the heavens were opened before him and Christ was seen at the right hand of the power of God (Acts 7:55–56). And, though we do not see as Stephen saw, it is no less true because of this, seeing that we defend the same cause. This is why Christ willed to appear to this holy martyr, who was the first after the ascension of Jesus Christ to taste death for the testimony of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus did this to testify that thus He is also toward all others who are called into the same combat.

Seeing that it is so, we are thus assured that He will not lose the battle. For He it is who said, “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).³²

Possessing such assurance of victory, the soul needs not fear any danger, Viret exclaimed. No torment need concern the believer, for all proceeds directly from the merciful, powerful, and victorious hand of a loving Father:

But He also later said, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt 10:30). “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father” (Matt 10:29). Seeing then that this is the Lord who sends us, who holds us in His keeping, and who cares for us—even to the very hairs of our head—let us deliver ourselves wholly into His hands, commending ourselves to Him. And then let us await what it pleases Him to send us. For we are quite assured that if we trust in Him, He will send us nothing except what will be to our profit, and nothing shall ever come upon us except such as shall serve to His glory and our good.

For if He cares for the little sparrows and other brute beasts (no matter how little they may be esteemed of men), how much more will He care for His own children, redeemed with the precious blood of His own Son? Did He not say by His prophet that He would give His angels charge over us, to keep us from all harm, and that they would encamp around His own as an army to guard us? (Pss 91:11; 34:7). Therefore you can rest assured in the statement of Paul—that is, that God, who is faithful and true, shall keep all men, particularly those who believe (1 Cor 10:13).

Trust then in these holy promises, pursuing the calling in which the Lord has called you, and fearing more to offend Him than anything else in the world (1 Tim 2:2–3). It must suffice us to be always in the hand of our Father, in whom we can never perish, and that He gave His own Son as our Shepherd, to whom I pray that He shall increase your faith and all His other gifts and graces ever more and more, that you might persevere in His calling unto the end.³³

Thus, though torments and sufferings afflict the soul, Viret assured the Huguenots that as believers they could meet these trials with joy and peace, knowing that all was for their eternal good and the glorification of God’s name. And, though a believer might never fully understand the purpose of his individual trials, Viret called each believer to remember the instruction Christ gave to Peter:

Jesus Christ said to Peter, “When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not” (John 21:18). John explains that Jesus Christ said this to signify by what death Peter would glorify God. Peter, having heard this statement from the mouth of his Master, had the boldness to ask Jesus Christ what would become of John his companion who was then present. At this Jesus Christ responded, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is *that* to thee? follow thou me” (John 21:22). By these words our Lord Jesus supplies us with much sound doctrine:

First, God is glorified in our death and in all that we suffer for His name.

Second, our good Father spares us when it pleases Him.

Third, it has already been ordained what we will suffer, and what death we will die to glorify Him.

Fourth, we must be prepared and fully willing to suffer when it pleases Him.

Fifth, we must not be envious of others if He spares them while we suffer. For our sole concern must be to obey God in all things that it pleases Him to bring upon us, and leave all others in His hands. For He knows well what He wills to do.³⁴

“Leave all in his hands,” Viret counseled. Despite all appearances to the contrary, the Christian life is truly a life of utmost simplicity: fear God, honor him, and rest in his promises. This is the essence of true consolation. Writing to a young man who was soon to suffer martyrdom for his testimony to Christ, Viret concluded his counsel and comfort by rehearsing the true biblical simplicity of resting and trusting in a wise and righteous God:

The Lord does what He wills with you, and what pleases Him. If He desires to be glorified in your life, He is quite powerful enough to preserve it despite all your enemies. If He desires to be glorified by your death, your death shall not be death, but true life. And the Lord whom you serve shall give you the power, strength, and consolation required for such a combat and battle. For you have the promise of Him who never disappoints the hope of those who wait upon Him. Therefore you need never doubt that He shall perfect the work which He has begun in you

You must then be prepared, as true and valiant soldiers who go to war to maintain the cause of their ruler and fight valiantly for him, be it by life or by death. But you have an assurance and a consolation more than these; for whether you live or die, you live and die to God, and are assured of the victory if you persevere in this confidence and hope you have in Him, as I trust He shall give you the grace. If it please Him that you die, your death shall be a testimony to the Church of God of the steadfastness and victory of your faith and heart, which can never be vanquished. Though the body may be forced by the violence your adversaries, they have no power over your heart, your faith, or your hope.³⁵

Whether a believer was facing the loss of goods, reputation, or even his very life, Viret's advice remained the same: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee" (Ps 55:22 KJV). With a right knowledge and understanding of God and a true trust in his lovingkindness and wisdom, every affliction is a blessing, and can be received as one, to the glory of God.

IV. Conclusion

Thus by word, prayer, and pen Viret offered consolation, instruction, and encouragement to the faithful Huguenots suffering persecution for the sake of their Lord. Writing to those whom he had never met, and whose very names were often unknown to him, Viret's letters express the heart of a true pastor who calls sheep to look to the true and trustworthy Shepherd of their souls.

In concluding his letter to the young Frenchman about to suffer martyrdom for his adherence to Christ, the words of Viret—words that ring true throughout every age of history—capture the heart of genuine Christian love, as well as the comfort and consolation reserved for the believer who knows that persecution is only one more way by which God is perfecting his work:

I have [written you] in order to show that I have not forgotten you, and that I wish to spare nothing for you, whatever other affairs I may have; for nothing is so urgent that I cannot easily lay it aside for you and your companions, considering the combat in which you are engaged, by which the

Lord desires to strengthen you by His grace. To Him I commend you. ... [Know that] God shall assist, confirm, and preserve you by His grace, and that He shall perfect the work which He has begun in you until the day of our Lord Jesus, to whom alone be honor and glory forever. Amen.³⁶

Footnotes:

- [1] Jean Henri Merle D'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in the Time of Calvin* (Harrisonburg, VA.: Sprinkle Publications, 2000), 3:98–103.
- [2] Henry M. Baird, *History of the Rise of the Huguenots* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1880), 1:171.
- [3] Jean Crespin, *Histoire des martyres* (Toulouse: Société des Livres Religieux, 1885–1889), 1:303. This and all following translations of French texts are my own.
- [4] Émile G. Léonard, *Histoire Générale du Protestantisme*, vol. 1, *La Réformation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), 208; ET, *A History of Protestantism*, vol. 1, *The Reformation*, ed. H. H. Rowley, trans. Joyce M. H. Reid (London: Nelson, 1966), 234.
- [5] Crespin, *Histoire des martyres*, 1:303.
- [6] Alexandre Crottet, *Petite Chronique Protestante de France* (Paris: A. Cherbuliez, 1846), 83.
- [7] A. L. Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs dans les Pays de Langue Française* (Geneva: H. Georg, 1866–1897), 3:327.
- [8] Jean Barnaud, *Pierre Viret, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Saint-Amans: G. Carayol, 1911), 186.
- [9] Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 1:187.
- [10] Pierre Viret to John Calvin, February 6, 1541, quoted in Charles Schnetzler et al., eds., *Pierre Viret d'après lui-même* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1911), 47.
- [11] Quoted in Herminjard, *Correspondance*, 5:371.
- [12] Pierre Viret, *Epistres aus fideles, pour les instruire et les admonester et exhorter touchant leur office, et pour les consoler en leurs tribulations* (Geneva: Jean Rivery, 1559), 164.
- [13] Pierre Viret, *Epistre Consolatoire envoyée aux fideles qui souffrent persecution pour le Nom de Jesus et Verité evangelique* (Geneva, 1541), 3–4.
- [14] Viret, *Epistre Consolatoire*, 7–8.
- [15] Ibid., 8–9.

- [16] Ibid., 13–14.
- [17] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 117–18.
- [18] Schnetzler et al., *Pierre Viret*, 116.
- [19] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 11–16.
- [20] Pierre Viret, *Letters of Comfort to the Persecuted Church*, trans. Rebekah A. Sheats (Monticello, FL: Psalm 78 Ministries, 2015), 39–40.
- [21] Ibid., 41–42.
- [22] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 12.
- [23] Ibid., 22–23.
- [24] Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 71.
- [25] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 130–31.
- [26] Schnetzler et al., *Pierre Viret*, 116.
- [27] Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 26.
- [28] Ibid., 97–98.
- [29] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 173.
- [30] Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 25.
- [31] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 166–67.
- [32] Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 96–97.
- [33] Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 150–51.
- [34] Ibid., 183–84.
- [35] Jean Crespin, *Des cinq escoliers sortis de Lausanne, bruslez à Lyon* (Geneva: Jules-Guillaume Fick, 1878), 147–48.
- [36] Ibid., 158.

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6. Pierre Viret, Pastor of the French-Speaking Reformation

by Olivier Favre



Though John Calvin, the Theologian of the French-speaking Reformation, is well known, as well as William Farel, its Evangelist, unfortunately its Pastor, Pierre Viret, has been largely forgotten. This brief article, written for the five hundredth anniversary of his birth, will seek to unveil this forgotten man in his pastoral aspect.

In order to understand how Viret's pastoral ministry was valued, let's look first of all at the words of pastor Jacques Bernard, who wrote to Calvin in February of 1541 to persuade him to return to Geneva, from whence he had been banished four years earlier, "Geneva, regenerated by the work of Viret, has become a new nation." 1 Farel, after having seen the pastoral work accomplished by Viret at Geneva during the same period, wrote to the pastors of Zurich, "I have seen the admirable edifice raised by Viret's work. His labor has been immense in restoring the people in the good way." 2 Hear also the words of Calvin, who sought at all costs to keep Viret at his side during his return to Geneva, "If Viret is taken from me, I will be more dead than alive, and this Church is lost." 3 These words are an eloquent depiction of the appreciation of Viret's pastoral ministry by his peers. Let's now turn to what made Viret the "Pastor" of the French-speaking Reformation.

Viret's Personality

The biographies of Pierre Viret are all in agreement on one point: Viret possessed a peaceful and gentle spirit which expressed itself within the different spheres of his ministry:

In his language, as witnessed by Theodore Beza, who spoke of "the wisdom of Calvin, the thunders of Farel, and the honey of Viret." 4 He also states elsewhere of him: "None possessed more charm when he spoke." 5

In his preaching, which seemed to embrace his hearers as a calm and tranquil stream, as attested by Verheiden, “[Viret] had a word so sweet that he constantly kept his hearers alert and attentive. His style had such strength and a harmony so caressing to the ear and spirit that the least religious amongst his hearers, the most impatient of others, heard him out effortlessly and with pleasure. His audience was, it was said, as though suspended upon his lips, wishing the sermon were longer.”⁶

In his relationship with others. In order to maintain peace, Viret was ready to suffer many injustices, as was the case when his colleague Caroli, but newly arrived, was named the head pastor of Lausanne in Viret’s place.⁷ His peaceful character was also displayed in his quarrels with the Bernese political authority. Also, when Calvin had lost hope and encouraged him to leave the city (Theodore Beza had already followed the council of the Genevan Reformer), Viret himself still hoped that a peaceful solution might be found. The result of which was that this most peaceful pastor was banished from the city in which he had been the Reformer and pastor for twenty-two years.

In his dealings with heretics. Although Viret was exceedingly firm in maintaining doctrinal purity in the Church, we have no record that he had recourse to the civil government to condemn heretics. This could in part be explained by Viret’s caution with regard to the Bernese government, always reticent in sustaining/supporting the application of ecclesiastical discipline. Nevertheless two events throughout the course of his life attest to his gentleness and moderation in this domain. While passing through Valence Viret delivered and rescued a Jesuit father who had fallen into the hands of a Huguenot officer who was preparing to put him to death. Afterwards, much later, it appears that it was thanks to his intervention written to the pastors assembled at Montpellier that the Protestants peaceably delivered the church buildings to the Catholics following the royal edict of

January 17, 1562.

However, it must not be thought that Viret’s gentleness found its origin in a lack of courage, for when the truth and the purity of the Church were in jeopardy, Viret knew how to stand firm and prove his stubbornness, as his determination to obtain the right to exercise a Biblical Church discipline within his local church attests. Indeed, he preferred banishment from his homeland to a dishonest compromise with the moral laxity of the Bernese authorities.

Viret's Pastoral Gifts

If Calvin systematized the theology of the Reformation, it would be just to say that Viret popularized it. He preached in a language simple and colorful. He wrote in a style which captivated people, responded to their questions, and provided them with simple apologetic arguments necessary for the defense of their faith. In his writings, often written in the form of dialogues, he places in the mouth of his different characters the ordinary thoughts of the time. In this way he succeeded in fascinating his readers who, little by little, following the development of the Biblical argumentation and discovered the insurmountable force and the truth of the Gospel as opposed to human thought. Jean Barnaud, an astute expert on Viret, summarized it thus, “We must not forget that Viret is, *par excellence*, the people’s writer of the French Reformation; the torn, fragmented, worn copies of countless works which he successfully published, found in numerous public and private libraries of France, Switzerland, and foreign lands—discovered as far away as the secret Holy Office of the Seville Inquisition—thus bespeak the popularity which these writings enjoyed and the far-reaching influence they exercised.” 8

From the commencement of his ministry, Viret’s concern for the people of God caused him to devote himself to the training of pastors for the French-speaking churches. He is thus discovered among the founding members and the first professors of the Lausanne Academy, created in 1537 (only one year after the city’s acceptance of the Reformation). This Academy bore a major importance from the outset of the French-speaking Reformation until the creation of the Genevan Academy, founded in 1559, “from the ruins” of that of Lausanne, following Viret’s banishment.

Other proofs attest to the pastoral gifts of Viret and to the great esteem he enjoyed in the midst of the people of God in the French-speaking world. When he took refuge at Geneva following his banishment, he was immediately received as a pastor and was given the *bourgeoisie* of the city at the end of 1559, at the same time as Calvin, who had been pastor there for more than fifteen years. Then, when he left for the south of France because of his poor health, he played a role of first importance in the organization of the Reformed Church of Bearn, the kingdom of Jeanne d’Albret. His influence and the respect which all bore him are demonstrated in the fact that he was named Moderator of four successive synods, though the law specified that it was impermissible for the same man to occupy this place two years in a row.

Viret is thus a man who devoted all his life to the service of the Church of Jesus Christ and in particular to the local French-speaking churches. This is why it is important that we turn now to the conception which he had of the Church. For beyond his personality and his pastoral gifts, that which led Viret to become the Pastor of the Reformation was his concept of the Church and pastoral ministry.

Viret's Concept of the Church and Pastoral Ministry

Even though he was pastor in a city where the Reformation had been imposed in a more political than spiritual manner, Viret affirmed that entrance into the Church was exclusively by means of faith in Jesus Christ: "In order to become sheep, we must hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, which is the voice of the Gospel, by which this conversion and transformation from a wolf into a sheep is made. For the means by which we have access to Jesus Christ and entrance into His Church and His sheepfold, and consequently into the Kingdom of Heaven, is by faith . . . and as Jesus Christ is the Door by which we must enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, thus faith is as the hinge and the key by which this door is opened to us, and without which it must forever remain closed to us." 9

But seeing that God alone knows the heart, the responsibility is incumbent upon the pastor does not consist in judging the hearts of the members of his church, 10 but in preaching the Gospel, for it is through this that the knowledge of Jesus Christ proceeds. His task is also to be vigilant to maintain a well-disciplined confessing church. This is why Viret could not tolerate within the midst of the people of God a multitude of people who had nothing to do with the Confession of Faith and who refused to conform their life to Biblical standards. Thus, for Viret, the true member of the Church was he who, after having publicly confessed his faith, joyfully submitted his life to the requirements of the Word of God with love for his God by considering every daily event as a means of advancing in his Christian walk.

Thus he affirmed that the task of pastor could be summarized in four elements: "The complete charge of the ministers of the Church consists in nothing more than prayers, administration of teaching and the Sacraments, and in Church discipline." 11

The faithful exercise of these four elements is what he sought to accomplish through the length of his ministry, no matter the cost. He preached by explaining the true sense of the Scriptures and by

applying it for the use of every man, that he might understand it. 12 He also prayed fervently, relying upon the power of God to transform hearts, and finally he administered the sacraments, taking care not to receive at the table of the Lord those who lived in deliberate sin. For, for Viret, “It would be better to have a small flock of sheep and lambs than a very large one in which there were many wolves . . . seeing that such beasts can only damage the flock, and that afterward the trouble must be taken to drive them out, to the great scandal of the Church. . .” 13

If Viret acted in such a manner with such courage, to the point of banishment, it is because he was convinced that he was given the authority of Jesus Christ and that he represented Jesus Christ when he acted faithfully in the midst of His Church, a Jesus Christ who, though dead and raised for sinners, did not tolerate scandalous sinners in the midst of His people. 14

Viret thus possessed a very high view of the ministry and, by the grace of God, he was an instrument in His hand for the salvation of many. He remains an example for pastors of all times to follow, that the Church, the Bride of Christ, might continue to reflect the holiness of her Lord until His return.

Author Bio:

Oliver Favre served as pastor of the Reformed Baptist Church of Lausanne for fourteen years. He now pastors two small pioneering churches in Payerne and Neuchâtel in French-speaking Switzerland. He is married to Denise and they have three adult sons. After undertaking his theological studies at the European Bible Institute in Lamorlaye and at the Free Reformed Theological Faculty of Aix-en-Provence where he obtained a Masters degree in Theology, writing his thesis on the *Ecclesiastical Discipline in the Thought of the Reformer Pierre Viret*.

Footnotes:

[1] Quoted in Philippe Godet, *Pierre Viret* (Lausanne, Payot, 1892), pp. 65-66.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[4] Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[5] Quoted in Henri Vuileumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Lausanne, Payot, 1191), p. 142.

- [6] Verheiden, *Praestantium Aliquot Theologorum Effigies*, quoted in Jacques Cart, *Pierre Viret Reformateur de Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), p. 129.
- [7] Regarding this see Viret's letter to Calvin in Henri Jaquemot, *Viret le Reformatteur de Lausanne* (Strasbourg, 1836), p. 39.
- [8] Speech given by Jean Barnaud in *Le Jubile de Pirret Viret* (Lausanne-Orbe, Pache, 1911), p. 61.
- [9] Pierre Viret, *Des Clefs de l'Eglise et de l'Administration de la Parole de Dieu . . .* (Geneva, Jean Rivery, 1564), p. 8.
- [10] "However, we must note upon what has been said of dogs and swine, that the Church has no commandment to take such for all those who are so in truth, but only those who are known to be true dogs and true swine as declared by their open sins and wicked life. For this is not at all judging things unknown and hidden, which are reserved to the judgment of God. For how could the Church pronounce sentence against those whose wickedness is still hidden, under semblance and cover of religion, by those feigned and false?" Pierre Viret, *Du Vray ministere de la Vraye Eglise de Jesus-Christ, et des Vrays Sacrements d'Icelle . . .* (Geneva, Jean Rivery, 1560), pp. 34-35.
- [11] Pierre Viret, *De l'Estat de la Conference, de l'Autorite, Puissance, . . .* (Lyon, Claude Senneton, 1565), p. 131.
- [12] Cf. Pierre Viret, *De l'Autorite et Perfection de la Doctrine des Saintes Ecritures . . .* (Lyon, Claude Senneton, 1564), pp. 77-78.
- [13] Henri Meylan, "Un texte inedit de Pierre Viret, le reglement de 1570 sur la discipline," *Revue de Theologie et de Philosophie* No. 3 (Lausanne, 1961), p. 213.
- [14] "When we see the Minister exercising his office, in administering the holy things to the people-be it the Word or the Sacraments-we must set forth Jesus Christ before our eyes, who is represented to us by the Minister ordained for these things in the name of Jesus Christ . . . In this way the Minister of Jesus Christ are in no way false or vain. For what they declare they do not declare from themselves, or by their own name and authority." Pierre Viret, *Du Vray ministere de la Vraye Eglise de Jesus-Christ, et des Vrays Sacrements d'Icelle . . .*, pp. 47-48.

7. Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God

Over Every Aspect of Reality

Author: Jean-Marc Berthoud

Excerpt from A Comprehensive Faith. Pages 93-106

The Church inescapably invited war by its very existence as a Christian institution. It broke radically with the old unitary and immanent concept of society. It shattered the humanistic unity of society by declaring itself to be the representative of a transcendental King and order, Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. It held, moreover, that the State, and every aspect of society, is similarly duty bound to represent God's order, not man's. The Church therefore was more than new wine in an old wine skin; it was new wine demanding new wine skins, demanding that all things be made new in terms of Christ.

- R. J. Rushdoony, Christianity and the State

The distinctive vocation of Rousas J. Rushdoony and the particular place he holds in the history of the church are characterized by a whole lifetime of persevering labor in the task of calling back God's people to a renewed understanding of the significance, for every domain of life, of the written revelation, the Bible, and a summons addressed to the church to a renewed obedience to the whole counsel of God as at the same time law and gospel. This persistent call to repentance and faith, to spiritual understanding and thoroughgoing obedience, has resulted, as might have been expected, in much opposition and calumny both within the churches and beyond their walls. This has been specially true, unfortunately, in many circles which call themselves Reformed and openly adhere to the same doctrinal standards as Rushdoony. One aspect of this theological and ecclesiastical opposition to his teaching and influence has expressed itself in the accusation leveled against him of originality, of teaching things that the church has in the past not taught; of fomenting novelty by his insistence that man live by every word spoken by God in Scripture. Such an accusation must not be treated lightly. Within the church of God the concept of novelty is always

closely linked to that of heresy, for it is our vocation to teach only those things which have always been taught from all time past in all faithful churches, and thus to maintain the unity and apostolicity of the church. Coming from various quarters we have heard: “Never has the church known such a fanatical determination to apply to every aspect of reality of every detail the revealed word of God.” In this short paper, by examining the contribution to the on-going growth of the kingdom of God of a little known French Swiss reformer, Pierre Viret, I shall briefly endeavor to refute such unfounded accusations.

Background

Pierre Viret was born in 1511 in the ancient Roman and Burgundian town of Orbe at the base of the Jura mountains in what is today the canton of Vaud in French-speaking Switzerland. His father was by profession a draper and both his parents pious Roman Catholics. After following the parochial school of his home town, his parents sent him in 1527 at the age of sixteen to Paris to further his higher education with a view to his entering the priesthood. There he followed the strenuous academic discipline of Montaigu College, famous for such students as John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order. Not only did Viret in these Parisian years begin to acquire the encyclopaedic knowledge which marks all his writings, but he advanced greatly in that apprenticeship of the ancient tongues which later made of him not only a fluent Latin scholar but a pastor familiar with Hebrew and Greek. Far more important, however, it was in this context of arduous study, lighted by the bonfires in which the first French martyrs of the Reformation were burnt at the stake, that Viret came to see the deadly errors of that Roman religion in which he had been reared and his need for a personal Savior to deliver him from the curse a holy God laid on his sins. After a very painful and difficult struggle, he at last came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For it was a time when all over the Kingdom of France, and more especially in Paris, the newly rediscovered gospel was being powerfully preached in a climate of dire persecution for any who dared question the established doctrines of a totalitarian religious and political order.

This persecution led Viret, seeking refuge, back to his native Orbe. It was here that he met his vocation. In the spring of 1531, Guillaume Farel, that intrepid preacher of the gospel and political agent of the newly Reformed authorities of the Berne Republic, called Viret (as he was to do with Calvin a few years later) out of the tranquility of his studies into the battlefield of the Reformation of the church and the implantation in his country of God’s mighty kingdom. At the age of twenty, Viret thus became the pastor of the small evangelical congregation of Orbe where he had the

privilege of seeing his parents' conversion under his preaching of the word of God. The following years saw him engaged in a growing itinerant ministry all over French-speaking Switzerland. In the Abbey town of Payerne, some thirty miles north of Lausanne, an irate monk violently refuted his preaching by running him through (in the back!) with a sword as he was crossing a field. In 1534 we find Viret at Farel's side breaking the ground for the free entrance of the gospel in the city of Geneva. There again, murder was on his path, this time in the shape of a poisoned soup which, if it did not kill him, nonetheless left him with permanently ruined health. In 1536 the canton of Vaud was overrun by the Bernese army, ostensibly at war to defend Geneva from the threats of the Counts of Savoy, but effectively working for the aggrandizement of Bernese power. These temporal ambitions, in God's merciful hand, opened up the whole region to the preaching of the gospel. After the famous Dispute de Lausanne in the same year, a public disputation where Viret (with Farel) bore the brunt of the debate, the young pastor, now age 25, became the minister of the Cathedral Church. Apart from a brief period (1541-1542) where he very ably assisted Calvin on his return to Geneva after his exile in Strasbourg, the twenty-three years between 1536 and 1559 saw Viret as the principal minister of the Reformed church of the Vaud canton where he exercised the ministry of God's word under the heavy hand of the Bernese political and ecclesiastical power.

The Freedom of the Church

Very early Viret came to hold a high view of the authority and dignity of the church. As a result, he came to demand, with a mild but unshakable persistence, that the church be free to exercise its ecclesiastical discipline independently of the overweening Erastian ambitions of the Bernese authorities. The government of Berne saw themselves as the heirs of the undivided rule of the Roman republic and were on no account prepared to tolerate any kind of real spiritual independence in the church. In his polemical writings, Viret was often to declare that the Bernese Pope in short frock (the absolute state) was a far worse enemy for the Faith than the old Pope of Rome in his long gown. The conflict was inevitable, long-drawn and brutally climaxed in February, 1559, when those Messieurs de Berne, as they styled themselves, demanded of the recalcitrant pastors of Vaud either total submission to their undivided authority or immediate resignation and exile. More than thirty opted for faithfulness and exile and this at the very moment when God, in his Providence, had opened the doors for a great expansion of his kingdom in neighboring France. Between 1559 and 1561 Viret exercised a much appreciated ministry in

Geneva at the side of his great friend Calvin, but his failing health forced him to seek a milder climate in the south of France. His health partly restored, he was instrumental in bringing about a remarkable revival, first in Montpellier and Nîmes, then in the second city of the realm, Lyon. There he exercised a highly blessed ministry during the early years of the civil wars, ending a very fruitful and eventful life as Chief Pastor and Academic Superintendent of the Reformed Church of the Kingdom of Navarre where he died in 1571.

Viret's Significance

Now Pierre Viret, Calvin's most intimate friend, known under the name of the Angel of the Reformation, was by no means the minor or insignificant figure which most Reformed histories of the Reformation lead us to imagine. He had, in 1537, founded in Lausanne the first Reformed Academy. He gave much of his time to the teaching of theology to students who flocked from every corner of Europe. This Lausanne Academy (and not the Genevan, as is too often thought) became the model of all future Reformed Academies. By the time of the expulsion of Viret in 1559, the Academy had nearly a thousand students enrolled. For many years, the Principal was none other than the celebrated Greek scholar and poet, Théodore de Bèze. Amongst the students we find men of the stature of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus and Olevianus, ample proof of the quality of the teaching dispensed in Lausanne. In 1559 the whole staff of the Academy resigned and constituted the teaching base of the newly founded Genevan Academy.

But this mild and gentle Christian, a man of the highest spiritual mettle, was also one of the great preachers of the Reformation. Of Calvin Bèze wrote, "None have taught with greater authority"; of Farel, "None thundered more mightily"; but of Viret he said, "None has a more winsome charm when he speaks."

His speech was so sweet that he would continually hold the attention and the interest of those who heard him. His style, which married strength to harmony, was so caressing to the ear and to the intelligence that even those of his hearers least interested in religious matters, those most impatient of other preachers, would hear him out without difficulty and even with pleasure.

Melchior Adam remarked of his preaching:

In Lyon, preaching out in the open, he brought thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out.

Writings

But in addition to exercising such great gifts, Viret was in his own right a prolific writer, author of some forty books, some almost a thousand pages long. A number of these were translated into English during the sixteenth century,⁹ others into Dutch, German and Italian. If very few of Viret's works have been reprinted, they nonetheless had a marked influence on Reformed thinking up to the time of that last great dogmatician of the Genevan school, Benedict Pictet, in the early years of the eighteenth century. Viret wrote a small number of treatises in Latin, but the immense majority of his books were written in French, in a familiar style and in the popular form of dialogues between clearly differentiated and attractive personages designed to reach a public privileged with little formal instruction. But if the style is pleasant, the matter is profound, the knowledge of the Bible impeccable, and the scholarship immense. The pattern of his dialogues: affirmations — objections — refutations — and finally the clear, authoritative and balanced doctrinal synthesis, harks clearly back, in a popular form but without the philosophical jargon, to the scholastic method of formal discussion learnt at the feet of the Scottish master of Philosophy and Theology at the Collège Montaigu, John Major.

Pierre Viret was undoubtedly (with Martin Luther) one of the finest popularizers of the Christian Faith in the sixteenth century. But his deep concern for the spiritual needs of the common people never led him (as is all too common today) to debase the content of his theological teaching. It is impossible, in the brief space assigned to this paper, to do proper justice to the astonishing achievements of this extraordinary Christian. If his good friend, John Calvin, was the consummate dogmatician and the prince of exegetes, Pierre Viret must be considered as the finest ethicist and the most acute apologist of the sixteenth century. His monumental *Instruction chrétienne en la doctrine de la Loy et de l'Evangile et en la vraie philosophie et théologie, tant naturelle que surnaturelle des chrétiens* ("Christian instruction in the doctrine of the law and the gospel and in true Christian philosophy and theology, both natural and supernatural") is without doubt his major theological work and can well bear comparison, in its own domain, with Calvin's *Institutes*. The first 248 pages of Vol. I (large folio pages, small print) comprises a treatise on the subject of God's

general revelation as manifested in creation. The refreshingly simple and direct character of Viret's teaching on general revelation makes it clear that this work was written in a period prior to the philosophical insanity of Cartesian rationalism and of Kantian idealism. Pages 249 through 674 constitute a complete treatise on the detailed application of the Ten Commandments to every aspect of reality. It is the finest exposition of the law of God that it has been my privilege to read. The only work I know which in any way bears comparison to this masterpiece is Rushdoony's *Institutes of Biblical Law*. Not only do we find there a detailed application of God's word to the practical problems of Christian living in every aspect of personal and social life, but this is done with an admirable sense of theological balance and of the delicate relation of dogmatics to ethics, together with the constant, implicit purpose of favoring the preaching of the gospel, of extending God's kingdom, and of bringing all honor and praise to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Preface Viret sets forth his central purpose with the utmost clarity:

My aim in this volume has been to produce an exposition of the Law of God, Law which must be regarded as the rule for every other law through which men are to be directed and governed.

and adds,

Every science, human prudence and all wisdom of men must be put into relation to God as a gift which proceeds from him.

Then Viret goes on to define his purpose more precisely:

Thus God has included in this Law every aspect of that moral doctrine by which men may live well. For in these Laws he has done infinitely better than the Philosophers and all their books, whether they deal with Ethics, Economics or Politics. This Law stands far above all human legislation, whether past, present or future and is above all laws and statutes edicted by men. It follows that whatever good men may put forward has previously been included in this law, and

whatever is contrary to it is of necessity evil This law, if it is rightly understood, will furnish us with true Ethics, Economics and Politics. It is incomparably superior to what we find in the teachings of Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero and like thinkers who have taken such pains to fashion the customs of men.

And Viret concludes his Preface with these words:

For as it can only be God Himself who is able to give us such a perfect Law by which we are truly enabled to govern ourselves, likewise it is only He who can provide us with Princes and Magistrates, Pastors and Ministers gifted with the capacity of applying this Law. Further, He is fully able to shape such men into adequate instruments for his service and to grant them the authority necessary for the accomplishment of the duties of their office. Thus armed they are enabled by God to maintain those over whom they rule (and of whose welfare they are accountable to God) in a spirit of due subjection. For, just as He has granted us this Law in order that we might clearly know what we lack, so he likewise grants us, through Jesus Christ his Son, the Holy Ghost by whom our hearts are renewed and through whom we receive those gifts and graces so necessary for the accomplishment of our vocation.

Such a view of the overarching authority and of the supreme wisdom of God's law led Pierre Viret to an examination of the particular duties of men within the bounds of their specific vocations. To this task he more particularly addressed himself in a masterly treatise entitled *Métamorphose chrétienne, faite par dialogue*. The chapter titles of the sections of the first part entitled *Man* go as follows: 1/ The natural man. 2/ Man deformed. 3/ The transformation of souls. 4/ The true man, or man transformed. The second part concerns The school of beasts and is composed of the following sections: 1/ Economics, or good management. 2/ Politics, or the Republic. 3/ Military art. 4/ The Arts. 5/ Ethics, or moral behavior. 6/ Religion. 7/ Language and, finally, 8/ Prophecy or Theology. One can imagine the interest such a work provoked at the time it was written.

Finally, among his numerous writings in the field of apologetics (a good number of which were devoted to a running polemic with the errors of the Roman Church) we cannot pass without

comment his satirical examination of the politics of his time and development of what we must call the theology of history, a book entitled, *Le monde à l'empire et le monde démoniacle*. This title, with its pun on the word empire (meaning both empire and to worsen), could be tentatively translated *The corruption of the world's empires and the world demonized*. This work bears ample witness to the extraordinary prophetic insight granted to those who, like Viret, make it their business to see and understand every aspect of reality in the light of God's law-word.

Viret's Political Thinking

Here of great value is Robert T. Linder's path-breaking study on Viret's political thinking. After having described what for Viret was the normative rule of the word of God for both ecclesiastical and theological matters, Linder defines his thinking in these terms:

The Scriptures also contained statements concerning the state and, insofar as they applied to secular government, they represented God's will for that institution. Thus the secular state was seen by Viret as a *de facto* creation derived directly from God himself but governed in harmony with the rules and precepts contained in the Holy Scriptures.

Linder adds:

God's plan for men included a peaceful and orderly existence and the state was the means whereby this kind of life was assured. The rulers of the secular state were to legislate in accordance with the Bible and fulfill the office outlined for them in the Scriptures. Viret had to make the civil authorities see that all justice and law emanated from the sovereign will of God and that they were the dispensers of God's justice and law. If they did not do this, these secular authorities were considered "wicked tyrants" and in danger of the judgment of Almighty God.

For, in Viret's eyes,

The secular state was a direct creation of God and because of this was delegated a certain amount of authority directly from God himself. However, according to Viret, the Holy Scriptures not only described and confirmed temporal authority but also defined and limited it.

Viret felt that all laws affecting public morals and related to spiritual values should be drawn directly from the moral law of God. However, he believed that these absolute and eternal laws of God had to be geared to the times in which people lived and the national temperament of the country to which the laws were to be applied.

Further,

Viret made it plain that civil laws could be both good and bad. He believed that men had a certain amount of freedom in choosing the legal codes under which they lived. Nevertheless, he felt that “good laws” in a truly Christian state always would be based on the Ten Commandments of God found in the Holy Scriptures. According to Viret, unless human laws were built upon God’s moral law, men could not expect for them to be just and equitable. In this sense, all “good laws,” come from God himself for they are derived from God’s Word which is the written record of his will for mankind

Viret’s great emphasis was upon government under civil law, and particularly under civil law derived, as fully as possible within a given political context, from the moral law of God.

Linder states, moreover:

Viret’s notion that the prince was below the law is extremely interesting and very different from the absolutist theory placing the king above the law that Jean Bodin was to advocate in his *De Republica* in the latter part of the sixteenth century. The idea that the secular ruler was always

subject to the law was one of several recurrent strains in Medieval political thought in Western Europe and was not a new concept.

Viret put it this way:

For prince and magistrate must be subject to the laws of the land and conform their rule to them. For they are not rulers of the law but servants thereof, as they are servants of God from whom all good laws proceed.

And Linder comments:

Viret stressed that in every instance the true Christian should subjugate the Justinian Code and all Roman Law to the Word of God.

Linder concludes:

Viret's pattern of thought led him to advocate what would be called today the legislation of morals. For example, he favored the adoption of civil statutes against adultery, blasphemy and idolatry, and was a proponent of regulating certain economic activities on Sunday. In addition, he linked true Christianity with the support of such laws as those controlling public corruption and the purchase of public offices, against usury, against the exploitation of the poor by the rich, and legislation fixing ceiling prices and land purchases.

From all this it is clear that Viret's great friendship for John Calvin (his elder by only two years) in no way prevented him from, on occasion, expressing divergent theological views whilst, of course, sharing on all fundamental points of doctrine the same Reformed convictions. The Reformation thus gives us a striking example of the way basic doctrinal unity is in no way

exclusive of a certain theological diversity. It is the mechanical conformism of a narrow-gutted age which cannot stomach disagreements on secondary matters in the church. Thus, on the question of extent of the application of the detail of the Mosaic law to our present situation, Viret held a significantly different position from that of Calvin. This is how Linder defines this difference:

Viret, unlike Calvin, was ready to extend openly the authority of the Bible over the State.

One must here in passing draw the reader's attention to the influence, on this particular point, of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on the political and legal theology of John Calvin. On this point Viret's position, though not explicitly theonomic, was far more consistently and thoroughly Biblical than that of his Genevan colleague who, in his application of God's law to the body politic, ambivalently ranged between the affirmation of the existence of a natural law, a law of nations (nonetheless inspired, be it said by, Biblical principles) on the one hand in his Institutes, and, on the other, a more careful and precise coordination of the legal and political implications of Biblical law in his commentaries and in his sermons. It is enlightening to compare Viret's and Calvin's exegesis of specific texts. In his sermons on Deuteronomy, for example, we often find that Calvin, while not ignoring the detailed practical implications of the Mosaic law, nonetheless pays but scant attention to their application to the political and social problems of his time. He often rapidly passes from these practical ethical and social considerations to, in his eyes, more essential matters and goes on to draw out the doctrinal and spiritual implications of the text. Viret, on the other hand, while never minimizing the doctrinal aspect of his text, paid far more attention to the immediate literal meaning of the specific law under consideration and to its application for his own time. This may explain the fascination his preaching exercised even on those who were foreign to the Faith. But in spite of these different and complementary orientations we do not find the slightest indication of personal and theological tension in the friendship that united these two great Christians leaders in their common vocation to further the kingdom of God. In this they have much to teach us latter-day Calvinists who are all too often inclined to give way to that sectarian spirit which so banefully characterized the Corinthian church.

Viret's Discernment

I would like to conclude this all too brief appreciation of one of the great figures in the history of the church (often unknown to those who consider themselves heirs of the Reformation) by showing the extraordinary lucidity and discernment by which his great respect for God's law endowed Pierre Viret. In a book on the nature of the study of history in the latter part of the sixteenth century, the Marxist historian, Claude Gilbert Dubois, pays considerable attention to Viret's Biblical vision of history and in so doing brings to light the remarkable economic discernment of our Swiss reformer. Dubois' analysis is concentrated on the study of Viret's masterpiece in apologetics, *Le monde a l'empire et le monde de'moniacle*. This book, says Dubois, could well be considered a treatise in economics written some two hundred years in advance of its time. Though in total disagreement with Viret's theocentric conservatism, Dubois is nonetheless outspoken in his admiration of our author's perception of contemporary economic currents. For Viret saw in the anarchical monopolistic capitalism developing before his indignant gaze a growing practical opposition to God's law and the rise of a thoroughly anti-Christian society. Viret saw in the progressive attachment of many of his contemporaries to material wealth (a fascination severed from all sense of stewardship and of accountability to God for the use of one's riches), a particularly vile form of idolatry where the rapidity of growth in opulence was in direct proportion to the loss of religion and morality. This is how Dubois expresses Viret's preoccupations:

Behind the official public laws which are supposed to govern society one can discern the existence of those hidden perverse principles of our fallen nature that have now come to be officially accepted by society which imposes as the norm of a new morality the perverted rules of a chaotic nature.

Behind the official public laws which are supposed to govern society one can discern the existence of those hidden perverse principles of our fallen nature that have now come to be officially accepted by society which imposes as the norm of a new morality the perverted rules of a chaotic nature.

Viret's indignation has a theological base — these Christians have betrayed that spirit of poverty which characterized the apostles; but it also bears a social character — this sterile and unproductive wealth provokes the economic enslavement of the poor to the newly enriched ruling class. What this 16th century economist reproaches the Roman Church for is that its accumulation of riches had the effect of freezing its wealth in unproductive activities rather than letting it circulate freely in the money market where eventually it would also come to benefit the poorer classes.

And he asks,

What is the true character of the social degradation Viret perceives in the history of his time? Its origin is theological in nature, linked as it is to human sin. It manifests itself immorally by the perversion of the created order. But it takes on the modern form of a specifically economic scandal: a perverted economic order, a unethical distribution of riches, provoked by the circulation of wealth in one direction only, its accumulation in the hands of a few. Such are the signs of the corruption that reigns in the world today.

Viret writes:

The greatest evil that can be imagined is when the public purse is impoverished and individual men wealthy. This is an evident sign that the commonwealth is in an unhealthy condition, that public policy is in weak and incapable hands and that the state is under the domination of thieves and bandits who make of it their prey.

For Viret such a cultivation of sterile wealth represents nothing less than an iniquitous pact with the Prince of this fallen world. It is nothing less than idolatry, the cult of the creature and the forgetting of the Creator. Such an egotistical cumulative concentration of wealth runs completely counter to the Biblical doctrines of stewardship, of charity, and of personal sacrifice. In itself it is a clear indication of the decadence of a society and calls forth future purifying social disasters and

divine judgments. For the economic mechanisms which lead to such an unfruitful concentration of wealth in the hands of a financial oligarchy prepares the way for those social and political catastrophes which will inevitably destroy such an amoral and irresponsible ruling class. For this infernal cycle of economic injustice must of necessity breed revolution. Economic oppression has as direct origin an inordinate desire for the accumulation of wealth but, in the long run, it must produce popular impatience. And such a feeling of social frustration, when it becomes conscious, ends in revolt. For Viret very lucidly perceived, and here the Marxist Dubois parts ways with him, that sedition cannot be constructive. Viret saw very clearly that this new oligarchy made abundant use of its monopolistic domination of the apparatus of the state to appropriate the riches of the whole nation by disrupting the natural circulation of wealth in the usual channels of production and exchange. For Viret, this stifling of the economic blood flow of industrial production and commercial exchange by a parasitical oligarchy must be broken if an equitable distribution of wealth is to be reestablished and the economic health of the society restored. In spite of his explicit opposition, both to Viret's social and political conservatism and to his Christian pessimism as to the benefits to be drawn from revolutionary action, Dubois at the close of his analysis of Pierre Viret's diagnosis of the economic evils of his time (and ours!) exclaims:

Is it not indeed extraordinary that Viret, taking as his point of departure a number of vague theological propositions, ... should manifest such a sure sense of historical judgment, such precision in his economic analysis of the trends of his time and so marvelous a perspicuity in his analysis of the new economic mechanisms which were transforming society before his very eyes?

But Viret's vague theological propositions are not as sterile as Dubois imagines. We here see the wonderful practical and intellectual wisdom that comes from a long-standing meditation of God's law, particularly, in this instance, with regard to the law's economic implications. And if Viret sees all too well, in the outworking of the principles of evil the judgments of God towards a rebellious and ungrateful world, he on the other hand, shows us all the more clearly the blessings which flow from faithful obedience to God's commandments. Speaking of the blessings and judgments being so clearly worked out before his attentive gaze, he writes:

If we but consider what the grace of God has in our time manifested through the renewed revelation of his Holy Gospel and the restoration of letters and of every excellent discipline that has followed, we can without hesitation call our age, the age of gold and affirm that, since the time of the Apostles, none have been so blessed as we are today. But if, on the contrary, we oppose our malice and ungratefulness to God's abundant goodness and to the grace he so generously offers us, then we can certainly call this age, an age of iron and consider ourselves the most miserable of men who have ever lived under heaven's implacable dome.

This brief evocation of the astonishing life and labors of Pierre Viret, that faithful servant of Almighty God who all his life labored to bring every thought of his contemporaries captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ and of his word, makes it absolutely plain that R. J. Rushdoony stands squarely in that Biblical tradition which manifests to the world what is without a doubt the most vigorous and the most fruitful heritage of the church of the living God.

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Book available: Chalcedon Foundation: www.chalcedon.edu

(Jean-Marc Berthoud, *A Comprehensive Faith*, pages 93-106)

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8. Pierre Viret and Geneva

by Michael Bruening

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There is no “Rue Pierre Viret” in Geneva. Viret does not stand next to John Calvin, Guillaume Farel, Theodore Beza, and John Knox in Geneva’s Reformation Monument, but one suspects that had a fifth figure been added, it would have been Viret. Pierre Viret (1511-1571) is best known as the reformer of Lausanne, where he served from 1536 to 1559 during the crucial, formative years of the Reformation in his native Pays de Vaud. His ministry in Lausanne was bracketed and occasionally interrupted, however, by stays in Geneva. Viret’s activity in Geneva, together with his close personal relationship with John Calvin, made him in some ways a minister of Geneva his entire adult life. Indeed, the Reformation in Geneva would not have taken the form that we know it without him.

On three occasions in particular, Viret played a vital yet often overlooked role in Geneva. First, it was Viret, together with Guillaume Farel, who introduced the Reformation to the city in 1534-1535. Second, in 1541-1542, Viret’s work in Geneva was decisive in convincing Calvin to return from exile in Strasbourg. Third, after his own exile from Lausanne in 1559, he served officially as a minister of Geneva until he was transferred to the church of Lyon in 1563. Although discontinuous, the nine years during which Viret was a pastor of Geneva, therefore, represent a quarter of his career as a minister. Moreover, he was well liked by the people of Geneva – no doubt more than Calvin was in some quarters. Unlike the French Calvin, Viret was practically a native son, a fellow romand who spoke a similar dialect and shared the same culture as the Genevans. Indeed, there is much truth to Henri Vuilleumier’s assessment: “The Genevans always considered him one of their ministers, and as if he were simply on leave in Lausanne.”

A reassessment of Viret's relationship with Geneva is necessary for two reasons: first, to correct several misconceptions in the current understanding of his biography; and second, to deepen our understanding of Calvin himself as a collegial pastor who was indebted to his friends and colleagues for his success, rather than as the towering independent figure famously decried as the "pope of Geneva" by his detractors. During Viret's first two stays in Geneva he played a decisive role in setting the stage for Calvin. Farel is commonly given most of the credit for introducing the Reformation in Geneva; in 1534-1535, however, Viret was nearly as active in encouraging the Genevans to break from the Catholic Church. The period from 1541-1542, when Viret was preparing Geneva for Calvin's return from Strasbourg, was still more significant, yet it has received even less attention. Viret's presence in Geneva at that time was essential in overcoming Calvin's initial reluctance to return to the city and in assisting him in his reform efforts once he arrived. Finally, no period of Viret's life has inspired as much conjecture and misunderstanding as the years he spent in Geneva between his banishment from Lausanne in early 1559 and his subsequent departure for France in the autumn of 1561. He has been accused of feigning illness, of trying to escape the restrictive atmosphere of Geneva, and of feeling betrayed by Calvin's selection of Theodore Beza as his successor in Geneva. Not only do such speculations lack support in the sources, but, more importantly, they have obscured the significance of Viret's final years as a pastor of Geneva.

I. REFORMING GENEVA, PART 1:1534-35

Not a great deal is known of Pierre Viret's early life. It seems that he was born in 1511 in the town of Orbe in the Pays de Vaud, the son of Guillaume Viret, a tailor. He claims to have been first introduced to the new evangelical teachings as a boy by the town's schoolmaster, Marc Romain. Later, he studied in Paris at the College de Montaigu with John Mair, among others, but returned to Orbe before receiving a degree, probably for fear of religious persecution. Orbe's unusual political status helped to pave the way for Viret's introduction to the Reformed ministry, for the town was one of the common lordships (*bailliages communs*) governed jointly by Catholic Fribourg and Protestant Bern. Orbe's status as a common lordship allowed the Bernese to insist that the town permit evangelical preaching, and when Guillaume Farel came to preach in Orbe in April-May 1531, he immediately recruited Viret into the evangelical ministry. Between 1531 and

1534, Viret was an evangelical preacher in the service of Bern, and he was active chiefly in Orbe, Grandson, Payerne, and Neuchatel.

Viret played his first significant role in Geneva in January 1534, as a member of the Bernese delegation sent to resolve the Furbity affair. In December 1533, Guy Furbity, a Dominican doctor of the Sorbonne, had preached Advent sermons in Geneva against the “Lutheran heresy” in general and the “Germans” in particular. The Bernese, allied to Geneva by a treaty of *combourgeoisie*, understood Furbity’s words as a direct assault on them and their support of the evangelical movement in Geneva. The Bernese called on Viret to go to Geneva to participate with Farel in a debate with Furbity. Viret played an active role in the dispute, and ultimately the Dominican was forced out of town. This event brought Genevan Reformation to a turning point. In response to the affair, Catholic Fribourg insisted that Geneva expel the evangelical ministers. Protestant Bern, on the other hand, enjoined Geneva to protect them and guarantee their freedom to preach. Faced with these contradictory demands, the Genevans decided to cancel their treaty of *combourgeoisie* with the Catholic city, preferring the military might of Bern. This left Bern as Geneva’s sole military protector and thus gave the Bernese greater leverage than they had previously enjoyed in the city.

After the Furbity affair, Viret and Farel continued to preach in Geneva. The willingness of the Bernese to keep two of their most talented preachers in the city, despite the slow progress of reform in their other Francophone territories, demonstrates the importance they attached to the progress of the Reformation in Geneva. In 1535 Viret became the central figure in another key turning point in Geneva’s Reformation: the alleged assassination attempt on Viret, Farel, and Antoine Froment by Antonia Vax. In March of that year, Vax served the three ministers spinach soup, but only Viret ate it; he fell seriously ill afterward. Whether or not Vax actually poisoned Viret is uncertain; Jean-Francois Bergier casts doubt on the event through a close examination of her trial records. The Genevan authorities and the ministers themselves believed at the time, however, that she had indeed attempted to kill them. More importantly, they believed that Vax was not operating alone but had the support of certain Catholic clergyman in town. Vax was executed in July, and despite the eventual acquittal of the others accused, the episode led to a backlash against the city’s Catholic clergy. In June, Viret and Farel assisted Jacques Bernard in the Dispute de Rive against a weak Catholic opposition, and the Geneva city council suspended the celebration of the Mass in August. The introduction of the Reformation in Geneva was a team effort. History has tended to remember

Farel principally, but Viret worked closely with him, and together they were helped by the efforts of several others, including Bernard, Froment, and Froment's wife, Marie Dentiere.

Viret's itinerary during the autumn and winter of 1535 is unclear, but we know that he left Geneva for several months. It is certain that he went to Basel, where he probably first met Calvin, and possible that he continued on to Strasbourg and other German cities to plead on behalf of the persecuted Waldensians in Provence. By February 1536 he was in Neuchatel, but the Genevans wanted him back. In the wake of Bern's successful attack on Savoy in January 1536, the Genevans wrote to both Viret and the Neuchatel city council asking for his return. The Neuchatel council cited a number of reasons why it could not send Viret back at the time, but soon afterwards Viret did in fact leave Neuchatel for Geneva. On the way, he encountered the Bernese army as it was besieging the town of Yverdon during its conquest of the Pays de Vaud. There he had his fateful encounter with the soldiers from Lausanne, who convinced him not to continue on to Geneva but to return with them to Lausanne, recently conquered by Bern and much in need of an evangelical minister. Viret would remain in Lausanne for most of his career, but his work in Geneva had been significant. When Calvin arrived there in the summer of 1536, he entered a city where, in his oft-quoted words, "Papism had been crushed a little while before by the work of this excellent man [Farel] and Pierre Viret."

II. REFORMING GENEVA, PART 2: 1541-42

Viret would reprise his reforming role in Geneva five years later, this time preparing the city for Calvin's return from exile in Strasbourg. Yet Calvin's biographers have barely commented on the crucial significance of Viret's presence in Geneva in 1541. Calvin's reluctance to return to the city that had banished him is well known. For several months, he resisted enormous pressure exerted by those who wished him to return, especially Farel. Historians have not examined as closely Calvin's eventual acquiescence, yet the sources suggest that he would not likely have abandoned Strasbourg had Viret not laid the groundwork.

In May 1540, Viret was among the first to suggest to Calvin directly that he should return. Even before the fall from power of the Articulant faction in Geneva, which favored strong political ties to Bern, Calvin scoffed at this suggestion in his reply to Viret: "I had to laugh at that part of the letter where you show yourself so concerned for my health. Would I prosper in Geneva (of all

places)? Why not rather be crucified right now? It was more than enough to have perished there once; why would I want to be racked with that torture again? Therefore, my Viret, if you want the best for me, forget about that idea.” Even earlier, by March 1540, Calvin had begun to hear rumblings from those in Geneva who hoped he would return. In June, when the leading Articulants had been ousted, Farel went to Strasbourg seeking again to recall Calvin to his former post.

These early attempts to bring Calvin back to Geneva demand minor revision to some of William Naphy’s findings. Naphy states, “When the Guillermins regained control in the summer of 1540 they made no attempt to contact Calvin about his possible return,” and he concludes that “the lack of enthusiasm for Calvin’s recall is another indication that the ecclesiastical aspects of the crisis were of secondary importance...Clearly, one cannot say that Calvin was central to the 1538 crisis.” Instead, he claims, “The crisis was first and foremost political in nature.” Naphy’s case for the political elements of the conflict is strong, and it provides a necessary antidote to earlier, pious histories that saw Calvin behind all that happened in Geneva. Nevertheless, Naphy has overstated his case, for these appeals to Calvin came in the spring of 1540, months before the official call from Geneva in October, and even well before the factional resolution in favor of the Guillermins in the summer of 1540. This enthusiasm for Calvin’s recall indicates that the ecclesiastical elements of the conflict went hand-in-hand with the political concerns, as they so often did in the sixteenth century. Ultimately, the central element of the conflict shifts depending on one’s perspective. For example, Naphy rightly notes that “the central disputed issue at the beginning of the crisis in 1538 was whether or not the magistracy had the power to order changes to the religious practices of Geneva without consulting the ministers or getting their approval. This issue has implications for both the political and ecclesiastical history of Geneva. For the city councilors, it was a political struggle for authority in the city. For Calvin, on the other hand, it was a clear infringement on the proper jurisdiction of the church. Calvin’s refusal to administer the Easter Eucharist in 1538, the act that directly prompted his expulsion, likewise illustrates the dual nature of the tensions in Geneva. To the magistrates, this was an act of political disobedience, but to Calvin it was a necessary precaution to avoid the pollution of the body of Christ in the sacrament.

When Calvin was finally recalled to Geneva officially in the autumn of 1540, he was still reluctant and invoked as an excuse for delay his duties as a negotiator at the imperial colloquy of Worms. “If in the meantime,” he suggested, “you wish to call our brother Master Pierre Viret, your church would not be destitute, for you know him, and he would show the same concern for your church

now as he did in the beginning.” Viret also had reservations about going to Geneva, for he was concerned about leaving his church in Lausanne. Farel, however, appealed to the pastors in Bern, saying, “So that Satan, who always resists holy endeavors, cannot set up any stumbling blocks for you, temporarily release Viret, who was recently requested. I am sure you can manage this with the Small Council.” The Bernese subsequently granted Viret a six-month leave of absence to go to Geneva, an apparent indication of their concern for both the ecclesiastical and the political affairs of the city. The Bernese were chronically short of pastors in Vaud; Viret was the chief pastor in the most important city in the region and among the few faculty members at the fledgling Lausanne Academy. The Bernese must have believed that his presence in Geneva was indeed important.

Viret arrived in Geneva on 10 January 1541, and he appears to have enjoyed immediate success. Farel wrote to Calvin, “No man has ever been so accepted. No church has ever rushed in so eagerly to hear the word of the Lord.” Less than a month after Viret’s arrival, the Genevan minister Jacques Bernard urged Calvin, “Do not put off coming to see Geneva, that is, a new people, clearly restored (thanks be to God) by the work of Pierre Viret.” These are but two of a long series of letters begging Calvin to return to Geneva, and they may well have exaggerated Viret’s success in an effort to allay Calvin’s fears of returning. Viret himself may provide a more accurate description of the situation. In a letter to the chief minister of Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger, he was cautiously optimistic: “The situation in Geneva has been proceeding very successfully and improving daily, but one issue greatly hinders our efforts. Although everything is now going our way and this is the very turning point and the best occasion for rebuilding everything that had collapsed, nevertheless, we do not have men with suitable learning and piety who can carry it out...The ministry of the Word is respected again, the youth are instructed properly, the hospitals and hospices are repaired, and the political strategy of the opposition is shattered, yet there are too few who assist and advance out pious efforts; on the other hand, there are too many who strive to obstruct and delay our work and who violate the peacefulness of the churches. So far, the Lord has greatly blessed our efforts. But there is not anyone whose shoulders can bear such a burden alone, certainly not I who am so weak in body and spirit that it is amazing I have been able to carry on thus far.” Viret’s description seems to indicate that good progress had indeed been made. He makes it clear, however, that there was still a long way to go and, most importantly, that he needed help.

After a long delay, which necessitated a six-month extension of Viret's leave of absence, Calvin finally returned to Geneva in September 1541. Viret had helped to turn the Genevan church around, making it possible for Calvin to set about the task of implementing his reforms immediately upon his arrival. Faced with this daunting task, he insisted that Viret remain at his side to help. Three days after his return, Calvin told Farel, "I have also kept Viret with me, whom I absolutely would not allow to be taken away from me." Now it was Calvin who sought to persuade Viret that he was needed in Geneva. He explained to Farel, "If Viret leaves me, I am completely finished; I will not be able to keep this church alive. Therefore, I hope you and others will forgive me if I move every stone to ensure that I am not deprived of him." Calvin is hardly known for emotional outbursts; this language, therefore, indicates how precious a resource he considered his friend during his first months back in Geneva. Viret's continued presence was all the more necessary because he had not been able to establish effective ecclesiastical discipline before Calvin arrived. This is Calvin's one criticism of his associate at this time: "For although Viret began successfully to restore many things, because he put off a complete plan of order and discipline until my arrival, it was like starting from the beginning." In fact, Calvin exaggerated. Earlier, in April 1541, influenced by Viret, the Small Council had moved to establish a consistory to enforce discipline and regulate marriage. It put off further action until the matter could be discussed by the Council of Two Hundred, which then delayed its decision. The consistory was not discussed again until Calvin's arrival. In any event, Viret's past failure could not overcome his present necessity in Calvin's eyes. Unfortunately for Calvin, he could not detain Viret forever, and after multiple extensions of his leave of absence, Viret finally returned to Lausanne in July 1542. His stay in Geneva had been more than a year longer than originally planned. The political situation, within the city and without, set the stage for Calvin's return, and it is certain that the long-term success of the Genevan Reformation was largely a result of his efforts. But any account of Calvin's return to Geneva is incomplete without consideration of Viret's impact on the city and on Calvin himself both before and after his return. Viret's efforts there eased Calvin's dread of returning, and his continued labor was so effective that Calvin claimed he would not be able to go on without him. Calvin was, of course, able to survive Viret's departure, but one is left to wonder whether the history of the Reformation in Geneva would be so inextricably bound up with Calvin had Viret not preceded his return.

III. LIFE AFTER LAUSANNE, 1559-1563

For nearly seventeen years following his departure from Geneva in 1542, Viret served the church and city of Lausanne as its chief pastor. He returned to Geneva frequently, however, to consult with Calvin, and he continued to appear before the city council, taking an active role in the city's ecclesiastical affairs. One episode from this period is especially indicative of the respect with which the people of Geneva held their former minister. In the autumn of 1557, the magistrates of Lausanne sued Viret for preaching against them. When they learned of this, Geneva's city councilors contributed the substantial sum of twenty-five ecus to aid Viret in his defense. Attacked in court by his own townsmen of Lausanne, Viret found assistance from his old friends in Geneva. Fifteen years after his departure from Geneva in 1542, Viret's ties to the city remained strong.

In light of his continuing connection with Geneva, it is hardly surprising that Viret should have returned to the city in early 1559 following his expulsion from Lausanne. When he arrived, he was immediately installed as a pastor, and he remained there until September 1561. Unfortunately, this is one of the most obscure periods of Viret's life, since, as Jean Barnaud rightly points out, so much of our knowledge of his previous activities comes from his extensive correspondence with Calvin. Once in Geneva, Viret had no further need to communicate with Calvin by post, and he corresponded regularly with few others. Outside of those mentioned in scattered city council records, therefore, Viret's activities are difficult to trace. Perhaps because of this silence, no period of Viret's life has given rise to more speculation and misunderstanding. Most of the guesswork has surrounded Viret's departure from Geneva in 1561, which has been characterized as "sudden" or "mysterious" and explained by an assortment of unsubstantiated theories. Scholars have suggested variously that Viret was not really ill, that he was bored in Geneva, that he had been implicated suddenly with the controversial theologian Jean Morely, and that he was resentful of the supposed favor shown by Calvin toward Theodore Beza. None of these suggestions holds up under closer scrutiny, however. First of all, we must keep in mind – and this is rarely noted in the secondary literature – that Viret's departure from Geneva was not intended to be permanent; he was taking a leave of absence, initially only for the winter of 1561 – 1562, and he planned to return to Geneva the following spring. The fact that he left his family behind in Geneva is a good indication that he had every intention of returning at that time. Furthermore, although his leave was extended, he remained a pastor of Geneva until 1563.

When Viret left Geneva for Nimes in September 1561, he explained that he needed a warmer climate for his failing health during the winter months. Historians have been peculiarly reluctant, however, to accept this “excuse” for his departure. Robert Kingdon suggests that Viret may have feigned illness in order to undertake an independent evangelical tour of France: “The whole story of Viret’s departure from Geneva suggests some rather detailed independent plans. Even the sickness may have been feigned. Viret generally looked to contemporaries to be extremely ill, but that seldom kept him from his exceedingly strenuous pastoral work. He may well have used the recurrence of a chronic ailment as an excuse to leave Geneva and begin an independent tour of evangelization.” Kingdon, furthermore, points out that Viret was remarkably active in Nimes upon his arrival, suggesting that he could not, therefore, have been terribly ill.

Viret was, in fact, very worried about his health. He had fallen so ill earlier in the year that Beza reported to Bullinger, “We seriously suspect that he will die.” During 1561, the Geneva council made a number of special provisions for Viret, who lay “deathly ill” in April. Viret prepared his last will and testament on 12 April 1561, an act usually deferred until one’s deathbed. Later, in 1563, Viret himself would recall, “It has been two years since, by the will of our God and Father, I fell into an illness whereby my body was so debilitated and brought so low that in my judgment I could not expect anything else but to be lowered into the ground. For I had never before had a sickness that had brought me so close to the grave, not even when I was poisoned by the art and cunning of the enemies of the Gospel.” Clearly, this was no pretense, nor should the fact that he began preaching in Nimes on his arrival in the autumn of 1561 be understood as a sign that his health was no longer a concern. Viret’s illness was most serious in April 1561, at the time he wrote his will. It seems to have continued unabated into May, when Beza reported on his condition to Bullinger. But by September, he had recovered significantly; Christophe Fabri wrote to Viret, “I am marvelously happy, and all the brothers with me give thanks to the Lord for your recuperation.” He certainly must have been healthy enough to make the 350-kilometer journey from Geneva to Nimes. Yet Viret might reasonably have feared that if he were to stay in Geneva another winter, he could relapse into the same ill health that the previous winter had brought him. Spending the season in Nimes would be preferable to enduring the near-freezing temperatures he could expect in Geneva. Hence, the primary reason for his departure was exactly the one he gave: his health.

Robert Linder, however, believes that Viret may simply have been bored and resented having to play second fiddle to Calvin in Geneva after having led the Lausanne Church for over twenty

years: “Whether or not Viret’s sickness was the real reason for his hurried departure from Geneva in 1561 is a matter of speculation...It is very likely that Viret was restless and bored with his work at Geneva. After all, for twenty-three years he had been in ‘the thick of the fight’ against Berne on one hand and Roman Catholicism on the other as chief pastor of the huge church in Lausanne. He was not accustomed to labor for long in the shadow of another man as he was forced to do in Geneva in relation to the great Calvin.” Linder also indicates that Viret’s tense relationship with Beza was being groomed as Calvin’s successor may have also played a role in Viret’s decision, a theme reiterated by Heiko Oberman: “On 24 August 1558....Viret had reached the end of his rope; he wanted to leave the ministry in order to conclude his life as a private citizen. When Viret, exiled by Bern and after an interlude in Geneva, finally left for France in September 1561, the reason Calvin gave for his friend’s departure was his need for the healthier air of Provence. But in the confidential letter in which Viret first announced his planned resignation, the stated motive for this dramatic move was not his physical health. In unequivocal terms, he accused Calvin of having masterminded Beza’s move to Geneva...A new structure emerged when Beza came to Geneva destined to be Calvin’s successor...When [Viret] was welcomed in Geneva it was not to assume his old role of trusted lieutenant and second-in-command. This position had been given to Beza.” Oberman’s interpretation of events rests on a leap of both logic and chronology. Apparently relying in part on Linder’s argument, he suggests that Viret’s departure from Geneva in 1561 was directly related to the quarrel between Viret and Calvin some three years earlier over Beza’s departure from Lausanne. Nothing in the source connects these two episodes. Furthermore, Oberman implies that upon going to France, Viret resigned from the ministry in Geneva. In fact, Viret remained on the roster of the Geneva Company of Pastors, as is amply documented by Bernard Roussel, who rightly points out the weakness of Oberman’s argument regarding Beza but does not deal extensively with Beza’s and Viret’s relationship in Geneva and afterwards.

Demanding particular consideration is the assumption that Beza was being groomed as Calvin’s successor and the tension alleged to have developed between Viret and Beza as a result. Oberman’s claim that the position of “lieutenant and second-in-command had been given to Beza is not supported by the evidence. First, Viret had been elected pastor of Geneva even before he arrived in the city; Beza, by contrast, had been called to Geneva chiefly as a professor of Greek. He was elected minister two months after Viret, and only after he had been in the city for months. Second, for the next two years, Viret, not Beza, appears with Calvin in almost all the city’s records. The

consistory registers invariably list Calvin and Viret first among those present, while the names of Beza and the other ministers are listed below in varying order. When Calvin appeared before the city council, he almost always did so together with Viret, not Beza. Calvin and Viret preached together in the cathedral; even the mid-week services had to be moved to the cathedral of St. Pierre because of the summer heat and “the multitude that came to hear Calvin and Viret.” Finally, the decision to elect Beza rector of the new Academy was certainly an honor and an acknowledgement of his profound intellectual ability, but it was not the position from which one would naturally inherit leadership of the Company of Pastors. Until his illness in 1561, Viret, not Beza, must have been Calvin’s heir-apparent – if indeed Calvin had need of one at that time.

There is merit to the notion that there was tension in Viret and Beza’s relationship, but it did not result from an effort to groom Beza as Calvin’s successor. While Viret and Beza were in Lausanne together, there is no evidence that relations between them were rocky, although there is likewise little evidence that they were especially close. Nonetheless, Beza’s departure from Lausanne in August 1558 certainly strained Viret’s relationship with both Beza and Calvin. Unlike Viret’s departure from Geneva, Beza’s removal from Lausanne was sudden, and Calvin played an important role in it. Although Viret initially resented Calvin’s failure to consult him in this instance, the two quickly reconciled in Geneva. Viret and Beza’s relationship, on the other hand, hit another rough patch as soon as Viret arrived in the city; in essence, Viret stole Beza’s accommodations. Just a week after Viret’s arrival, the city council decreed “that Viret be lodged at Saint Abre, where we had initially ordered lodging for Theodore Beza, who should remain where he is with Seigneur de Arca for another three months.” Beza seems not to have taken the news well. Less than a week later, the two of them appeared before the council, where “once again the manner of their lodging was discussed. And it was decided that Viret be lodged at Saint Abre in the sale....and that he have the garden... and as for Beza, he should be lodged elsewhere.” If anything, it was not Viret who was upset that Beza was being groomed as Calvin’s successor, but Beza who was resentful of being overshadowed by Viret once again, as he had been previously in Lausanne.

It is difficult to take this argument much further, however, for there is simply no additional evidence of bitter disagreement or serious rupture between Viret and Beza. Nor, however, is there evidence of much cooperation. The almost total lack of surviving correspondence between the two after Viret went to France is striking; a single letter from Beza to Viret is all that survives from the

seven years between Calvin's and Viret's deaths (1564-1571). On the other hand, Beza seems to have been well aware of Viret's activities in France, perhaps through confidential correspondence that does not survive or through word of mouth. And Beza honored "l'eloquent Viret" in his *Icones* as "a learned man, with a marvelously charming disposition." Although Viret and Beza seem not to have been close, we can say with confidence that whatever tension there may have been nothing whatever to do with Viret's decision to leave Geneva.

A fourth scholar who questions Viret's departure from Geneva is Philippe Denis. Denis suggests that Viret was sympathetic to Jean Morely's controversial Congregationalist ideas, which later came under intense fire from Geneva, particularly from Beza. Denis implies that Viret may have crossed Calvin by insisting that consistory members be selected on the advice of all the ministers rather than that of Calvin alone. "One little known episode from Viret's stay in Geneva could have played a significant role in his decision to leave. It is, in any case, of the greatest interest in the context of the Morely affair. On 30 January 1560, Viret and Calvin appeared together before Geneva's Small Council...They proposed that the members of the consistory no longer be chosen from the group of citizens, but from among the pious men of the church and that, before appointing them, one should take the advice of all the ministers instead of calling on Calvin "all alone, as if he were the ministers." Denis suggests that this last proposal must have been Viret's and may have alienated him from Calvin.

First of all, Calvin and Viret's appearance before the city council in January 1560 hardly seems directly relevant to what Denis suggests is Viret's "hasty" departure over a year and a half later. Moreover, Denis's point rests entirely on his interpretation of certain ambiguous pronouns as a reference to Calvin: "that one calls on (lui) alone, as if (il) were the ministers." To be sure, the grammar of the passage is less than perfectly clear, and in the absence of a clear antecedent, the pronouns may, in fact, refer to Calvin. Its context, however, makes Denis's reading implausible. In a proposal for reforming the consistory prepared and presented by Calvin and Viret together, Viret would hardly have launched an impromptu attack on Calvin as the two stood side-by-side before the city council.

Furthermore, in trying to show possible connections between Viret and Jean Morely, Denis highlights, as Linder had as well, the suddenness of Viret's departure: "His departure is sudden,

as Morely notes in the dedicatory letter of the *Traicte de la discipline et police chrestienne*. He departs in haste, without taking leave of the city council.”

Viret’s departure was hardly as sudden as Linder and Denis indicate. Viret left Geneva on 29 September 1561, but more than two weeks earlier, on 11 September, Calvin notified the city council of Viret’s intention to spend the winter in Languedoc on his doctor’s advice. Viret must have been discussing the idea with his friends even earlier, for on 12 September, Christophe Fabri sent him a letter from Neuchatel, advising him to select a destination other than Montpellier, since the climate there would be too harsh for his health. By 17 September, word had spread to France, where Beza reported from the Colloquy of Poissy that Viret was “being sought out by many leading nobles who all say that he is useless in Geneva if the doctors can be believed.” It is true that Viret did not appear before the council to take his leave in person because “he feared his departure was too well known” among the general populace. Still, the discussion of his imminent departure suggests that he made no secret of it among his friends. Hence, we must conclude with Roussel that “the historian does not have a single argument to minimize the motive” of Viret’s poor health to explain his departure.

Although he had originally planned to return to Geneva the following spring, Viret left Geneva for good in 1561, returning only briefly in 1563 to collect his family and goods. Nonetheless, Viret was still a member of the venerable *compagnie* and had been given a leave of absence only for the winter months. His activity in France was extraordinary, especially given his illness earlier in the year. When Viret arrived in France, churches from all over the country sought him out. The churches in Nîmes and Paris even sent delegations to Geneva to ask officially for his services. Ultimately, he left Nîmes for Montpellier in February 1562, and from there went to Lyon. The exact date of Viret’s official release from Geneva is unclear. Roussel points to January 1563. At first glance, it seems that Viret’s transfer to the church in Lyon occurred then, but his transfer was not, in fact, complete until May 1563. On 21 January, the Geneva council records show that “The church of Lyon asks once and for all that we cede Viret completely. After hearing the advice of the ministers, the request was granted.” But apparently neither Lyon nor Geneva informed Viret about their negotiations over his future, and he was outraged. In February he complained to the pastors in Geneva about the secretive manner of the negotiations: “There was complete agreements with the plan I had described to the [Genevan] council concerning the postponement of my return until the spring. But our council [in Lyon], unaware of our agreement, wrote to your council in the

letter you saw, which I was not consulted about or made aware of. You should, therefore, find the authors worthy of serious censure and reproach...None of us heard as much as a syllable about their request before we were informed by the letter your council sent us.” It is not entirely clear why these negotiations were conducted without Viret’s knowledge or why the Genevans were willing to cede Viret to Lyon. Part of the answer could lie in Geneva’s desire for closer cooperation with Lyon. The two cities were closely tied economically, and the combination of Geneva’s increasing alienation from Bern in the 1550’s with the Huguenot capture of Lyon in 1562 may well have made a stronger alliance with the French city appear all the more desirable.

To the Geneva city council, Viret expressed his sadness at being handed over to the church of Lyon and indicated his desire to retire from the ministry altogether: “If it were up to me, I would very much like to end my days with you [in Geneva], if it pleased the Lord to allow me to serve your Church such as I would like to every day of my life and if it did not please God to call me elsewhere....For from now on, I place myself in the ranks of old, exhausted, broken soldiers who can no longer perform great exploits in battle. It seems better to me to spend the future as a private citizen than to take on any public duty.” Viret did not resign from the ministry, however, and his official transfer from Geneva was delayed. Later that year, in May, the church officials of Lyon had to repeat their request for Viret, “whom they have merely borrowed.” Finally, on 13 May 1563, more than two years after he had left Geneva for France, Viret returned to Geneva and appeared before the city council to take his final leave. The council decided “to grant him honorable leave and equally to thank him for his service to our Lord in planting the Gospel and serving faithfully in the ministry here.” On 25 May, Viret bade adieu to the council and returned to Lyon, never again to return to Geneva or his homeland in the Pays de Vaud.

Viret’s relationship with Geneva while he was in France was rocky at times. The Genevans found they had little control over his activities and had to extend his initial leave of absence repeatedly. Viret never liked to take orders, whether from the Bernese magistrates while he was in Lausanne or from the ministers and council of Geneva while in France. Beza memorialized his independent spirit with the words, “He always said precisely what he wanted.” It seems that he did what he wanted as well. But it is a mistake to conclude that Viret somehow broke acrimoniously with Geneva, as he had with Bern, or that he stealthily crept out of town under a fog of suspicion. In the prefatory epistle of his *Instruction chretienne*, addressed to the church of Nimes, he fondly recalled his association with Geneva: “I cannot name the city of Geneva but with great honor and

reverence and without always recalling the fruit of the joy and consolation that I for so long received from that church – both on the part of all the good and honorable lords whom God constituted there for the government of the republic and from my brothers and companions, pastors in the same ministry with me, and generally from all the people, who were always so affectionate toward me, as I was toward them from the beginning.”

Viret would spend the rest of his life in France, residing during his last years in Jeanne d’Albret’s Bearn. But, in many ways, Viret remained throughout his life a minister of Geneva, whether officially on the roster of the Company of Pastors or unofficially through his writing, preaching, and missionary work. With Farel, he introduced the Reformation to Geneva in the first place. He almost single-handedly set the stage for Calvin’s return from exile. And with Calvin, he created the ecclesiastical ordinances and consistory that would define Reformation Geneva. Indeed, “Calvin’s Geneva” would not have existed as such had it not been for the work of Pierre Viret.

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9 Pierre Viret: and the Refusal of the Church to Fold Before the Power of the State

Author: Jean-Marc Berthoud

Excerpt from *The Acts of the Church: Christianity in French-Speaking Switzerland*. Pages 45-55



Twass the night before Christmas, 1558. In the vicarage of the Madeleine, at the foot of the cathedral, Sebastienne Viret awaited with anxiety and some impatience the return of her husband, who had been for some time detained by the debates of the local Council of the Two Hundred.

What could these men be discussing so late into the night on Christmas Eve? It was a question of postponing the celebration of the Lord's Supper, held three times a year, at Passover, Pentecost, and Christmas; a delay of eight days had been requested, to postpone the Supper until the first of the new year. This earnest demand came from three pastors of the cathedral: Pierre Viret, Jacques Valier, and Armand Banc, who wanted this delay in order to be able to arrange the times necessary for the examination before the Consistory—but not the discipline—of those whom the pastors considered unworthy to partake of the Supper because of their scandalous life or faltering faith. This was at all costs immediately to make the most of the last concession of the Bernese lords. We find here the culminating point of a conflict of powers between the pastors of the Classe of Lausanne on the one hand, of whom the undisputed leader was Pierre Viret, who called for the right of the Consistory, that is, the Church, to excommunicate the unfaithful, and, on the other hand, the political authority, Their Excellencies of Bern, who did not wish in any way to hear talk of the least departure of their absolute control over their Vaudois subjects. After a turbulent debate the Council acceded to the demands of the pastors. The celebration of the Supper would be postponed a single week.

But what now had the Council and the Senate of Bern done? For, since the conquest of 1536, the power of the Pays de Vaud was in their hands. What would be the reaction of those who had been named by their subjects: “Our Illustrious, High, Powerful, and Sovereign Lords, their Excellencies of the City and Republic of Bern”? The response was not long in coming. Informed the same day by their bailiff, the lords of Bern responded with the greatest vigor. The Supper of the first day of the year was completely banned, and a delegation of the Senate was immediately dispatched to Lausanne with quite rigorous instructions: Viret and his two colleagues were dismissed from their offices, effective immediately. The City Council received a strong reprimand for their “abuse of power,” and the Classe of Lausanne (an assembly of pastors and deacons of the region from Lausanne to Vevey) received orders to fill the posts which had thus been made vacant. The unanimous refusal of the Classe to replace Viret and his colleagues brought about the imprisonment of all its members. Released after three days, these pastors were summoned to appear before the Senate, at Bern, February 23-25, 1559. They were placed under the alternative: submit unconditionally to the “Reformation of the Messieurs of Bern,” or resign from their office. About thirty of the pastors chose exile, among whom were nearly all the professors of the flourishing Academy founded by Viret and the Messieurs of Bern in 1537. The dean of the Academy, the famous Theodore de Beze who had arrived in Lausanne in 1549, had realized earlier than his colleagues the uselessness of pursuing the battle with the Bernese power for the spiritual independence of the Vaudois Church. In August of 1558 he had requested leave, and rejoined Calvin in Geneva. He there assisted in founding the famous Theological Academy, which took those exiled from Lausanne, to engage in the work of spreading the Reformation throughout the entirety of Europe. At the end of February 1559, Pierre Viret, seeing finally that nothing more could be obtained, rejoined his friends Calvin and Beze at Geneva where he received shortly thereafter the sentence of perpetual banishment pronounced against him by the Bernese authorities. Thus at the age of 48, after a fruitful ministry of twenty-eight years, Pierre Viret left forever his home country to which he would write later, “If I should wish that God be glorified among men, where should I desire that He be so more than in the country of my birth?”

Was this then the man, so little inclined to conflicts and controversies, who thus provoked such a violent tempest among the Vaudois, a tempest which scarcely has equal before the great schism of 1847? Was this Pierre Viret, the Vadois Reformer, friend and companion-in-arms of Guillaume Farel, John Calvin, and Theodore de Beze, the faithful pastor who was named the Angel of the

Reformation? Forced into innumerable combats in order to establish a true Reformation in the Pays de Vaud, he was driven to engage in a war lasting nearly twenty years with his suzerain in the goal of obtaining true spiritual autonomy of the Church in the face of the pretensions of the absolute sovereignty of the Bernese state. The leader of the Church capable of a such a persistent long-term fight could, in all sincerity, write of himself:

I have always naturally loved peace and have always been in horror of all dissensions and troubles. However, the knowledge that it pleased God to give me His Word, from my youth, and the experience acquired for which I exercise the ministry of His holy Gospel, incites me still more to push for peace and concord, and to better consider what Jesus Christ said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’

August 1, 1550, at a time when he was busy with the inextricable difficulties which the tenacious will of Bern procured for him to keep the high hand over the Church, Viret wrote to his friend Calvin:

One thing comforts me, the peace which reigns in my house, the mutual affection and the good accord among ministers and professors and the constant progress of our schools. If these things be blemished, I could not live, but must emigrate from here.

Pierre Viret was born in 1511 in the ancient Roman and Burgundian village of Orbe, of parents especially pious who belonged to the middle-class. His father was a tailor by profession. After a start at education in the parish school of Orbe—which one could scarcely call mediocre considering Viret’s remarkable knowledge, his immense education, and perfect mastery of ancient languages, particularly Latin—he left his native village the end of 1527 at the age of 17 in order to complete his studies at Paris, where he thought to prepare himself for the priesthood. At Paris he applied at the College Montaigu, which had been frequented before him by John Calvin, and where he had as a classmate Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. As Calvin, he was strongly marked by the Scottish philosophical teaching of the tendency of the Scot John Major. This common influence explains in part the close resemblance of the thought of the two Reformers. At Paris, after bitter spiritual battles, Pierre Viret converted to the Evangelical faith and opted for the Lutheranism which could so easily conduct those who accepted it to the pyres kindled by the false church. He knew the anxiety of those “poor consciences,” as he described himself, “so troubled and nearly desperate, not knowing which way to turn.” He added: “In good time, being

still at school, the goodness of God withdrew me from that labyrinth of error before I was plunged too deeply in that Babylon.”

This Babylon was, obviously, the Roman Church. The beginning of 1531 he returned to Orbe, having left Paris in order to escape from the persecution which held sway over those who dared to profess Evangelical convictions.

From the beginning of 1528, after the famous dispute of Bern in which Zwingli, Bucer, Capito, Oecolampadius, and Farel participated, Their Excellencies of Bern were won over to the Reformation. The Great Order of the Reformation of February 7, 1528, laid down the Word of God as the sole foundation of the Church in all territories under Bernese authority. Throughout the rest of the Burgundian wars until the end of the fifteenth century, the Bernese held possession of a certain number of baillages in common with Fribourg: Orbe, Echallens, Morat, Grandson, Avenches, Payerne, etc. Wherever this was the case, Their Excellencies sought to progress their own territorial extension by way of the Reformed Faith. Certainly they acted by religious conviction, but also, it cannot be doubted, with the offices of a political conquest with long term serious reflection.

This it was that Guillaume Farel, provided with a diplomatic mandate officially issued by the Bernese authority, went to preach the Word of God in all the common baillages. He there provoked many troubles and disputes but, by the grace of God, he also brought about a number of conversions. Ambassador of God, he was equally provided with letters of recommendation from the Bernese authorities which made him their delegate, the diplomatic agent of Their Excellencies. Thus Farel, in the first years of his activity in French-speaking Switzerland, was both the iron lance of the Gospel, and at the same time the political expansionist of Bern.

For Bern had adopted the Zwinglian reform in which the political power, after having broken from a faulty ecclesiastical authority, entirely absorbed it to its own advantage. It was a question here not of a State Church in which the Church, joined to the State, would be meanwhile preserved as an independent spiritual reality, but a true State-Church. The Caesaro-papism of the Roman Church was replaced by the religious autocracy of a united Christian State in which all real distinction between temporal and spiritual powers would disappear. On the one side as on the other, the distinction was lost—and not the opposition!—which established the Bible between the spiritual power (the Church wielding the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God) and the temporal

power (the State wielding the sword). This confusion of powers well explains also the pyres of the Roman Church, and the drowning of the Christian Mennonite Baptists in the Limmatt at Zurich by Zwingli's State-Church. The dead hand on Zwingli's sword at Kappel, October 11, 1531, was the logical consequence of such confusion.

Bern adopted the Zwinglian vision of a State-Church in which the magistrates dominate the ecclesiastical power with a high hand. Up until the eighteenth century, Their Excellencies also arrested the Baptists who dared to enter their territory, and sold them at the slave market of Venice to the Turks who sent them to man their galleys. Georges de Lagarde put his finger on the absolutist and statist deviation of the Zurich reform when he wrote:

The Zurich State realized within their breast the unity of the public life. It was solely responsible before God for all political or religious acts. High priest and king, it rediscovered the attributes of the ancient pagan cities. It was sovereign.

Later, under the prudent and courageous direction of Heinrich Bullinger, the Church of Zurich recovered a part of its spiritual autonomy in connection to the State. Bern was the Swiss city which pushed the hardest to found the Zwinglian position. As James Good, the American historian of the Reformed Churches in Switzerland wrote:

For no part of Zwingli's Erastian view (the theory of the submission of the Church to the State) saw a development so extended as that of Bern. There not only was the Church united to the State, but it was also reduced to a nonentity in the arms of the State. By destroying the reign of bishops by the Reform, the State was merely entirely substituted for them and reigned by its own authority.

Gonzague de Reynold, in his study on the genius of Bern, helps us better understand to what point this vision of connections between the State and the Church rejoined the secular politics of Their Excellencies.

For Bern, from its inception, is the only city in the interior of Switzerland which possesses a State thought . . . it reaches to the natural limits, the summit of the Alps and the peak of the Jura . . . A realistic politic, which is not hampered by theories, is itself sufficiently often devoid of scruples; a political enemy of doctrines and suspicious of ideas. . . . To be its own master and to reign among the others. Not to admit superior power, to subordinate, therefore, the Church to the State, and education to politics.

We have here not the spirit of the Bernese people but those of the political elite who ruled throughout all the medieval and patrician epoch. Gonzague de Reynold, speaking of the political spirit of Bern more clearly, says:

The final, most pronounced character of this spirit is the envy of authority.

I will analyze it.

No one allowed to leave, to run out of power; to retain it until the last particle; to fix it, to render it absolute.

To limit it to the bourgeois, then solely to the patrician families.

To be attentive to this worthless faction, worthless personal ambition which cannot be seized; to defend the entire family from having more than a representative at the Senate and more than a hundred thousand livres in his purse.

To never permit the discussion of power, to also fear lest someone speak of good: to exercise silence, with lips sealed, to withdraw from spectators, curious, and strangers.

To give favor often, sometimes to reforms, never to concessions.

To demand respect of power as a sacred thing, given by God.

We find here before us a resurrection of the spirit which animated the Roman Empire; of this the leaders of the Republic of Bern were well aware. Gonzague de Reynold writes:

The ancient energetic city and poor of every hour, the humanists please themselves to compare it to Sparta; the now powerful Republic compared itself to Rome; as she, on the long-enduring rock, wrote the four sacred letters: S.P.Q.B.: Senatus Populusque Bernensis.

This is that power that God in His providence used in order to back up Guillaume Farel in his efforts to uproot the French-speaking province to the errors of papal Rome.

Palm Sunday 1531 Farel was in Orbe, according to the order of Their Excellencies, to preach the Word of God there at all costs. This is not the place to describe the battles which followed and the manner in which the city was little by little won over to the Gospel. Among the listeners of the fiery Dauphine evangelist was found a young man of twenty years, entirely accepting of his preaching. This was our Viret, and Farel quickly detected the grace of God which his modesty and young age concealed. As he was to do later with Calvin, Farel imposed the vocation of minister of

the Word of God upon Viret, and established him as pastor of his native community. Viret had the joy of bringing his father and mother to the knowledge of salvation, and when he left Orbe fifteen months later, he left a flourishing community. From ten people it had passed to more than forty-five.

In 1534, after an itinerant ministry which led him to receive a sword wound in the back—a forceful argument from a monk of the Payerne Abbey—Viret was found at Farel’s side at Geneva. There again an attempt was made on his life, this time by poison. He survived, though his health was never restored. In 1536, after a short journey to Germany to solicit aid in favor of the Vadois of Piemont, who were being harshly persecuted by Charles II of Savoy and Francis I of France, Viret settled in Lausanne, where he began to preach the Gospel before the arrival of the Bernese troops. The year 1536 saw the conquest of the Pays de Vaud by Bern and Fribourg, the famous Lausanne Dispute in which Viret took the lead role alongside of Farel—he was not then twenty-five—and the Reformation Edicts which imposed the Reformation by force on a population still largely established in the old Catholic traditions. Apart from the period running from January 1541 to July 1542 when he assisted Calvin at Geneva, Viret, until his exile in 1559, consecrated all his energies and great gifts which God had given him to feed the Vaudois Church, and more particularly his Lausanne parishioners. This long pastoral experience permitted him to have a clear regard for his Vaudois fellow citizens who, though truly desiring that someone should throw out the bishop, wished to limit this to what Viret called a diffamation, and refused all true reformation according to the Word of God.

They gladly hear the preachers when they cry out against the vices of the priests and monks, but they do not wish to hear the preachers cry out against their vices. They want a Gospel preached without repentance and without a changed life. They want, under the title of the Gospel, a liberty which would be to them an unrestrained licence to do all that they please. They want to be unburdened from the yoke of the Antichrist, but they want nothing to do with carrying Christ’s.

In order to achieve a Church which would sanctify itself, Viret, in spite of his love for peace, was progressively caused to enter into a merciless wrestling match with the Roman power of the Bernese Republic. Roger Barilier, in his remarkable historical piece *Viret Banished*, sanctioned by the dramatic circumstances which we have examined, characterized Viret’s thought so justly by these words which he placed in the Reformer’s mouth:

The Church will not be reformed; she shall not truly be the Church until the day when she will be emancipated from the civil power, when the authority of the minister will be recognized, when she will be disciplined according to the Gospel, and when she will clearly confess, by her faith and by her works, the name of the glorious Savior.

In Viret's satirical dialogue, *Le Monde à l'Empire et le Monde Démoniacle* [The Corruption of the World's Empires and the World Demonized], we read:

The reformation of the Gospel can be understood in two ways.

How is this?

One can well take the reformation of the Gospel for a reformation by which men reform their lives and conversation to the rule of the Church. . . . But there is also another way which can be called a hidden or illegitimate reformation.

What do you mean by this hidden or illegitimate reformation?

A reformation made by design in which men do not truly wish to reform their morals, old and wicked customs, and manners to the rule of the Gospel, but they wish to reform the Gospel to their rule and to make it serve their affections and their particular gain and profit.

Viret, much more than Calvin or Farel, Bullinger or Zwingli, desired a Church separated from the State. But, as Calvin himself had done, after having welcomed as providential the support of the Bernese power in establishing the Reform, the French-speaking Reformers—Farel also—quickly realized the spiritual dangers which represented the political predominance of the State over the Church. No true reformation of the Church and the society can be effective without the reestablishment of a true spiritual autonomy of the Church beside the State. This necessary independence is marked, negatively by the refusal of the interference of the magistrate in the internal life of the Church; positively by the reestablishment within the Church of a true ecclesiastical jurisdiction leading to the disciplinary power of the consistories, which should materialize in the right of excommunication of the unfaithful and public sinners. Their Excellencies of Bern, in their slow but inflexible march toward absolute power, could not at any moment tolerate such pretensions. This would signify the establishment of a state within the State, the manifestation of a power which evaded—no matter how small—their will of total ascendancy over society.

For Viret, the Church should respect the power of the magistrate as being directly instituted by God (like the father of the family, which is a Biblical model of all social organisms), and not reduce it to an inferior state as had often been done by the papacy. Listen to him:

The Church has her ministers and conductors, not to engage in things pertaining to the office of the civil magistrates, but solely over those things which concern her ministry and her discipline. For the power which the Lord has given her (which sign is the power of the keys) is confined within these limits. Thus, if she overstep, and if her ministers usurp in any way the office of the magistrates, they abuse their office and are not true ministers but tyrants who usurp that which does not in any way belong to them.

But, by contrast:

There is no prince who has the right to give the laws of religion and service of God. . . . If a presumptuous prince be found who desires to stop serving God, none should obey him, under pain of obeying the devil.

In 1551, several years before his departure from Lausanne, Viret could write these strong words on the limits of pastoral obedience:

The pastor remembers that he is a minister of God and not of men; he faithfully discharges his offices which have been confided to him, he endeavors to obtain justice from the magistrates and the Church. That which he cannot obtain he returns to God and occupies himself solely with doing that which is his duty. He will right gladly suffer to be deposed and driven from his ministry and will expose his own life rather than act against his conscience and lose the Church in confirming impiety and tyranny.

Also, of such magistrates who dare to usurp spiritual power, Viret adds:

. . . they want a liberty which is an unrestrained license . . . They want to take under their paw the poor ministers and preachers, as their valets, to make them scurry about and go under their hand as they please. If the ministers do not wish to do this, . . . they will immediately cry that such ministers are ambitious and rebels and that they wish to set aside the magistrate.

Viret well knew that the medieval vision, a vision largely inherited by the Reformers, which tried largely to coincide the State and the civil society and in which all the citizens were submitted to ecclesiastical discipline, different and more demanding than that of the magistrate, was not faithful

to the teaching of the Bible. This vision of a homogeneous religious society drew its origins rather from a political totalitarianism of Aristotle, of which the Roman Empire was a striking example. In this sense the teaching of Viret is much in advance of that of his contemporary Reformers and, what matters more to us, is much more faithful to the model of the Church which we find in the Bible. He wanted a living, regenerated Church, disciplined by the Word, truly confessing, a Church which would be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, and whose teachings would affect all institutions of society, beginning with the State, in order to conform it, through the sanctification of faithful Christian citizens in every social order, to God's design for all His creation. Viret wrote:

We will not stop at the multitude but at truth. For we love more to have a little herd of sheep who line up according to the obedience of the Word of God, than a truly great herd made up of dogs, swine, wolves, and foxes, and mixed with all sorts of beasts.

He understood better than anyone the necessary distinction of the two swords, both having their authority from God, both submitted in their action to the divine norm of the Scripture, but each exercising in its own proper domain the means which were appropriated to it. To the question: Why is it necessary for the Church to arrange a discipline properly exercised by elders when there exists a civil jurisdiction perfectly capable of exercising justice, Viret responded:

Because matters are diverse. For this reason it is necessary that the offices pertaining to the Church and its administration and government be distinguished from those which pertain to the civil government and the republic. For otherwise there would be confusion if temporal and spiritual things were all put together.

Such a perspective did not refuse less the entirely new Roman tyranny of popes and short robes (that of the Bernese), to whom the false reformation was nothing but a diffamation, of the old; these popes and their bishops had a long robe of clerical Rome.

Instead of a pope with his long robe, they want to make another with a short robe, which it will be well to fear more than those whom they so condemn, if it happens that they once take root and be received and sustained.

And Viret, without difficulty, clearly showed the inevitable consequences of the appearance of such a power as that of Bern accumulating the religious and profane authority. This is that ancient Roman power which, since the French Revolution, has reappeared on the world scene in all its

ancient force under the form of the modern Hegelian State: sovereign, absolute, completely autonomous, not accountable to anyone, least of all God. This State without faith or law has become, as was foreseen by the supreme theoretician Hegel, a god walking upon earth, a god who knows no boundaries to his power, nor justice to his right.

If the complete-power of the Church is within the hands of the magistrates, they can cut it up and sew it back together as they please. They have no need to borrow the sword which they have beside them. They give and take away ministers as it seems good to them. They treat them as their valets. When they be drunk and angry, they give them leave, as the fancy takes them. And in this way the wolves will receive their fill in the Church, and the true pastors will be cast out. For the tyrants will never allow anyone to tell them the truth.

A contemporary theologian who, like Viret, has consecrated his entire life to the practical application of the Law of God to all aspects of reality, Rousas John Rushdoony, in his study on the connections of Christianity and the State before the Reform, reached the same conclusions as our Reformer:

If the state is not placed under the sovereign authority of the triune God, there can exist no hope of liberty for men and the Church. The State, having become its own god, its own source of rights and morals, it is therefore impossible for it to deceive or to do any wrong. Faced with such a State no man can possess the least right of critique or any other liberty of having any other opinion besides theirs. . . . The modern humanist State is thus the most jealous god in history. It will not tolerate any rival.

The confrontation with Bern was inevitable. After two years of such an appreciated ministry in Geneva, Viret's failing health obliged him to seek a milder climate in France in the spring of 1561. In this country he exercised his remarkable talents to the benefit of the Churches of Midi, of the city of Lyon, and finally, which was his last exile, in Bearn, the kingdom of Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre.

Viret was a man of rare modesty. Posterity, in taking at his word his deceptive appreciation of himself, hold him in fundamentally low regard. Here is an example of what some of his contemporaries say of his preaching gifts:

His speech was so sweet that he would continually hold the attention and the interest of those who heard him. His style, which married strength to harmony, was so caressing to the ear and to the intelligence that even those of his hearers least interested in religious matters, those most impatient of other preachers, would hear him out without difficulty and even with pleasure. One has said, that they were as though suspended on his lips, that they wished his discourses were even longer.

At his side Melchior Adam wrote:

In Lyon, preaching out in the open, he brought thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out.

Of Calvin Beze wrote, “None have taught with greater authority,” of Farel, “None thundered more mightily,” but of Viret he said, “None has a more winsome charm when he speaks.” Some of his contemporaries placed him above Calvin as a preacher. But if Calvin is incomparable as a dogmatic exegete and polemist, Viret largely surpasses him as ethicist and apologist. His strength was a domain often neglected, because of its awkwardness: the application of the Word of God to all domains of life. His *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and Gospel* of 1564 is unquestionably the best commentary on the Ten Commandments that the Christian Church has ever known. In this work, as he presents the appearance of the philosophical idealism of Descartes (a subjectivism that does not allow any true link between the knowledge of nature and that of the Creator, Romans 1:18-23), Viret gives us a magisterial application of the Biblical doctrine of the general revelation of God throughout all creation. His marvelous polemical dialogue, *Le Monde à l’Empire et le Monde Démoniacle* (1561) contains—among other treasures—a historical, social, and economic analysis of the light of the Word of God which permits him, for example, to put his finger on the functioning of certain economic phenomena perverted in his time, two centuries before the development of modern economic science! As a Christian moralist he was comparable to a John Chrysostom of the fifth century, to a Cardinal Pie of the nineteenth, or even to a Rousas Rushdoony of our epoch. It is high time that we finally begin to grasp the importance of this remarkable thinker, that we repeat his words in modern adaptation, and that we return to his vision of the application of the complete Word of God to all aspects of human life, to all scientific disciplines. Without such a return to the Biblical reality we can have no hope for the revival of the

Church and for the restoration of his reformational influence over the entirety of culture and society.

To conclude this too brief survey, I will give you the words of a man who knew Pierre Viret well and who, moving beyond the modesty of his friend, sought to place him among the great men of God, the humble and powerful servants by which the Lord Jesus Christ is glorified in His Church. This is what Theodore de Beze wrote in his Portraits in 1581:

Pierre Viret

I see his body, beaten, fraught with suffering and age,

Recipient of poison, wounds, and all man's deadly rage.

I see the virtue of the Lord, His noble mysteries,

And in great silence I submit myself to His decrees.

I read the precious writings, full of wisdom without end,

That you, my dearest Viret, in that dreadful prison penned.

I see the goodness of your judgment, and your conscience clear,

And know that truly God resides within your mansion here.

I know Christ watches o'er His Church with gentle, loving care,

For, seeing it half-dead, engulfed in flame, in great despair,

He lights a fire in men's souls within that dreadful heat,

Enflaming hearts, enlight'ning minds, to make His Church complete.

If all the folly of the world rejects His sacred way,

Demanding from us some new sign, some miracle today,

Our gentle Viret will provide a witness with each breath;

He spoke to them in life, and he is speaking still in death.

(Lausanne, January 13, 1991. Excerpt from *Des Actes de L'Eglise*, Jean-Marc Berthoud. pages 45-55. Published by L'Age D'Homme)

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10 Pierre Viret and Church Discipline

Author: Olivier Favre

Excerpt from Olivier Favre, “Pierre Viret (1511-1571) et la discipline ecclésiastique,” *La revue réformée*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1998), 55-76



I. Pierre Viret, a great Reformer

Pierre Viret is the second of three sons of a man of the lower middle class, raised in the village of Orbe, not far from Lausanne. Having an inclination for letters and religion, he was, according to the custom of the time, devoted to the priesthood. In 1528, at the age of seventeen, he journeyed to Paris, to the college of Montaigu, which was shortly before frequented by a certain John Calvin. It was here that Viret acquired his solid training, and also where his conversion occurred. He speaks of this event as a painful moment and an intense struggle.¹ In His providence, God led him in the French capital to become a privileged instrument for the Reformation of His Church and the conversion of many.

Returning to his native village in 1531, Viret heard a sermon of Farel's. Some weeks later he mounted the pulpit, convinced by “the thunders” of Farel that he must pursue the newly commenced work. Thus he began a ministry which he did not quit until the moment the Lord called him home, forty years later, at Pau, in the kingdom of Jeanne d'Albret.

Before becoming established at Lausanne in the beginning of 1536, Viret's ministry led him across French-speaking Switzerland. He went to Neuchatel, then Payerne. He was at Geneva during the “disputation” seeking the establishment of the Reform in that city. He returned many times to meet with his friend Calvin and also to carry on the ministry there.

During Calvin's banishment from 1537 to 1542, Viret was loaned to the Genevans for a sixmonth duration, and indeed remained a year and a half at Calvin's request, who desired to have his friend Viret at his side during his return from Strasbourg.

At Geneva Viret was greatly valued and worked a remarkable work. Farel wrote of him to the pastors of Zurich: "I have seen the admirable building constructed by the work of Viret. His labor has been immense to restore the people to the right way."²

Viret returned to Geneva in 1559, after being banished by the Bernese because of his persistence in establishing Church discipline; he was forced to quit his country once and for all. Owing to the simplicity of his words, and his persuasive gentleness mingled with great depth recognized by all, Viret was so appreciated in Geneva that, from his arrival, a place of pastor was afforded him. The registers of the Lordship of Geneva speak of his "prodigious"³ success, and a certain Verdheiden declares: "His speech was so sweet that he kept his hearers wide-awake with attention. His style had such force and a harmony so caressing to the ear and spirit that the least religious amongst us, the most impatient . . . listened to him ungrudgingly and with pleasure. One has said that they appeared to be suspended upon his lips, that they wished the sermon to be even longer."⁴

Nevertheless, it was not at Geneva that Viret's career ended. Following an illness, he was forced to convalesce in the south of France. His trail is found, among others, at Orange, Nimes, Montpellier, Avignon, Valence, and Lyons. Afterward he permanently left Geneva with his family and, in 1567, responded to an appeal from Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre. The acts of the Synod of 1567 attest that "under the good pleasure of the Queen, . . . his residence will be at Pau . . . and he shall be named the super numeraire following the Queen, as his health and convenience will allow."⁵

Despite the little information that we have on this period of his life, some indications show that Viret very likely played a role of first importance in the establishment and organization of the Reformed Church. His salary was largely above that of a married pastor. He was moderator of four successive synods, even though the regulations stipulated that it was impossible to occupy this post for two consecutive years.

Throughout the course of his life, Viret wrote profusely: about fifty works, some of which are quite voluminous. In the majority of them his constant concern for the edification of the people is apparent. This is why he made abundant use of dialogues. He desired the Word of God and doctrine

to be given the people; hence he encouraged, among others, the translation of the Psalms into Bearnese and that of the New Testament into Basque.

Our purpose is not to worship a man, but only to demonstrate that Pierre Viret is a great forgotten Reformer. Where does he stand on the Reformer's Wall in Geneva? He is mentioned in a base relief on the left side as he who administered the first evangelical baptism at Geneva on February 22, 1534, but he is not placed beside the four great statues of Knox, Farel, Calvin, and Beza. Nevertheless, when Beza speaks of Calvin, Farel, and Viret in his *True Portraits*, he calls them "the elite trivet," and in his Latin verses, he praises "the wisdom of Calvin, the thunders of Farel, and the honey of Viret."⁶

Though Viret sojourned at Geneva and in Bearn, he is above all the Reformer of the city of Lausanne. It was here that he exercised the greatest part of his ministry, and here also that his thought over Church discipline was developed and affirmed. As he himself declared, Viret settled in Lausanne a little before the invasion of the land by the Protestant Bernese army which occurred February–March, 1536.

If, at first, Viret put up with this new sovereign who protected him in the proclamation of the Gospel, tensions were not long in arising because of the dictatorial attitude with which the Bernese sovereign tended to run the newly Reformed Vaudois Church. Various controversies burst forth: over the ecclesiastical goods, predestination, the Lord's Supper, the administration of baptism, the catechism, the instruction manual of the Lausanne Academy—which was no other than Calvin's *Institutes*—and, finally, Church discipline.

Lausanne also became the city in which the tensions between two divergent theologies were focused. The Bernese embodied a Zwinglian ecclesiology, with its concept of a State Church to which its citizens belonged. According to them, it was the magistrate who possessed final authority over the Church. Though Viret and the Lausanne pastors who assisted him adhered to an ecclesiology which we would by anachronism call "Calvinist," it very probably developed in an earlier time, independently of Calvin. It was an ecclesiology which maintained the distinction of the two jurisdictions (that of the Church and State), though both were instituted by God and received their authority from Him.

Bern refused point-blank to grant the pastors the "power" to exercise excommunication upon "scandalous" (notorious or public) sinners, permitting them at most to summon them before the

Consistory, that they might be “duly warned . . . nevertheless we will not hear of the Lord’s Supper being refused them.”⁷

This was not sufficient for the Lausanne pastors—Viret most of all—who maintained that excommunication played an integral part in a Biblical Church discipline. To the very end, they sought to obtain the Biblical means to correct the “scandalous” sinners, twice threatening, in 1558, to postpone the Lord’s Supper if they did not obtain a favorable response to this discussion. This was too much for the Bernese, who suspended the Supper until a new order, and banished Viret, Valier, and Banc, the three pastors of Lausanne. The rest of the Classe joined with the pastors, so much so that all the pastors were incarcerated for two days in the chateau of Lausanne.

This is a dramatic moment for the history of the Lausanne Reformation. This land of asylum having become inhospitable, it appears that six hundred to a thousand French left Lausanne with Viret, some for Geneva (this was the case, among others, with the better professors of the Lausanne Academy), others to return to their own country.

II. The importance of Church discipline for Pierre Viret

Viret’s relentless desire to maintain Church discipline in all its extent reveals the importance he attached to it. For him, this discipline is essential, and no Church worthy of the name can neglect it, for it is impossible that the Word of God and the sacraments be properly administered without it. Church discipline is at the heart of his ecclesiology.

The importance that Viret attached to discipline arises from the fact that he rightly linked it to the preaching of the Word of God and the sacraments, particularly the Lord’s Supper. It was instituted by God; He “who ordained and commanded that the Gospel be preached, and who ordained baptism and the Lord’s Supper, also ordained this discipline.”⁸ Thus, for Viret, the Church could neglect this discipline “if she can neglect the administration and use of the Word of God and the sacraments.”⁹ Discipline is thus the line which couples the two poles of Reformed orthodoxy: doctrinal faithfulness and conformity of life to this doctrine. Viret believed that the Church must be purified both of heretics as well as the lecherous and immoral: “The dogs and swine must be cast out of the assemblies of the Church: those who declare themselves dogs and swine by their life must be treated in the same manner as those who declare themselves such by their doctrine.”¹⁰

By his words Viret testified of his attachment to a well-disciplined confessing Church. He could not tolerate the inclusion into the bosom of this people of a multitude who had made no confession of faith and refused to conform their life to Biblical standards.

From what we have seen, we understand the great importance of Church discipline for Viret. It is practically the third mark of the true Church, unceasingly accompanying the preaching and sacraments. Its importance is placed third, essentially constructive, seeking and consisting of:

1. restoring the erring believer
2. protecting the Church against false teachers
3. preserving God's honor and the purity of the sacrament

Certainly, discipline chastises and excludes the one who will not amend his ways, but its driving force is always love, a love which must change its object according to the reaction to the discipline. First, it is a love which is exercised toward one's neighbor. Then, this love is exercised toward the Church of Jesus Christ to the end that it be not contaminated by error. And, finally, this love is also exercised toward God, whose glory and honor within the bosom of His people must not be tarnished by a rebellious sinner.

In discipline, Viret did not believe that our neighbor must be the sole beneficiary of our love. He is the first, certainly, for if we see him in sin, it is by love and not suspicion that we must go to restore and edify him by the Word of God. If he hardens himself in his sin, however, the love must change its object. It is no more a question of favoring him with love. This rebellious sinner is a "wolf" who risks ravaging the flock. For Viret, to ignore this and remain passive in such a situation is to lack love for the faithful brothers and the Church of God.

Peter: Do you think we act in mercy if, after a wolf has eaten the sheep, we have pity and compassion on him, and save him, that he might eat still others? Nathaniel: It seems to me that this would rather be a great cruelty. For this would be to murder the sheep to save the wolves, and

abuse the mercy which it is fitting to exercise toward the sheep. Peter: . . . there are many who, in matters of justice, employ such love and forgiveness, in tolerating the wicked who deserve punishment, and leaving them to trample the righteous and innocent, instead of punishing them as they ought. The same also oftentimes happens in the Church, when we tolerate far too much the scandalous, and pay no heed to the great damage they bring to the entire Church.”¹¹

Likewise, if the Church tolerates a scandalous sinner within its midst, it scorns the honor of God every time this person approaches the Lord’s Table. Such laxity is not without consequence for the Church who, by her tolerance, finds herself associated with this sinner and his deeds, at the same time placing herself also under God’s judgment.

“For if we do our duty toward such people by removing the evil and setting right the scandals which they do . . . it is certain that we render ourselves guilty of the sins which they have committed and the punishment they merit by them.”¹²

We thus see that if Viret could not neglect Church discipline and excommunication, it was by no means out of a desire for revenge, but out of love:

He loved his sheep and desired to see them grow in obedience to the Word; he therefore did not hesitate to resort to the means that the Lord appointed in Scripture to spur them on.

He loved his flock; therefore he did not hesitate to resort to the means that the Lord appointed in Scripture to protect them.

He loved his Shepherd—the Good Shepherd—therefore he did not hesitate to resort to the means that the Lord appointed in Scripture to glorify and honor Him.

Do we so love our brothers and sisters, our churches and our God, to resort to the divinely appointed means, even if they are painful to employ? Even if they are often laden with consequences for those who employ them?

III. The framework of discipline according to Viret

Upon whom rests the responsibility to exercise Church discipline? Such is the question we shall now attempt to answer in this section.

For Viret, supreme authority resides in God, who delegates it to those whom He has established: the civil magistrates and the ministers of the Gospel. Their functions cannot be lawfully exercised save by submitting, both, to the written Word of God: “. . . when the Law reigns and commands, it is God who reigns and governs, and not man, who is but God’s minister . . .”¹³ However, despite their common divine appointment, their common book of reference, and a complementary and reciprocal relationship which must be exercised between them, Viret did not confuse the civil magistrate and the minister of the Gospel. Their fields of action were distinct: “For the minister of the Church and the office of the magistrates are two charges clearly distinguished by the Word of God. We must not confuse the one with the other, but always distinguish them, as the Lord who ordained them distinguishes them.”¹⁴

The interpretation of Scripture and the exercise of Church discipline is given to the ministers of the Gospel, whereas the establishment of laws is attributed to the magistrates. It is thus within the Church that the practice of Church discipline finds its application. Such being the case, we must turn our attention to this Church to discover its structure.

Viret distinguished between what he called the true Church—that is, the Church universal—and the local manifestations of the people of God. The Church universal, known by God alone, is the believing people throughout all time. Man is incorporated into it by the regeneration God works in the heart. Thus, membership into this Church depends upon God alone, who alone knows the hearts. But, here below in time, this Church universal is revealed in the form of local churches. Each is imperfect, for the acceptance of a new member into its midst does not pass judgment upon the heart, but only upon visible and fallible requirements: confession of faith and growing conformity of life unto the Word of God.

There is thus a mixture within the local church, but the Church cannot long bear the responsibility of allowing the true nature of the sinner to remain hidden. It is the work of the preaching of the Word, coupled with a right exercise of discipline, which brings this hypocrisy to light and causes the assembly of the people of God to grow in holiness.

But within this Church not all possess the same function. The responsibility to exercise discipline resides in the ministers and elders, their decisions being ratified by the Church. In referring to the New Testament, Viret recognized that these different terms described one and the same function, which we currently designate by the term pastor. In the person of the pastor is thus found collected an important number of distinct functions described by the New Testament. At the time of his consecration, the pastor receives from the Church—who received it from the Lord—an authority of office, the power to accomplish his ministry. Thus pastors “must never allocate to themselves any power or authority the church has not, and cannot, give them. And the Church cannot give them any more than what she has received from her Bridegroom and Head, upon whom she wholly depends.”¹⁵

By this means Viret established a double action which seeks to prevent every form of deadly tyranny. The minister possesses authority over the Church, but he receives it from the Church, herself having received it from Christ. If such is the case, no man, not even the pastor, possesses such an authority as to exempt him from submission to Church discipline. This is why Viret advocated a sort of self-supervision among the pastors.

The minister is thus a servant consecrated by the Church and employed by God within her. He summarizes his task thus: “The complete charge of ministers of the Church consists in naught but prayers, teaching, the administration of sacraments, and Church discipline.”¹⁶

Although these four tasks form an indissoluble whole, the brevity of this article constrains us to limit ourselves to the teaching of doctrine and Church discipline. As we have already seen, the two are closely linked. Very often, moreover, private teaching administered by the pastor in the home of the parishioner is intertwined with the first steps of Church discipline. For he must teach “by pure doctrine, [but also] by exhortations and admonitions taken from the Word of God, and sometimes by correction and rebuke, when occasion requires it.”¹⁷

In order to sustain pastors in their disciplinary task, Viret added to them what he called elders. These were men whose mission was “to aid and maintain the discipline of the Church, without concerning themselves with preaching.”¹⁸ These were members of the Consistory, chosen for their wisdom and virtue, very often men holding a public office.

Composed of pastors and laymen, the consistory’s purpose was to prevent the tyranny of the pastor over his Church, and to be representatives of the Church community. For

it is good that there also be other people of the Church, who be joined with them to recognize that the Church, concerning the power and discipline which Jesus Christ has given it, . . . is not a monarchy, or some other temporal lordship, in which certain rulers are all-powerful: but is a free community which is therefore called the communion of the saints, to which Jesus Christ has given in general—and not to any one in particular—all power and authority, to be used for edification, and not for destruction.¹⁹

IV. The practice of discipline

It must not be thought that, before the establishment of the Reformation, excommunication was nonexistent. It was practiced, albeit badly. Thus, in his *Exposition familière sur le Symbole des apôtres*, Viret denounced an abusive use of excommunication: “How can the bishops and priests excommunicate snakes, worms, mice, leeches, eels, and other such beasts?”²⁰ It is within such a context that he was compelled to work to reestablish a sound Church discipline. But of what does this truly consist?

Before broaching the different stages of this discipline, it is useful to note that Viret distinguished between different “types” of sin. There are sins committed knowingly and those which result from the ignorance of those who practice them. There are scandalous and public sins which necessitate a swift and public intervention. But there are also secret sins which we must entrust to the Spirit of God who applies the Word to the heart of the believer. This allows us to understand that Viret did not envisage discipline as a simple rigid and uniform code of laws, in which a sanction against every sinner is found. No, what counted above all was not punishment, but seeing the sinner repent and return from his wicked way. We must then be watchful to make use of the most favorable means to produce this result.

We come now to the “levels” of the disciplinary system we believe to have discovered within Viret’s writings. It is composed of six stages which we will treat successively even though, in the practice and function of the nature of the offence, it is possible to omit some of them.

1.) *Personal discipline*

Viret believed in the importance of public preaching in the process of sanctification. This is why, in his preaching, he never limited himself to the mere exposition of Scripture, but he also applied it to the specific needs of his listeners. He did not hesitate to join the Law to the Gospel, for “[the ministers] must begin the proceedings of every man by their preaching, showing by the Gospel the

salvation offered them in Jesus Christ. This is what I literally call binding and loosing, pardoning and retaining sins . . .”²¹

When the Word of God is faithfully preached, the minister exercises the first stage of discipline. When he faithfully proclaims the Law-Gospel, he binds and looses, opens and closes access to the kingdom of God to his listeners, according to the work that the Spirit accomplishes in their hearts. This first stage is hidden, characterized by the internal personal struggle to resist affections contrary to the will of God, a will expressed by the preaching of the Word.

2.) Private admonition

Private admonition is joined to what we earlier called “private preaching.” It might happen that, during a visit, the pastor discovers a sin within his faithful. At this moment, it is his duty to resort to exhortations and admonitions to convict his listener of sin. But this must be done “out of zeal for the glory of God, and out of the kindness and love he bears toward the sinner, to remove him from his sin and restore him to God; he does well if in doing this he exposes his sin, and names it by name, without dressing it up . . .”²²

On the pastor resides this weighty responsibility to discern the nature of sin, to explain the Word and, if necessary, to address a more or less firm rebuke by way of remedy to the person in question.

In the event that the faithful respond obediently to the exhortation, the discipline can end there; if not, it must follow its course and proceed to stage three.

3.) Admonition with two or three witnesses

With this stage we arrive at a point of Viret’s disciplinary practice which remains obscure. He speaks of it several times in supporting the text of Matthew 18:15-16, but no biography of the Reformer alludes to the practice of a visit of several people to the home of the disciplined.

This being the case, could it be that the Consistory played this role of “two or three witnesses”? This appears improbable for, as we have seen, it is by definition a representation of the Church body.

Faced with this obscurity, we must not fail instead to advance the hypothesis that Viret, tormented and occupied with the numerous scandalous sinners he had to regain, never had the occasion to practice this stage of discipline, though it was well present in his spirit.

4.) The Consistory

It is before the Consistory that every person who continues in his rebellion must be summoned. By its representative office of the Church, only those presumed wisest were permitted to offer a ruling on the case and impose the punishment suitable for each situation.

When the admonition of the Consistory bore its fruits, another advantage is discerned: that of not having to unnecessarily reveal this sin to all. If, on the other hand, the sinner persisted in his lack of repentance and an excommunication must be pronounced, it was the duty and jurisdiction of the Consistory to do so. But, in this particular occurrence, Viret on several occasions counseled the confirmation and approval of this decision by the assembled Church.

5.) Excommunication

In practice, how did Viret conceive excommunication? The Vaudois Reformer left abundant writing on the subject.

Let us recall, first of all, the profoundly spiritual nature of this punishment. It is a visible sign of an invisible judgment and cutting off. It was a portrayal within the local church of what occurred in the spiritual realm of the invisible Church if the sinner persevered in his way. Thus, to be excommunicated from the local Church is to be rejected from the kingdom of God as long as an attitude of Christian repentance does not arise to prove the contrary. For

excommunication is not a vain ceremony, . . . but a sure witness of God, which He has ordained to make known and declare who are to be taken as members of His Church, or to be taken as corrupt, cut off, rejected members of it, and consequently of the kingdom of heaven, to which none can enter if they be not first a true member of the Church.²³

The end of this quotation recalls an oft-forgotten teaching of the Reformers: outside the Church there is no salvation. This does not mean that the Reformers ascribed to the Church a work which can come from God alone—that is, the work of salvation in the heart. But the Church, without having this regenerative power, nevertheless remains the earthly representation of the invisible people of God; thus that which is cut off from the local church because of sin cannot claim to be in communion with Jesus Christ, the Church's Bridegroom.

We now understand why Viret could make an equivalence of sense between the terms excommunicate, bind, and deliver to Satan. For him, to deliver to Satan clearly conveys what the first expression so plainly demonstrates: a rejection into the kingdom of the devil.

“St. Paul used this manner of speaking—delivering to Satan—for excommunication, that all might better understand the state of the excommunicated, and how this ecclesiastical censure and correction is to be feared when it is lawfully exercised according to the Word of God.”²⁴

Because excommunication is such a grave matter, Viret took particular care to repeatedly expose its consequences in detail to those who risked incurring it upon themselves. As a last resort, these people were publicly named during three successive Sunday worship services to the end that, awakened by its gravity, they might yet return to God.

But if, despite all these attempts, they continued in their rebellion, the declaration of excommunication was made.

By the care, patience, and wisdom of Viret, we see that excommunication was by no means a hasty rejection to rid oneself of an embarrassing person. The desired goal is first to restore the brother. This is why broaching the question of Church discipline while omitting to speak of reconciliation is to forget its essential part.

6.) Reconciliation

For Viret, reconciliation with Jesus Christ was inevitably bound to reconciliation with His Church. “For we cannot have reconciliation with Jesus Christ her Head if we do not also have it with her [the Church]. For He cannot be divided or separated from her, nor her from Him. But just as Jesus Christ her Bridegroom is forgiving, so also she is forgiving toward her children, . . .”²⁵

Thus, even as the Church has the duty to excommunicate, so she must also welcome back those who display the fruits of a sincere repentance. The spiritual door of reconciliation is to be received by Christ into His kingdom. Just as with excommunication, it is not the Church who possesses the power, in herself, to grant salvation. Nevertheless, if she rests upon the Biblical requirements to discern the reality of the repentance of the excommunicated, her task is effective, for she acts with the authority delegated her by Christ.

Just as with excommunication, reconciliation must not be done in haste. Viret emphasized time as a determining factor to test the sincerity of the repentant. He even recommended at times attaching

a “punishment” (a work—not meritorious, but reparational) to repentance to allow the entire Church to discern the new direction of the repentant sinner. In the occasion that these conditions were met, reconciliation could occur. This, however, was not a matter of a quiet reintegration into the bosom of the people of God. It must be just as solemn as the ceremony of excommunication. As much as possible, Viret recommended doing this on a day in which the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated, to reinforce the symbol.

It is with this magnificent ceremony to the Spirit that the Church must courageously envisage exercising Church discipline, counting on the faithfulness of God toward His elect.

V. The practice of discipline in an age of tolerance

Can the twentieth-century Church gain anything from Viret? We believe so. As this article is not the place for a detailed analysis of Viret’s thought, we must set aside the rest and finish by inciting some reflections upon the subject which has engaged us.

A) A true love

The current situation of the Church is very often that of sentimentalism and laxity. In making tolerance and man’s “liberty” the rule of all things, we have come to denigrate—indeed, condemn—Church discipline and those who practice it. In the name of this type of love, we prefer to keep the gangrenous member within the body, at the risk of endangering the entire body.

But what would you say to a love shown you by a doctor who refused to amputate your gangrenous arm because of the fondness he had for this diseased member? We believe that the present difficulty of practicing Church discipline finds its roots, in a large measure, in a lack of love for the Church of Jesus Christ and the God who saved her. Thus the renewed practice of Church discipline proceeds from a rediscovery of the character and attributes of God. He is the thrice holy, perfectly just, immutable God, intolerant toward sin and the rebellious sinner, but offering grace to all those who come to Him in Christ.

In His grace this holy, just, and good God who saved us does not leave us alone. He joins us together in churches, thus affording us the means of grace necessary for our growth and conformity into the image of His Son. And one of these means is that of Church discipline.

We learn to have a profound brotherly communion within the Church—a communion which is revealed by a true love, from which exclusion is a genuine deprivation—having a love which dares

to recover the brother in sin for, in the light of Matthew 18:15, the first stages of Church discipline must not be the prerogative of pastors alone.

B) An accurate use of the Word of God

Within the Church today an increasing doubt exists over the ability of the Word of God to accomplish the work of God. Public preaching is shortened, private preaching is tainted by psychology, and the Bible is scarcely opened.

Nevertheless, as the apostle Paul taught Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16-17), the Bible is the instrument perfectly adapted to the pastoral task. If it was sufficient to perfectly equip this young servant of God in a dysfunctional Church, is it not so for us today?

This Word of God works the work of God, both in the formative discipline of the personal response to the preaching and in the preventative and medicinal discipline which can lead to excommunication. We have no fear and no doubt.

We must courageously preach both the Law and the Gospel, for without conviction of sin, there is no Gospel.

We must study the Truth, that we might utilize it with precision in the particular cases we will be confronted with during private conversations.

It is by a healthy use of this Word that we show whether we truly love the sheep of our flock.

C) An accurate understanding of authority

Today, in matters of authority, two tendencies divide us: clericalism, with a class of virtually untouchable pastors, and anti-clericalism, with its search for the abolition of all differences and offices.

By his position on discipline, Viret guards against authoritarian clericalism by emphasizing that every man is a sinner and that none among them, not even the pastor, can pretend to be above a proper use of Church discipline. Discipline is not the “weapon of the pastor” with which he

destroys his personal enemies. When he is convicted of sin, he himself must also submit to this discipline, and the Church as a body must remember that it has the duty to call back their pastor when he has lost his way—indeed, to excommunicate him if he persists in his sin.

On the other hand, Viret never allows us to believe that preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and Church discipline can be practiced by any member of the Church whatsoever. These are inseparable acts, the responsibility and administration of which has been confided to those whom God has given as teaching pastors to His Church (Ephesians 4:11).

Conclusion

Thanks to Pierre Viret, we have discovered that Church discipline is not a trivial practice in the life of the Church which she can easily neglect. It is thus essential that we become aware of its importance if we desire our churches to remain true Churches.

But the practice of Biblical discipline is not without risk. Viret was banished from his country for this very reason. Nevertheless he preferred banishment to surrender, for he understood that he went for the honor of his Lord and the survival of the Church of Jesus Christ. Currently, the risks are different, but the question remains the same: shall we prefer our comfort, our pastoral position, the image of the pastor who “knows what’s what,” to faithfulness to Biblical teaching? May the Lord by His grace allow us to make the right choice, no matter the cost.

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Footnotes:

- [1] Pierre Viret, *Disputation Chretiennes* . . . (Geneva, 1544), preface, 7-9
- [2] Cited in Philippe Godet, *Pierre Viret*, 65-66
- [3] Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Lausanne, 1911), 237
- [4] Verdheiden, *Praestantium aligot theologorum effigies*, cited in J. Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Réformateur Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), 129
- [5] L. Latourette, "Les dernières années de Pierre Viret (1567-1571)," *Revue de Theologie et de Philosophie* (Lausanne, 1938), 60-68
- [6] Cited in Godet, *Pierre Viret*, 81
- [7] Ibid. 63
- [8] Pierre Viret, *De la vertu et usage de ministère de la Parole de Dieu et des sacrements dépendants d'icelle* (Geneva, 1548), 337
- [9] Pierre Viret, *Instruction chrestienne en la doctrine de la loi et de l'Evangile . . . , Tome I* (Geneva, 1564), 91
- [10] Ibid. 81
- [11] Ibid., *Tome II*, Ibid., 577-578
- [12] Viret, *De la vertu et usage de ministère de la Parole de Dieu*, 331
- [13] Pierre Viret, *De l'Estat de la conférence, de l'autoritié, puissance . . .* (Lyons, 1565), 57-58
- [14] Ibid., 129
- [15] Ibid. 71-72
- [16] Ibid., 131
- [17] Pierre Viret, *De vray ministère de la vraye Eglise de Jésus-Christ . . .* (Geneva, 1560), 6
- [18] Pierre Viret, *Des actes des vrais successeurs de Jésus-Christ et de ses apôtres . . .* (Geneva, 1554), 254
- [19] Viret, *Instruction chrestienne, Tome I*, 85-86
- [20] Pierre Viret, *Exposition familière sur le Symbole des apôtres . . .* (Geneva, 1544, 1560), 333
- [21] Ibid., 416-417
- [22] Pierre Viret, *Réponse aux questions proposées par Jean Ropitel . . .* (Geneva, 1565), 150
- [23] Viret, *Instruction chrestienne, Tome I*, 88
- [24] Ibid., 74
- [25] Viret, *De l'Estat de la conférence*, 126-127

11. The Smile of the Reformation

BY DOUGLAS WILSON

Pierre Viret, born in 1511, was an apologist, an orator, a humorist, and an economist, and he was far ahead of his time. In addition to all this, he was also a great theologian.

A recent biography of Pierre Viret by Jean-Marc Berthoud is subtitled “A Forgotten Giant of the Reformation,” and that subtitle just about sums it up. We are so used to remembering the *known* giants of the Reformation — the likes of Luther and Calvin — that we sometimes forget they had *peers*.

Geneva’s Stepfather

Viret was a close personal friend to Calvin, and they both owed a significant debt to the same man, William Farel. Farel was the man who had heard that Calvin was passing through Geneva on his way to a quiet life in a library somewhere, and persuaded Calvin to stay there to help with the work of reformation. *Persuaded* is a mild way of putting it — he predicted thunder and ruin if Calvin did not remain — and so it was that William Farel scared Calvin into his prominent place in world history.



Pierre Viret was a native Swiss, but had gone to the University of Paris. He was converted to the Reformed faith while he was there, and fled to his hometown of Orbe to get away from the persecutions that had broken out in Paris. Farel was the man who then called Viret to the ministry, and so it was that he preached his first sermon at the age of 20, in May of 1531. This was five years *before* Calvin was confronted by Farel. Under his preaching ministry at Orbe, Viret had the great privilege of seeing his parents converted and brought into the Reformation.

Just as Calvin was associated with Geneva, so Viret was associated with Lausanne. The Genevan Academy is justly famous, but that academy was actually the stepchild of Viret's earlier work. Viret had founded the first Reformed Academy in Lausanne in 1537. That academy grew and flourished there, and in its heyday had about a thousand students. Some of its former students went on to write the Heidelberg Catechism (Ursinus and Olevianus) and the Belgic Confession (de Bres). And Theodore Beza was the principal there.

Bridges Berned

But Viret was up against a similar challenge as that which faced Calvin — the issue of state-controlled church discipline. Because Lausanne was under the city of Bern’s authority, and because the civil authorities there would not permit church discipline apart from their review and permission, the result was continued moral corruption.

For one glaring example, one man was running a prostitution ring out of his mother’s home, and Bern prohibited withholding the Lord’s Supper from him. According to biographer Jean-Marc Berthoud, “In his polemical writings Viret was often to declare that the Bernese Pope in short frock (the absolute State) was a far worse enemy for the faith than the old Pope of Rome in his long gown” (*Pierre Viret*, 35).

After many appeals, Viret decided that he simply needed to draw the line. He had the local authorities postpone a communion service so that he could examine and instruct those coming to partake. When the lords of Bern heard about this, they were outraged and demanded that Viret be sacked, which he then was. Viret then went to Geneva — and the entire faculty resigned in protest. As a result, a few months later, the academy in Geneva was formed. In effect, the Lausanne Academy relocated — and a cloud of blessing with it.

A Reformer with a Grin

Farel, mentioned earlier, was fully orthodox, but it must be acknowledged that his head was kind of on fire. Viret, by contrast, was much more even-keeled. Although Viret was an effective polemicist, and by no means an ecclesiastical pacifist, by the time he died in 1571 he earned the sobriquet “The Smile of the Reformation.”

Viret knew how to be combative, but he was also entirely winsome. May his tribe return, and increase.

12. Pierre Viret Association USA

<http://www.pierreviret.org/index.php>

12.1 Bio

A. Who is Pierre Viret?

Share6

Pierre Viret (vee-RAY) was a Sixteenth Century Reformer, son of Guillaume Viret, a tailor of Orbe, a small city in present-day French Switzerland. Viret, born in 1511, was two years younger than John Calvin, and one of the great Reformer's closest friends. These two men worked closely together for many years in Geneva and corresponded regularly when Viret left Geneva to accept a pastorate at Lausanne.

While a pastor at Lausanne, Viret founded a Reformed Academy, the first of its kind in French Switzerland. At a time when Reformed pastors were virtually non-existent, the Academy played a major role in filling the pastoral void by training and equipping young men to carry on the work of the Reformation. Under Viret's direction the Academy flourished for twenty-two years, turning out thousands of pastors, missionaries, and martyrs. In early 1559, however, trouble with the Bernese lords forced the Lausanne Academy to relocate to Geneva. Within that city the relocated professors and students of Viret's Academy soon became Calvin's famous Geneva Academy, which he founded in June of 1559.

After his banishment from Lausanne, Viret worked alongside Calvin in Geneva until 1561. He then, at the advice of his doctors, sought a healthier climate in southern France. Thus began his missionary journeys.

Viret traveled first to Lyon, then to Nimes, where he spent a year strengthening the persecuted Church. He then returned to Lyon, where he remained four years. His preaching was eagerly attended wherever he went, and he often spoke to crowds of thousands. In 1565 Viret was banished from France, and fled to Bearn in Navarre. Jeanne d'Albret then appointed him superintendent at the Academy at Orthez, where he remained until his death in 1571.

Viret's life was by no means a tranquil one. He was critically wounded by a Catholic priest in the early years of his ministry, and in 1535 was served a bowl of poisoned spinach soup at Geneva.

Though he recovered from the attempted murder, the poison ruined his health, and he suffered greatly the rest of his life.

Though a large portion of Viret's time was consumed with his preaching, letter writing, and managing the Lausanne Academy, he still found time to publish. He authored over fifty books, including his three volume work entitled *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel*.

B. Pierre Viret Timeline 1511-1571

Shares

1511

Pierre Viret born in Orbe, Switzerland, in the canton of Vaud.

1512

Guillaume Farel commences his studies at Paris.¹

1527

Viret enters Paris and commences studies for the priesthood at Montaigu College.

1527-1530

Viret is converted to the Protestant Faith.²

1528

Bern officially adopts the Reformation.³

1530

Guillaume Farel commences preaching in Orbe, but is violently driven out of the city by the Catholic opposition.⁴

1531

Having renounced Roman Catholicism, Viret flees Paris and returns to Orbe.

Guillaume Farel persuades Viret to begin preaching.

May 6, Viret, twenty years old, becomes pastor and preaches his first sermon at hometown Orbe.⁵

Viret administers his first Christian baptism in Orbe.

October, Death of Zwingli.

1532

Viret officiates at his first Christian wedding in Orbe.

Viret journeys to Grandson to carry the Reformation to that village.

June 4, Viret travels to Payerne to preach. He is forbidden access to the churches, and preaches instead in the taverns.

Passover, March 31, Viret offers communion to seventy-seven believers, including both Viret's parents.⁶

1533

While returning home one evening Viret is stabbed by a Catholic priest in Payerne.⁷

January, Viret accepts a pastoral call to Neuchatel.

1534

January 4, Viret, by order of the Council of Bern, joins Farel in Geneva.⁸

January 29, Dispute of Geneva in which Guy Furbity opposed Farel and Viret.⁹

February 22, Viret preaches and performs a Christian baptism in the house of Monsieur de Baudichon. His sermons were so well attended that there was not room enough in the hall to receive the people.¹⁰

March 1, Bernese authorities give Farel and Viret the Church at Rive in which to preach the Reformation.¹¹

March, Viret returns to his pastorate in Neuchatel, but is soon recalled to Geneva to aid Farel.¹²

October 17-18, The Affair in Paris.¹³

1535

March 6, Viret poisoned by Antonia Vax at Geneva while working with Farel and Antoine Froment. Viret would be unable to resume an active role in the ministry until August.

May 30, Commencement of the Geneva Disputation.^{[14](#)}

June 4, Publication of the first French Bible of the Reformation, translated by Pierre Robert, called Olivetan.^{[15](#)}

July 14, Execution of Antonia Vax.^{[16](#)}

August 10, Mass abolished in Geneva.^{[17](#)}

September 10, Viret journeys to Bern, and from thence to Basel on November 15, where he met John Calvin.^{[18](#)}

December 29, Bern renounces its alliance with the Duke of Savoy.^{[19](#)}

1536

January 16, Bern declares war on the Duke of Savoy.^{[20](#)}

February, Viret returns to his pastoral ministry at Neuchatel.

Viret preaches in Yverdon.^{[21](#)}

Bernese army takes control of the canton of Vaud.

Late February, Viret becomes minister in Lausanne.^{[22](#)}

March 6, City Council of Lausanne grants full liberty of conscience to those desiring to attend Viret's preaching.^{[23](#)}

April 6, The Church of the Madeleine is provided to the Reformers for preaching in Lausanne.^{[24](#)}

May 21, General Council of Geneva accepts the Reformation.^{[25](#)}

June 7-8, Viret resides over the synod of Reformed pastors in Yverdon.

June 13, Viret travels to Geneva to assist as peacemaker. The beginning of July he requests permission to return to Lausanne, but the Genevan Council refuse, stating that Viret is needed "much more here than there."^{[26](#)}

July, Viret witnesses Farel's threatening call to Calvin to remain in Geneva.^{[27](#)}

October 1-10, Viret and Farel defend the Reformed Faith in the Lausanne Disputation; Calvin also attended, though taking only a minor role.^{[28](#)}

Mid-October, At the close of the Lausanne Disputation two Catholic delegates persuade Viret to return to Cully with them to bring the good tidings of the Reformation to that village. ²⁹

October 19, The Protestant Faith is recognized as the official religion of Lausanne. ³⁰

November 5, Pierre Caroli and Pierre Viret are named pastors of the Reformed Church of Lausanne. ³¹

December 6, Bernese authorities command all subjects within their territory to attend Protestant preaching. ³²

1537

Early January, Viret founds the Reformed Academy in Lausanne at the Cathedral.

January 16, Calvin and Farel present *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva* to Genevan Council.

May 13, In a synod called for the occasion, Viret, Farel, and Calvin defend themselves against the charge of Arianism raised by Pierre Caroli, a double-dealing Roman Catholic.

May 31-June 5, Caroli is called before the Lords of Berne and peremptorily banished. ³³

1538

April 23, Calvin, Farel, and Corault are banished from Geneva. ³⁴

May, Viret and Ritter travel to Geneva as mediators between the banished pastors and the Council, but are barred access to the city. ³⁵

Sunday, October 6, Viret and Elisabeth Turtaz, a lady of Orbe, are married by Guillaume Farel. ³⁶

1539

April 6 (Passover), Viret enters Geneva and preaches, making great strides toward reconciliation between the Genevese and the exiled pastors. ³⁷

July 17, Pierre Viret and André Zébédée journey to Bern to plead the cause of the persecuted Vaudois of Provence. ³⁸

1540

October 30, The Lords of Berne open a scholarship house to augment the number of students able to attend Viret's Lausanne Academy. ³⁹

December 31, Viret called from Lausanne to preach in Geneva. ⁴⁰

1541

January 10, Viret arrives in Geneva. ⁴¹

February 28, Viret urges Council to write to call exiled Calvin back to Geneva. ⁴²

May 1, General Council of Geneva recalls Calvin. ⁴³

September 13, Viret assists Calvin on his return to Geneva.

September 29, Viret is chosen to travel to Neuchatel to act as mediator between Farel and the Council in their conflict. ⁴⁴

October 15, Viret returns to Geneva. ⁴⁵

December, Calvin begs the Lords of Bern to allow Viret to stay another six months in Geneva before returning to Lausanne. The Bernese accede to Calvin's request. ⁴⁶

1542

July 8, An ambassador from Lausanne arrives in Geneva to reclaim Viret, who had been on loan to the Genevese for eighteen months. ⁴⁷

July 15, Viret resumes his pastorate at Lausanne. ⁴⁸

Fall, Plague breaks out in Lausanne. ⁴⁹

1543

Spring, Farel is accused of heresy by the Roman Catholic Pierre Caroli. Calvin and Viret jointly publish a work in Farel's defense. ⁵⁰

June 16, Viret journeys to Geneva to ask the Genevan Council to allow Calvin to travel to Strasbourg to aid Farel in his defense against Caroli. Geneva accedes to the request, and Viret accompanies Calvin as far as Bern. ⁵¹

October 30, Viret attends the Synod of Neuchatel. ⁵²

1544

March 24, Viret's book *Christian Disputations in the Form of Dialogues* comes to print, with an introduction by Calvin.⁵³

Viret and family receive new lodgings in Lausanne. They are moved from the Convent of St. Francis to a house.⁵⁴

April 29, Calvin sends to Bern asking for permission to borrow Viret for six months to aid him in Geneva. Bern grants the request, but Lausanne refuses to loan Viret out because of the "perils and dangers Viret's absence would cause" in their Church.⁵⁵

August, Viret is moved from the Covent of St. Francis to the house of one of the old Cathedral canons.⁵⁶

September, The plague breaks out in Geneva.

1545

February 3, Viret writes to Calvin of his overwhelming workload in Lausanne, "I'm preaching every day."⁵⁷ He was also lecturing at the Academy.

Spring, Calvin travels to German Switzerland to raise support for the persecuted Vaudois. Viret fills Calvin's place in Geneva during the Reformer's absence.⁵⁸

Summer, Viret and Farel travel to Bern, Basel, and Strasbourg to again plead the cause of the persecuted Vaudois of Piemont.⁵⁹

July 28, Concerned at his wife's failing health, Viret writes to Calvin that he longs to run over to Geneva to consult their mutual friend, Doctor Benoit Textor.⁶⁰

November 26, Viret, writing to a friend, expresses his fear that Elisabeth's illness will be fatal.⁶¹

1546

January 29, Viret is hastily summoned to Neuchatel, where his presence was direly needed to smooth over certain ministerial problems.⁶²

March, Viret is requested to travel to Thonon on a mission for the citizens of Neuchatel, but his wife Elisabeth's health kept him in Lausanne.⁶³ Shortly thereafter his wife died (March 8).⁶⁴

March 20, After much strong pleading from Calvin, Viret journeys to Geneva to spend a few days with his dear friend after Elisabeth's death.⁶⁵

Viret is called to Geneva to mediate in two separate conflicts involving Calvin and certain dissenters.⁶⁶

November, After matchmaker Calvin arranges the match, Viret marries Sebastienne de la Harpe. Calvin assists at the wedding.⁶⁷

1547

January, Viret, whose pastoral duties required more and more of his time, was unable to retain his position at the Lausanne Academy. Bern named Andre Zébédée as Viret's successor, though Viret continued to teach at the Academy until 1558.⁶⁸

March 31, Death of Francis I, king of France. His son Henri II is crowned king. Under Henri's reign Huguenot persecution dramatically increased.⁶⁹

1548

May 4, Viret, Farel, Valier, and Ribit present themselves before the Counsel of Bern to defend their interpretation of the Lord's Supper.⁷⁰

Calvin's wife, Idelette, visits Viret's wife at Lausanne to assist in the birth of Viret's child.⁷¹

July, Viret publishes his tome, *De la vertu et usage du ministere de la parole de Dieu et des Sacremens dependans d'icelle*, a volume of over 750 pages, in which Viret delineates the state of the Church, touching, among other things, upon moral corruption, profanation of the Lord's Supper, and lack of discipline.⁷²

November, Viret is delegated by the Classe de Lausanne to carry a letter to Bern asking for a general synod to discuss the reformation of worship and morals.⁷³

1549

March 31, Viret writes to Calvin expressing his sorrow at Calvin's bereavement.⁷⁴

May 20-25, The pastors of the Pays de Vaud hold their general synod at Bern, in which Viret defends his interpretation of the Lord's Supper against the troublemaker Andre Zébédée.⁷⁵

September 2, Bern forbids the Reformed pastors of the Pays de Vaud to hold any further colloquies.⁷⁶

October 31, Headed by Viret, the pastors of Lausanne send a delegation to Bern to voice their protests of the September ban of colloquies.⁷⁷

November 6, Theodore de Beze appointed by Viret second professor of theology at Lausanne Academy.⁷⁸

November 9, After Viret appeared before the Bernese magistrates a second time concerning the issue of colloquies, the magistrates reiterate their conclusion of September and warn Viret not to press the matter further.⁷⁹

Viret attends the Geneva Colloquy with Calvin and Farel.⁸⁰

1550

Martha Viret is born. Calvin is named godfather of the child.⁸¹

June, Theodore de Beze and Raymond Merlin travel to Bern to discuss the weekly colloquies and church discipline. They receive a cold reception from the Lords of Bern and are granted nothing.⁸²

November 8, Viret and Jacques Valier present the Council of Sixty (of Lausanne) with the necessity of addressing the decadent state of the Church. The Council agrees, and Viret and Valier compose a report detailing the current morals of the Church.

December 4, Viret and Valier present their report to the Council of Lausanne, asking for reform, but receive nothing.⁸³

1551

April, The plague breaks out in Lausanne.

May 24, Viret and Valier appear before the Council of Two Hundred (of Lausanne) to ask for reform and aid, but receive no satisfaction.⁸⁴

Late May, Having exhausted every means of reform in Lausanne, Viret journeys to Bern to ask for aid in reforming the morals of the Church. The Bernese magistrates promise to send a deputation to Lausanne to look into the matter.⁸⁵

September, Bern orders the Vaudois churches to replace Calvin's catechism with that of Nicolas Zurkinden.⁸⁶

October, The Bern deputation promised in May finally arrives in Lausanne.⁸⁷

October 21, Prompted by the Bern deputation, the Council of Two Hundred appoint François Vitalis as deacon to aid Viret in ministering to the plague victims.⁸⁸

1552

February 23, The Bernese magistrates inform the Lausanne pastors of their impatience at the pastors' tardiness in replacing their catechism with Zurkinden's. They again order obedience, under pain of dismissal and banishment.⁸⁹

September, Viret travels to Geneva to defend Calvin against the false charge making God the author of evil.⁹⁰

November, Viret journeys to Bern to plead the ministers' case against the change of catechism. Bern listens politely but refuses to alter its decision.⁹¹

1553

March, The Reformation is established in Oulens. Viret asks Bern to allow a send a pastor to the town; Bern acquiesces, and grants Viret the honor of naming the man.⁹²

March 26, Raymon Merlin is appointed as Reformed preacher at Oulens.

March 28, Viret visits the newly-established Reformed Church in Oulens.⁹³

May 16, Five Frenchman, educated at Viret's Lausanne Academy, return home to preach the Gospel, are arrested at Lyons, and burned.⁹⁴

Viret publishes his work *Du devoir et du besoin qu'ont les hommes à s'enquérir de la volonté de Dieu par sa Parolle et de l'attente et finale résolution du vrai concile*.⁹⁵

August, Bern sends pastor Jean Haller, treasurer Hans Steiger, and Jérôme Manuel to the Pays de Vaud to insure the obedience of their orders regarding Zurkinden's catechism.⁹⁶

November 27, Viret travels to his hometown Orbe to meet with and encourage the faithful. Though the town is Catholic, the majority had been won to the Reformation, and Viret seeks to persuade the Council to put the religious issue to a vote.⁹⁷

1554

April 9, After months of delays, deputies from Bern and Fribourg meet to discuss the religious issue of Orbe. It is decided to put the matter to a public vote.^{[98](#)}

July 29, Delegates from Fribourg and Bern arrive in Orbe to oversee the public vote. Viret is unable to attend due to a high fever.^{[99](#)}

July 30, Mass abolished in Orbe, Viret's hometown.^{[100](#)}

Bern forbids throughout its territories the printing of any books dealing with predestination.^{[101](#)}

1555

March 13, Bern commands Lausanne to cease all disputes and discussions concerning predestination.^{[102](#)}

May, Viret and Theodore de Beze journey to Bern to plead before the Senate Calvin's cause in the dispute on predestination.^{[103](#)}

December 30, Bern writes to Viret, asking him to travel and preach throughout their towns newly won to the Reformation.^{[104](#)}

1556

Pierre, Viret's only son by his second marriage, dies at age 2.^{[105](#)}

Viret preaches at Chateau-d'Œx.^{[106](#)}

1557

Viret travels to Bern to discuss with the magistrates the necessity of Church discipline before administering communion.^{[107](#)}

1558

August 15, The Bernese magistrates, annoyed at the conduct of the Pays de Vaud ministers and professors, order a dozen of the men to appear before them in Bern.^{[108](#)}

Theodore de Beze accepts a call to Geneva.^{[109](#)}

Messieurs de Berne demand submission or exile of Viret and other pastors of Lausanne.^{[110](#)}

1559

January 25, Viret expelled from Lausanne by Bernese authorities. Viret and Academy relocate to Geneva, where the Lausanne Academy becomes Calvin's seminary.^{[111](#)}

March 2, Viret appointed preacher at Saint-Germain in Geneva.^{[112](#)}

Viret publishes his book, *Familière et ample instruction en la doctrine chrestienne et principalement touchant la divine Providence et prédestination, faicte en forme de dialogue*.^{[113](#)}

June 5, Calvin's Academy formally inaugurated.^{[114](#)}

December 25, Viret and Calvin become *bourgeois* of Geneva.

1561

April, Viret falls ill, and draws up his last will and testament, preparatory to his death.

September 11, Concerned at Viret's failing health, Dr. Benoit Textor advises Viret to seek a warmer climate in southern France in which to pass the winter. After receiving a leave of absence from the Genevan Council, Viret journeys first to Lyons, then to Nimes on October 6.^{[115](#)}

1562

January 4, Viret administers communion to over eight thousand believers of Nimes.^{[116](#)}

February 2-12, Viret presides over a provincial synod in Nimes.^{[11](#)}

February 15, Viret departs from Nimes to visit Montpellier.

February 18, Viret preaches in the Lodge Church at Montpellier.^{[118](#)}

Viret remains in Montpellier for his health, then accepts a call to Lyons on *May 25*.^{[119](#)}

March 1, Massacre of Huguenots at Vassy by Duc de Guise.

Marie, Viret's youngest child, dies at age 2.^{[120](#)}

1562-1563

First French civil war.

1563

March 15, Viret returns to Geneva to take his final leave of the city.^{[122](#)}

March 19, A Royal edict forbids all foreign-born Reformers from ministering in France. Viret is excepted by request of the Catholics themselves. [123](#)

June 19, The Mass is celebrated in Lyons by Catholic troops. [124](#)

July, Royal authority re-established in Lyons, legalizing Roman Catholicism. [125](#)

August 10, Viret presides as moderator over the 4th national Synod of the Huguenots at Lyons. [126](#)

1564

May 27, Death of Calvin.

The plague breaks out in Lyon.

Viret completes his greatest work, his three-volume *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and the Gospel*.

1565

August 27, Viret ordered by Royal decree to leave France. Flees from Lyon to the protection of William of Nassau in Orange. [127](#)

September 13, Guillaume Farel dies at Neuchatel.

October 4, The Class of Neuchatel begs Viret to accept Farel's vacant position, but Viret declines. [128](#)

1566

Viret is forced to flee Orange. He journeys to Bearn, where Jeanne d'Albret appoints him superintendent of the Church.

1567-1568

Second French civil war.

1568-1570

Third civil war. In 1569 Viret and 11 other ministers are captured by Catholic forces during the war. [129](#) Viret's life is spared. [130](#)

1571

Viret dies near Orthez, and is buried at Nerac.^{[131](#)}

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- ²² Jean-Marc Berthoud, "Pierre Viret and the Sovereignty of the Word of God Over Every Aspect of Life," *A Comprehensive Faith* (Friends of Chalcedon, San Jose, CA), page 95; see also Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Librairie Payot & Cie, Lausanne, 1911), page 41
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⁶⁹ Janet Glenn Gray, *The French Huguenots* (Baker Book House Company, 1981), page 18; Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 380

⁷⁰ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 336

⁷¹ Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*, page 291; Doumergue, *Lausanne au temps de la Reformation*, page 46

⁷² Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, pages 329, 343; Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 183

⁷³ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, pages 342-343

⁷⁴ Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, pages 46-47

⁷⁵ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 346

⁷⁶ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 351; Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground*, pages 171-172

⁷⁷ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 354

⁷⁸ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, page 251; Doumergue, *Lausanne au temps de la Reformation*, page 40; see also Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 114, in which the date given is 1550

⁷⁹ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 357

⁸⁰ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 37

⁸¹ Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Lausanne, 1911), page 102; see also *Pierre Viret, Instruction Chretienne (L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 2008)*, page 32

⁸² Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, pages 361, 363

⁸³ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 363

⁸⁴ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 366

⁸⁵ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 366

⁸⁶ Henri Vuilleumier, *L'Église Réformée du Pays de Vaud, Tome I* (Editions La Concorde, Lausanne, 1927), page 357; Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 369

⁸⁷ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 367

⁸⁸ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 368

⁸⁹ Barnaud, *Pierre Viret*, page 371

- ⁹⁰ Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 114; Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 404
- ⁹¹ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 372
- ⁹² Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 388
- ⁹³ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 389
- ⁹⁴ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, page 251
- ⁹⁵ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 374; Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 186
- ⁹⁶ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 372
- ⁹⁷ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 390
- ⁹⁸ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 392
- ⁹⁹ Pierrefleur, *Memoires de Pierrefleur*, page 210; Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 392
- ¹⁰⁰ Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 110
- ¹⁰¹ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 413
- ¹⁰² Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 417
- ¹⁰³ Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Lausanne, 1911), page 179; Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 415-420
- ¹⁰⁴ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 397
- ¹⁰⁵ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 397, but see also Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, Tome I (*L'Age d'Homme*, Lausanne, 2008), page 32, in which the child's name is given as Jean
- ¹⁰⁶ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 397
- ¹⁰⁷ J. Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), page 118
- ¹⁰⁸ Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 123
- ¹⁰⁹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, page 251
- ¹¹⁰ Berthoud, *A Comprehensive Faith*, page 95
- ¹¹¹ Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 125
- ¹¹² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, page 252; see also Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 39, and Cart, Pierre Viret, *le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 128
- ¹¹³ Barnaud, Pierre Viret, page 421; Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 188

¹¹⁴ Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organiser of Reformed Protestantism* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1906), page 364, and Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, page 28; date is given as March 5 in Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin, A Life* (John Knox Press, Richmond, VA), page 144

¹¹⁵ John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Volume X (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan), page 799; Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, page 29; Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," page 188; Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, pages 131-132

¹¹⁶ Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, page 29

¹¹⁷ J. Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), page 139

¹¹⁸ Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 142

¹¹⁹ McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Volume X, page 799; Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, pages 44-45

¹²⁰ Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, page 32

¹²¹ Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 144

¹²² Viret, *Instruction Chretienne*, page 30; see also Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 50, in which the date given is September 14

¹²³ J. Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois* (Lausanne, 1864), page 147

¹²⁴ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 36

¹²⁵ McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Volume X, page 799

¹²⁶ Jean Barnaud, *Pierre Viret, sa Vie et son Oeuvre* (Saint-Amans, 1911), page 634

¹²⁷ Hagenbach, *History of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland Chiefly*, Volume II, page 318, note

¹²⁸ Cart, *Pierre Viret, le Reformateur Vaudois*, page 150

¹²⁹ McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Volume X, page 799

¹³⁰ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 37

¹³¹ Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 50

C. CALVIN AND VIRET

Share3

Calvin's Love and Dependence on Viret

As you wished, I am settled here; may the Lord overrule it for good. For the present, I must retain Viret also, whom I shall not suffer on any account to be dragged away from me. Do you, besides, and all the brethren, exert yourselves to help me here to the utmost, unless you would have me tortured to no purpose, and made utterly wretched, without having any benefit to be gained by it.

Calvin to Farel, September 16, 1541, quoted in Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, Volume 1 (Philadelphia, 1858), p. 284

I will leave no stone unturned to prevent Viret being taken from me.

Calvin to Bucer, October 15, 1541, quoted in Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, Volume 1 (Philadelphia, 1858), p. 293

. . . should Viret be taken away from me I shall be utterly ruined, and this Church will be past recovery. On this account it is only reasonable that you and others pardon me if I leave no stone unturned to prevent his being carried off from me. In the meantime we must look for supply to the Church of Lausanne, according as shall be appointed by the godly brethren, and by your own advice. Only let Viret remain with me.

Calvin to Farel, November 11, 1541, quoted in Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, Volume 1 (Philadelphia, 1858), p. 307

There appears a brighter prospect for the future if Viret can be left here with me; on which account I am all the more desirous to express to you my most thankful acknowledgment, because you share with me in my anxiety that the Bernese may not call him away; and I earnestly beseech, for the sake of Christ, that you would do your utmost to bring that about; for whenever the thought of his going away presents itself, I faint and lose courage entirely.

Calvin to Oswald Myconius, March 14, 1542, quoted in Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, Volume 1 (Philadelphia, 1858), pp. 313-314

Calvin and Viret: Brethren in Unity

*“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”
—Psalm 133:1*

One of the brightest lights in the history of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century is doubtless the study of the remarkable friendships existing among the Christian Reformers of that era. Calvin, indisputably the most well-known Reformer of our time, was certainly not a solitary figure standing alone against the entrenched forces of Roman Catholicism. When God began to shine the light of His Gospel in the hearts of the Swiss and French people—so long steeped in the darkness of religious error—He raised among them a host of valiant men to press for reform, men who would soon be given the task of shepherding this new flock. Though each man was called individually and fashioned in a particular way quite distinct from the others, God saw fit to bring together these tools, separately fashioned, but all endued with the vision to engage in the same Kingdom work. One of the men thus prepared and brought to the forefront of the Reformation work was the little known Pierre Viret.

Viret, born and raised in present-day Switzerland, was the son of Guillaume Viret, a devout Roman Catholic. After finishing his elementary studies at his hometown Orbe, Viret journeyed to Paris and enrolled at the College de Montaigu where Calvin was also studying. Though both were converted at college, the two men did not meet until several years after the fires of persecution drove them from Paris to begin the work of Reformation on another field.

It is commonly believed that Calvin and Viret met for the first time in Basel in 1535. The two soon became regular correspondents and worked closely together for many years. Viret, together with William Farel, was actively engaged in bringing the Reformation to Geneva, and was present at the providential meeting in 1536 when Farel threatened Calvin with God's judgment unless the man remained in Geneva to continue God's work in that city. The young Calvin also joined Farel and Viret in defending the Reformed Faith at the Lausanne Disputation later that same year. On this Michael Bruening notes,

Three events, in particular, brought Calvin and Viret closely together in a common cause. The first was the Lausanne Disputation and, more importantly, its aftermath. Bern's decision to impose the Reformation on Vaud, along with the opening of the [Lausanne] Academy, made Lausanne the new center for the French-speaking Reformed Church in Vaud and arguably in all of Europe. Lausanne's new prominence demanded a closer working relationship between the city's leading reformer, Viret, and his counterpart in Geneva. Although Viret started his Lausanne ministry under the senior Pierre Caroli, his disputes with the former Sorbonne doctor constituted the second major factor that brought Calvin and Viret together. Defending themselves against accusations of Arianism and blasting Caroli's teaching on the efficacy of prayers for the dead was, to use modern parlance, a "bonding experience." This was particularly true for Calvin and Viret, for although each had already developed a close relationship with Farel, the two had not worked closely together until the Caroli affair.¹

These three friends, Calvin, Farel, and Viret, were to become the foundation upon which the French Reformation would be established. Though each worked in his own God-ordained ministry, the three were often found laboring closely together, and soon earned the name Triumvirate. Some even labeled them the Paul, Peter, and John of the Sixteenth Century Reformation. Calvin, dedicating a book to Farel and Viret, spoke thus of their holy friendship:

"It will at least be a testimony to this present age and perhaps to posterity of the holy bond of friendship that unites us. I think there has never been in ordinary life a circle of friends so heartily bound to each other as we have been in our ministry."²

Viret, together with Farel, continued the spread of the Reformation in Geneva until Calvin was firmly established in that city. Afterward Viret was appointed pastor of the Church of

Lausanne, the capital of the Canton of Vaud. From their separate locations the two men still managed to work closely together, and their friendship deepened over the following years.

As troubles multiplied and trials increased in the tumultuous city of Geneva, Calvin looked more and more to Viret to assist him in his work. Indeed, their friendship had become so deep by the time of Calvin's exile in 1541 that it was Viret to whom the city turned to exert his influence to persuade the recalcitrant Calvin to return to the city. Viret had been called to Geneva after Calvin's banishment, and did his utmost to restore the exiled pastor to his parish. Writing to Calvin, Viret described the transformation of the city, and the people's willingness to receive the reformation. "You cannot imagine," he wrote to Calvin, "the attentiveness with which they listen to my discourses, and what a crowd of men they attract. . . . such tranquility reigns in the republic, it is completely transformed, and has taken on an entirely new appearance. . . . The Lord has offered us a most favorable moment. If you neglect it, Calvin, the Lord will certainly punish you for neglecting the Church, and not you only, but also those who restrain you."³

Calvin, however, was in no way eager to return to the trials and troubles that awaited him at Geneva, and at first rejected Viret's proposal to return, writing to him on May 9, "I had to laugh at that part of the letter where you show yourself so concerned for my health. Would I prosper in Geneva (of all places)? Why not rather be crucified right now? It was more than enough to have perished there once; why would I want to be racked with that torture again? Therefore, my Viret, if you want the best for me, forget about that idea."⁴

Calvin's refusal can be accounted for in part by the confidence he placed in Viret. Calvin's implicit trust in his friend's ability to shepherd the church of Geneva is found in a letter to Farel in February of 1541, "It was a singular joy for me to learn that the Church of Geneva is endowed with the arrival of Viret. . . . I now foresee that the matter is out of danger."⁵ Thus assured of his flock's safety, Calvin had no inclination to return to the fire from which he had been dismissed.

Despite Calvin's well-placed faith in Viret, Viret was not to be dissuaded from calling his friend back to his duty, and exerted his utmost influence upon the city and Council to recall the exiled Reformer. 'Master Pierre Viret,' says the register at the date of the 28th February, 'hath showed that it would be very meet to write again to Master Calvin. Ordered that he be written to.'"⁶

After many such appeals, Calvin was at last persuaded to return to the city, and Viret joyfully assisted him in his reentrance. As Bruening notes, "Viret's presence in Geneva at that time was essential in overcoming Calvin's initial reluctance to return to the city and in assisting him in his reform efforts once he arrived."⁷ Robert Linder also writes, "Calvin later testified that only the fraternal support of Viret during this decisive period made these first months tolerable."⁸

Viret remained in Geneva for some time to aid Calvin in his return and reentrance into the city. The presence of Calvin's brother-at-arms was indispensable to the newly-returned Reformer, as Bruening writes,

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Viret's 1541-1542 stay in Geneva. First of all, Calvin had found the prospect of returning to the city from Strasbourg so abhorrent at first that he likely never would have returned to Geneva if Viret had not been there months beforehand to restore order in the church. Second, Calvin and Viret's friendship deepened during these ten months together in Geneva to the point where Viret clearly replaced Farel as Calvin's closest confidant in the following years. According to the extant record, Viret and Calvin exchanged only fourteen letters between Calvin's exile and his return (1538-1541). During the same period, sixty-five letters survive between Farel and Calvin. In the years following Viret's departure from Geneva in 1542, however, the figures are reversed. From 1542 to 1549, Calvin was in contact with Viret more than twice as often as with Farel.⁹

When Calvin was again settled in Geneva after his banishment, Viret desired to return at once to his pastorate in Lausanne, where his presence was sorely needed, but Calvin would not hear of his leaving. After continual pleadings and much urging, Viret was persuaded to remain for several months in Geneva to aid Calvin. Farel, writing to the pastors of Zurich, noted the importance of Viret's presence in the city of Geneva at that crucial time, "If Viret

is recalled [to Lausanne], then surely Calvin and the Church of Geneva shall fall again into ruins!”¹⁰ Calvin also shared this opinion, as is noted by Bruening,

After a long delay, which necessitated a six-month extension of Viret’s leave of absence [from Lausanne], Calvin finally returned to Geneva in September 1541. Viret had helped to turn the Genevan church around, making it possible for Calvin to set about the task of implementing his reforms immediately upon his arrival. Faced with this daunting task, he insisted that Viret remain at his side to help. Three days after his return, Calvin told Farel, “I have also kept Viret with me, whom I absolutely would not allow to be taken away from me.” Now it was Calvin who sought to persuade Viret that he was needed in Geneva. He explained to Farel, “If Viret leaves me, I am completely finished; I will not be able to keep this church alive. Therefore, I hope you and others will forgive me if I move every stone to ensure that I am not deprived of him.” Calvin is hardly known for emotional outbursts; this language, therefore, indicated how precious a resource he considered his friend during his first months back in Geneva.¹¹

Viret’s ready and selfless assistance of Calvin at one of the most difficult hours of his life was not forgotten by the Reformer. The friendship of these two men expanded significantly during this time, and showed itself in a beautiful brotherly relationship throughout the length of their lives.

Viret returned to Lausanne in July of 1542. His prolonged absence from the city had been disastrous for the Church, which he found in a deplorable condition upon his return. Writing to Calvin of its lamentable state, Viret mourned, “I came, I saw, I was dumbfounded (*veni, vidi, obstupui*). If only what we had heard about the state of this church were not so true.”¹² Calvin, fearful lest Viret perish under the weight of his ecclesiastical troubles, responded to his letter, expressing his concern and begging Viret to take care of himself and keep Calvin apprised of his health and condition, “I confess that I am in fear when I think of you. I beseech you to allow no one to come here without bringing letters from you or something to let me know how you are.”¹³

Despite Lausanne’s manifest need for Viret, Calvin still desired to have his fellow Reformer at his side, and in July of 1544 he urged the Council of Geneva to write to the Bernese lords, requesting permission to permanently retain Viret at Geneva. Upon hearing

of the letter, however, the Lausanne counselors and pastors immediately sent ambassadors to Bern, begging the lords to reject Geneva's request. Meeting with such a desperate appeal from Lausanne, Bern declined to grant the transfer, and ordered Viret to remain in Lausanne. Though refused their request, Viret wrote to Geneva to express his love for the city, assuring them of his devotion and seeking to comfort his Genevan friends, "As for me, if you so desire, you will always have me as your humble servant, no less than if I were present with you, as truly I am in spirit, though I am distant in person; I will also be joined with you in body as soon as it is the good pleasure of Him who has called us in His service."¹⁴

Upon the death of Viret's wife in 1545 an opportunity is afforded us to see Calvin's fondness and affection for his fellow laborer. Hearing of the depths of grief into which Viret had fallen at the loss of his wife, Calvin was terrified lest his friend perish under the weight of the blow. Writing to Viret, Calvin begged him to come to Geneva for a time, assuring him in the most endearing terms that he would take care of everything and see that Viret was not troubled in his grief: "Come to distract yourself," he wrote, "not only from your sorrow, but also from all your troubles. You need not fear that I will impose any work on you. I will take care that you enjoy your own pleasure in tranquility. And if anyone bothers you, I will deal with them."¹⁵

Despite Calvin's touching letter, Viret felt he could not pull himself from his work in Lausanne. Calvin, however, was not to be dissuaded, and wrote again, pleading with Viret to come. This time he went so far as to send a horse to carry Viret to Geneva, in order that Viret might not tire himself on the road. Thus pressed by his dear friend, Viret could refuse no longer, and, leaving Lausanne, he journeyed to Geneva to enjoy the company and consolation of his fellow Reformer.

Throughout the following years Viret was often called to Geneva to mediate in conflicts involving Calvin and certain dissenters. Viret's peacemaking skills were well-known throughout the country, and he was habitually called upon to mediate in quarrels between the brethren. His ability to quiet discord and establish peace was especially beneficial to

Calvin, who frequently employed his close friend in the role of peacemaker throughout his turbulent ministry in Geneva and elsewhere. Writing to Viret of one such quarrel in 1547, Calvin begged Viret's aid, exclaiming, "Those who wish to quiet the affair without tumult hope that you will be the providential peacemaker. The opposing faction themselves want you."¹⁶ Viret, writing to Calvin, assured the man of his devotion and willingness to offer aid in any way possible: "Ah! If I could only take upon myself a share of the tribulations that I know are now tormenting you! . . . If I could be of any service to you, I would not trouble myself at all with the displeasure of men if only my little aid would be to your advantage."¹⁷

Not only discord, however, drew these two friends together. Family life was also a large link between the two men. After the death of Viret's wife, Calvin took it upon himself to find a suitable helpmeet for the stricken Reformer. Leaving no stone unturned, the self-appointed matchmaker Calvin traveled far and near in his search for the ideal wife for his dear friend. After several ill-fated attempts the right woman was finally discovered, and Calvin himself assisted at the wedding.

Viret's new wife, Sebastienne, kept up a regular correspondence with Calvin's wife Idelette, and in 1548 the latter journeyed to Lausanne to assist Viret's wife in the birth of their child. At Idelette's departure Viret wrote Calvin, expressing his profuse thanks for the loan, "We have suffered great sadness at her leaving us so soon," he concluded, adding, "We would never have allowed it at all, save out of consideration for you."¹⁸ Another child, Martha, was born in 1550 to the Viret family, and Calvin was named the godfather.¹⁹

The years in which Calvin and Viret ministered in separate cities are marked by a plethora of letters. A regular correspondence passed between them upon every subject, and when heightened church troubles, journeys, or other matters brought a necessary silence to their communication, it was quickly remedied, often with apologies. Viret, writing to Calvin in 1541, assured him, "If I have written but rarely and very briefly to you and the other brothers at Strasbourg, I ask that you do not fault me with a crime as though I did not show enough regard for our friendship. . ."²⁰

Matters of children and other such “trivialities” fill the letters which passed regularly between the two Reformers during these years. Indeed, nothing appeared too commonplace to be mentioned in their correspondence. As one historian noted,

At Calvin’s return [to Geneva] Viret joined him as a colleague, and the sweetest epistolary relationship was enjoyed between the two. During nearly twenty years continual messages passed from Geneva to Lausanne. Everyday news, events involving the Church or State, household troubles, memories, plans, confidences, all are found in this friendly correspondence, which never closes without feeling and emotion, filled with testimonies of the truest affection. The two friends never laid the pen aside except to visit each other, and what a time was their every meeting! “Someone told me,” wrote Calvin, “that you are inclined to come to Geneva. I have seized the hope with as much fervor as if you were already here. If such is truly your intention, come Saturday. Your arrival could not be more timely. You will preach for me Sunday morning in the city so that I can preach at Jussy, and join me after dinner. We’ll take a visit to Monsieur de Falais; then, crossing the lake, we’ll enjoy the pleasures of the country together at the home of our friends Pommier and Delisle, and we shan’t return until Thursday. The day following, if you’d like to go to Tournay or Bellerive, I’ll accompany you. Above all, you can count on the warmest reception.”²¹

The unity enjoyed between Calvin and Viret throughout their lives is a marvelous testimony of the grace and favor of God upon His children. Throughout the many trials, troubles, and persecutions caused by enemies both within and outside the Church, the deep-rooted friendship of these two men of God is a shining example of the protection and provision of the Lord. The depth of the bond of love enjoyed between Calvin and Viret effuses the delightful fragrance of God’s blessing upon His own. As the psalmist wrote, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! . . . for there the LORD commandeth the blessing, even life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1, 3).

Calvin and Viret’s friendship presents a striking portrayal of Christian unity and brotherly love, a perfect example of the Biblical doctrine of dependence—no man stands alone, but each exists in communion with the fellow-members of Christ’s Church. Contrary to the modern ideology of independence and self-reliance, Christians above all must be first to acknowledge their complete dependence and reliance upon God. Furthermore, just as all

are dependent upon God, likewise no man can thrive in sterile theological and moral independence, but each must exist within the Biblical framework of the community of believers, being built up together into the true Church, of which Christ is the cornerstone. May God continue to grant to the Church many such relationships as that enjoyed by Calvin and Viret to further His kingdom work upon the earth.

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¹ Michael W. Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground: Conflict and Reform in the Pays de 1 Vaud, 1528-1559* (Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2005), pages 176-177

² As quoted in Jean-Marc Berthoud, *Pierre Viret: A Forgotten Giant of the Reformation*, page 2 22

³ Viret to Calvin, February 6, 1541, quoted in Schnetzler, Vuilleumier, & Schroeder, eds., *Pierre Viret D'Après Lui-Même* (Georges Bridel & Cie Éditeurs, Lausanne, 1911), pages 45-46

⁴ As quoted in Michael W. Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," *Archive for Reformation History*, Volume 99 (2008), page 180

⁵ Calvin to Farel, February 19, 1541, quoted in Henri Jaquemot, "Viret: Réformateur de Lausanne," *Thèse présentée à la Faculté de Théologie de Strasbourg* (Strasbourg, August, 1836), page 30

⁶ Felix Bungener, *Calvin: His Life, His Labours, and His Writings* (T. & T. Clark, 1863), pages 6 s 161-162

⁷ Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," page 176

⁸ Robert Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva, 1964), page 29

⁹ Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground*, pages 177-178

¹⁰ Henri Vuilleumier, *Notre Pierre Viret* (Librairie Payot & Cie, Lausanne, 1911), page 87

¹¹ Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," page 184

¹² Viret to Calvin, July 21, 1542, quoted in Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground*, page 12 179

¹³ Calvin to Viret, August 1542, quoted in Jaquemot, “Viret: Réformateur de Lausanne,” page 34, note

¹⁴ Viret to the Council of Geneva, July 10, 1544, quoted in Schnetzler, Vuilleumier, & Schroeder, eds., Pierre Viret, page 65

¹⁵ Calvin to Viret, quoted in Jean Barnaud, Pierre Viret, Sa Vie et Son Oeuvre (Saint-Amans, 1911), page 315

¹⁶ Calvin to Viret, March 27, 1547, quoted in Ibid., page 16 322

¹⁷ Viret to Calvin, October 26, 1547, quoted in Schnetzler, Vuilleumier, & Schroeder, eds., Pierre Viret, page 80

¹⁸ Viret to Calvin, June 29, 1548, quoted in Ibid., page 88

¹⁹ Henri Vuilleumier, Notre Pierre Viret (Librairie Payot & Cie, Lausanne, 1911), page 102

²⁰ Viret to Calvin, February 6, 1541, quoted in Schnetzler, Vuilleumier, & Schroeder, eds., Pierre Viret, page 44

²¹ “Les Amitiés de Calvin,” Bulletin de la Société de L’Histoire du Protestantisme Français (Paris, 1864), page 93

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VIRET’S FATHER, GUILLAUME (WILLIAM), WAS A DRAPER BY VOCATION.

VIRET’S PARENTS BECAME CHRISTIANS UNDER VIRET’S TEACHING.

Viret was raised in a devout Roman Catholic home. After his conversion, he had a tender affection for those still under the bondage of Roman Catholicism. Viret prayed fervently for his friends and relatives, but especially for his unsaved parents, and soon had the joy of leading them to their redemption in Christ.

At length the divine Word delivered Viret from the theocratic dominion of Rome, and he then began to look around him. . . . Alas! what did he see? Chains everywhere, prisoners held fast ‘in the citadel of idolatry.’ He felt the tenderest affection for the captives. ‘Since the Lord has brought me out,’ he

said, ‘I can not forget those who are within.’ Two of these prisoners were never out of his thoughts: they were his father and mother. At one time absorbed by the cares of business, at another mechanically attending divine service, they did not seek after the one thing needful. The pious son began to pray earnestly for his parents, to show them increased respect, to read them a few passages of Holy Scripture, and to speak gently to them of the Saviour. They felt attracted by his conduct, and the faith he professed took hold of their hearts. The grateful Viret was able to say: ‘I have much occasion to give thanks to God in that it hath pleased him to make use of me to bring my father and mother to the knowledge of the Son of God. . . . Ah! If he had made my ministry of no other use, I should have had good cause to bless him.’ ¹

VIRET WAS ONE OF JOHN CALVIN’S CLOSEST FRIENDS.

Viret and Calvin were great friends. Though when they first met remains a mystery, Viret was present when Farel called Calvin to the ministry of Geneva in 1536. Here Viret worked alongside Calvin for two years, and corresponded with him regularly thereafter when their ministries parted. The Viret and Calvin families were very close; Calvin’s wife Idelette even journeyed to Lausanne to assist in the birth of Viret’s child. Idelette and Elisabeth Turtaz, Viret’s wife, also kept up a regular correspondence.²

VIRET GREATLY AIDED THE BIRTH OF THE GENEVAN ACADEMY.

The Genevan Academy in the time of Calvin was started by Viret in 1537 in Lausanne. When the Bernese magistrates forced his expulsion, Viret brought his academy to Geneva. Most of the instructors were also from Lausanne, including the principal, Theodore de Beze, and nearly 1,000 of his parishioners.

[The Lausanne Academy’s] status as the intellectual center of the Francophone Reformed Church in the 1540s and 1550s has scarcely been noticed. By the mid-1540s, the early evangelical movement in France centered on Marguerite de Navarre’s network was dying out. Before 1558, Geneva was home to relatively few leading Protestant intellectuals apart from Calvin himself. In the years between the collapse of Marguerite’s network and the opening of the Genevan Academy, Lausanne was the place to be. In addition to Viret, Beza, and Cordier, the Greek scholar Conrad Gessner and noted legal expert Francois Hotman also taught at the Academy. The talented faculty drew visiting intellectuals to the

city as well. Renowned Parisian juriconsult Charles du Moulin resided in Lausanne for a time, as did the contentious Reformed theologian, Jean Morely.³

VIRET WAS KNOWN AS THE “ANGEL OF THE REFORMATION” AS WELL AS BEING CALLED THE “SMILE OF THE REFORMATION” BECAUSE OF HIS WINSOME AND GRACIOUS CHRISTIAN CHARACTER.

Professor Philippe Godet, a nineteenth-century biographer [says of Viret], ‘He reflects the Vaudois character, with its lively spirit of bonhomie, its easy tolerance; his work is for us the smile of the Reformation.’⁴

VIRET’S SINCERE CHRISTIAN NATURE MADE HIM RESPECTED BY FRIEND AND FOE ALIKE.

He was by nature a kindly man with a reputation for being gentle and slow to anger. Friend and enemy alike seemed to agree that he was humble and self-effacing.⁵

Catholic forces captured Viret and 11 other Reformed ministers in a surprise attack during the Third Religious War (1568-1570). The Catholic commander ordered the execution of seven of the twelve but spared Viret largely because of the positive reputation he enjoyed even among his ecclesiastical enemies.⁶

VIRET WAS HIGHLY PRIZED AMONG THE SWISS AND FRENCH REFORMERS AS MEDIATOR.

Viret often was called upon to mediate disputes between Calvin and various factions in Geneva. He had been sent by Berne to Geneva in 1538 to try to reconcile Calvin and the City Council but to no avail. Again in 1539, he offered to act as mediator between Calvin and the Genevan government but his proposal was rejected. Finally, in 1541, his presence in Geneva served as a pacifying influence upon both Calvin and the civil magistrates during the unsettled and uncertain weeks after Calvin first returned to the city.

Many times thereafter, when disputes arose among the Reformers themselves, Viret was invited to come to Geneva to act as arbitrator between the feuding parties. For example, in 1544, his services were solicited when Sebastien Castellio’s application for ordination was opposed by Calvin because Castellio rejected Calvin’s allegorical interpretation of the

descent of Christ into hell, and refused to accept the canonicity of the Song of Solomon. Castellio protested against the refusal of the Company of Pastors to recommend him for ordination and, since he did have some support for his case, requested that Viret be called in to mediate the dispute. Although Castellio did not obtain much satisfaction from the ensuing debate and final decision, he at least obtained a qualified letter of recommendation to help him acquire a post elsewhere and the whole affair was kept from doing any permanent damage to the Reformed movement in Geneva. Castellio apparently felt Viret had treated him fairly at the hearing and harbored no ill feelings against him for he spent some time in Lausanne immediately following his departure from Geneva.⁷

Viret was called to Geneva twice in 1546 to act as a mediator in two different conflicts. The first involved a certain citizen of Geneva named Pierre Ameaux who had openly criticized certain aspects of Calvin's doctrinal position and was thrown into prison because of his audacity. . . . Both Farel and Viret came to Geneva to referee the dispute. . . .

Later in 1546, a young minister at Geneva named Michel Cop became extremely irritated when the Council, upon the advice of Calvin and Abel Poupin, refused to suppress a controversial play based on the acts of the Apostles. . . . The Council of Geneva sent for Viret and he was able to calm the young pastor and persuade him to retract his denunciatory statements. In a few weeks the whole affair was forgotten.⁸

JOHN KNOX COUNSELED WITH VIRET.

The influence of Viret's ideas on other Calvinists offers a tantalizing possibility for further investigation. Both John Knox and Christopher Goodman had access to his person and writings. Knox was known to have conferred with Reformed theologians in both Geneva and Zurich and, according to a letter from Calvin to Viret, he was supposed to stop off at Lausanne on his way to Zurich in February of 1554, and seek Viret's "counsel and advice." Such a lay over would have been both logical and convenient since the main roads from Geneva to Zurich passed through Lausanne. It seems almost certain that Knox did stop and see Viret at Lausanne, for several months later he wrote concerning his recent journey through Switzerland:

My awne estait is this: since the 28th of January, I have travellit through all the congregationis of Helvetia, and hes reasonit with all the Pastouris and many other excellentlie learnit men upon sic matters as now I can not commit to wrytting.⁹

VIRET WAS BELOVED BY THE GENEVANS.

The Genevans loved Viret. They immediately elected him a minister of the Genevan church, and assigned him a salary of 800 florins, plus 12 strikes of corn and two casks of wine a year. The Council also provided him a commodious house, which Calvin noted was bigger and better furnished than his own.¹⁰

Viret went to Geneva and was appointed preacher of the city (March 2, 1559). His sermons were more popular and impressive than those of Calvin, and better attended.¹¹

VIRET WAS A PROLIFIC WRITER, AUTHOR OF OVER FIFTY BOOKS. HIS WORKS WERE BEST-SELLERS IN HIS DAY, AND WERE TRANSLATED INTO MANY LANGUAGES, INCLUDING GERMAN, ITALIAN, ENGLISH, DUTCH, AND LATIN.

. . . his works were best-sellers in France ranking second in sales only to the writings of John Calvin.¹²

VIRET WAS A POWERFUL AND POPULAR PREACHER.

From 1532 to 1536 our Reformer-Pastor [Viret] proclaimed the reign of God in the streets, taverns, homes, and church; and he did not cease to take part in what was called the “disputes,” theological discussions, which lasted for hours. . . or even days. Even so the gospel spread with men, women, and children receiving it to their salvation.¹³

VIRET WAS A 16TH CENTURY ‘MEGA-CHURCH’ EVANGELIST.

During Christmas of 1561, Viret preached in the Cathedral before a crowd, attended, at the head, by Royal Officials and the Councils (city magistrates). The 4th of January, 1562, he presided over the second of two Communion services (the first at 5 a.m., the second at 8 a.m.) at which 7000 to 8000 people communed.¹⁴

The English Ambassador, Sir Thomas Smith, observed that even during the height of the plague Viret and his colleagues were drawing crowds of from 5,000-6,000 at their daily sermons.¹⁵

The climax of [Viret's] visit at Nimes came on December 24, 1561, when he held a six hour pre-Christmas Communion service in the main Cathedral with nearly 8,000 people in attendance. Viret prefaced the service with a long, moving evangelistic appeal which led several prominent Roman Catholic authorities to make public confessions of their adherence to the Reformed faith before the large congregation.¹⁶

In Lyon, preaching out in the open, he brought thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out.¹⁷

VIRET AND FAREL LED THE REFORMATION IN FRENCH SWITZERLAND:

It was Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret who brought the Reformation to Geneva, Lausanne, and Neufchatel.

Calvin was present [at the Lausanne Disputation of 1536] and spoke briefly on several occasions but it was Farel and Viret who carried the chief burden of the argument for the Reformed cause. Worth noting was the fact that Viret's careful and skillful handling of the question of the relation of the civil magistracy to the true Church of God was seconded by both Calvin and Farel. In fact, after the first two days [of the Disputation] it was Viret who spoke most often and for the greatest length of time, and it was he who finally won the day for the Reformed faith. . . . There was a marked increase in the number of adherents to the Reformation including a number of converts from the ranks of the Roman Catholic clergy present at the debate. During the disputation and the three months following more than eighty monks and nuns and over one hundred and twenty members of the secular clergy of the Roman Catholic Church were won over to the Reformed faith, the majority of them due to the efforts of Viret.¹⁸

AMONG THE FIRST GREAT REFORMERS IN FRENCH SWITZERLAND, VIRET WAS THE ONLY NATIVE SWISS.

Peter Viret, the Reformer of Lausanne, was the only native Swiss among the pioneers of Protestantism in French Switzerland; all others were fugitive Frenchmen.¹⁹

Unlike the French Calvin, Viret was practically a native son, a fellow romand who spoke a similar dialect and shared the same culture as the Genevans. Indeed, there is much truth to Henri Vuilleumier's assessment, "The Genevans always considered him one of their ministers, and as if he were simply on leave in Lausanne."²⁰

VIRET WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING THE EXILED CALVIN BACK TO GENEVA IN 1541.

[Viret] was asked to use his influence with Calvin, and Calvin, in a letter written to him at the same time as his third to the Council of Geneva, gives us the key to the vagueness of tone which he had adopted in his official letter. ‘Thou tellest me that if I abandon Geneva, the Church is in danger. I can answer nought but what I have told thee, that there is no place which alarms me so much as Geneva. Not that I retain any hatred against them, but I see so many difficulties, that I feel incapable of escaping from them. Whenever I call to mind the times past, my heart freezes with terror.’ But Viret knew well that his fears would not go so far as to prevent him from coming, if once he clearly saw it to be a positive duty. ‘Master Pierre Viret,’ says the register at the date of the 28th February, ‘hath showed that it would be very meet to write again to Master Calvin. Ordered that he be written to.’ ²¹

Calvin later testified that only the fraternal support of Viret during this decisive period made these first months tolerable.²²

VIRET WAS EARNESTLY SOUGHT AS A PASTOR IN FRANCE.

In 1561 Viret’s failing health forced him to leave Geneva and seek a healthier climate in southern France. When news of this spread, calls from countless churches poured in, begging Viret to come to their aid.

...invitations poured in from churches in Paris, Orleans, Avignon, Montauban, and Montpellier. The leaders of Nimes begged him to remain with them.²³

When Viret arrived in France, churches from all over the country sought him out. The churches in Nimes and Paris even sent delegates to Geneva to ask officially for his services.²⁴

CALVIN’S WIFE, IDELETTE, VISITED VIRET’S WIFE AT LAUSANNE TO ASSIST IN THE BIRTH OF HER CHILD IN 1548.²⁵

VIRET EXPERIENCED TWO SEPARATE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS ON HIS LIFE.

The first attempt came after ministering in the Abbey town of Payerne. An irate monk violently refuted Viret’s preaching by running him through the back with a sword as he was crossing a field. The second was while in Geneva. The Reformer was given a bowl of

poisoned spinach soup. He lay for some time at the point of death. Though he at length recovered, he suffered from the effects of the poison for the rest of his life.

VIRET’S GENUINE CHRISTIAN CHARACTER GAVE HIM A LOVE FOR EVEN HIS GREATEST ENEMIES.

Despite their many attempts at his life, Viret once saved the life of a Roman Catholic priest.

In France, when a Protestant mob was on the point of lynching a traitorous Roman Catholic priest, Pierre Viret interposed his very life to save him from certain death.²⁶

VIRET ATTENDED COLLEGE AT PARIS.

He entered the College de Montaigu at the University of Paris at about the time Calvin was leaving and Ignatius Loyola was enrolling.²⁷

Loyola was later the founder of the Society of Jesus, also known as the infamous Jesuits.

VIRET WAS CALVIN'S CLOSEST CONFIDANT

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Viret’s 1541-1542 stay in Geneva. First of all, Calvin had found the prospect of returning to the city from Strasbourg so abhorrent at first that he likely never would have returned to Geneva if Viret had not been there months beforehand to restore order in the church. Second, Calvin and Viret’s friendship deepened during these ten months together in Geneva to the point where Viret clearly replaced Farel as Calvin’s closest confidant in the following years. According to the extant record, Viret and Calvin exchanged only fourteen letters between Calvin’s exile and his return (1538-1541). During the same period, sixty-five letters survive between Farel and Calvin. In the years following Viret’s departure from Geneva in 1542, however, the figures are reversed. From 1542 to 1549, Calvin was in contact with Viret more than twice as often as with Farel. By 1550, the frequency of Calvin’s correspondence with Viret drops to the level of that with Farel. . .²⁸

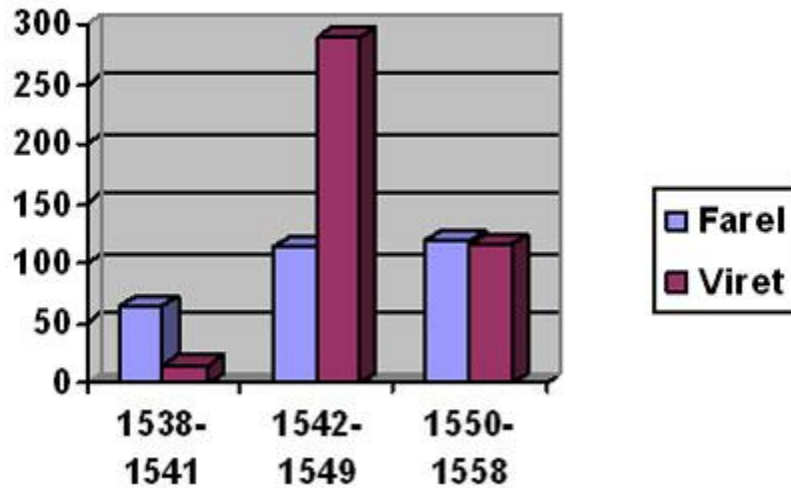


Figure: Calvin's correspondence with Viret and Farel: Total number of letters exchanged

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¹ J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, D.D., *History of the Reformation in Europe* (Sprinkle Publications, Harrisonburg, VA, 2000), pages 223-224

² Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation* (Wipf and Stock Publishers), page 291

³ Michael W. Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground: Conflict and Reform in the Pays de Vaud, 1528-1559* (Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2005), pages 174-175

⁴ As quoted in Robert Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva, 1964), page 178

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 174

⁶ Robert D. Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," *Christian History Magazine*, Issue 71 (2001), page 37

⁷ Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 30

⁸ *Ibid.*, page 31

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 140

¹⁰ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 36

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1910), page 252

¹² Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 46, footnote 108

- ¹³ Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chretienne, Introduction*, page 24
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 29
- ¹⁵ Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 46, footnote 106
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, page 42
- ¹⁷ Jean Barnaud, *Pierre Viret: Sa vie et son oeuvre* [Pierre Viret, His Life and Work] (Saint-Amans, 1911), page 540
- ¹⁸ Robert Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva, 1964), pages 25-26
- ¹⁹ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 8, page 250
- ²⁰ Michael W. Bruening, "Pierre Viret and Geneva," *Archive for Reformation History*, Volume 99 (2008), page 176
- ²¹ Felix Bungener, *Calvin: His Life, His Labours, and His Writings* (T. & T. Clark, 1863), pages 161-162
- ²² Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret*, page 29
- ²³ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 36
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, page 194
- ²⁵ Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*, page 291
- ²⁶ Jean-Marc Berthoud, *Pierre Viret: A Forgotten Giant of the Reformation*, page 3
- ²⁷ Linder, "Forgotten Reformer," page 35
- ²⁸ Michael W. Bruening, *Calvinism's First Battleground: Conflict and Reform in the Pays de Vaud, 1528-1559* (Springer, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2005), pages 177-178

E. Viret's Personal Quotes

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HIS CONVERSION:

'I was naturally given to religion,' he said, 'of which however I was then ignorant. . . . I was preparing myself for heaven, seeing that it was the way of salvation.' ¹

ON RAISING CHILDREN:

Some children you will have to keep bridled, some you will have to coax, some will need no discipline, some will be motivated by liberality, some by rewards and promises, and others by honor. Treat each

child according to his temperament and needs. Some will have to be treated like spirited horses, some like gentle asses, some like stubborn mules.²

ON VIRET’S ATTACHMENT TO THE CITY OF GENEVA:

I cannot name the city of Geneva but with great honor and reverence and without always recalling the fruit of the joy and consolation that I for so long received from that church—both on the part of all the good and honorable lords whom God constituted there for the government of the republic and from my brothers and companions, pastors in the same ministry with me, and generally from all the people, who were always so affectionate toward me, as I was toward them from the beginning.³

UPON THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE, ELIZABETH TURTAZ:

I was so completely dispirited and prostrated by that arrow of affliction, that the whole world appeared to me nothing but a burden. There was nothing pleasant, nothing that could mitigate my grief of mind.⁴

ON THE NECESSITY OF FATHERS INSTRUCTING THEIR CHILDREN

Although the fathers of the family ought to be like prophets and ministers in their homes, as it is said of Abraham (Genesis 18) and Job (Job 1), how can this be done if the fathers themselves are not first instructed? Now, it is useless to hope that they may be taught at the ordinary sermons, for we have clearly seen the contrary through more than twenty-three years of experience. . . . In fact, how has it happened that so many young people who have never seen the Mass or papism are nevertheless better instructed in those than in the Gospel, unless their fathers taught them what they know? ⁵

ON INSTRUCTING CHRISTIANS OF VARYING LEVELS OF MATURITY:

Those who desire to fill some vase consider first of all the form and capacity of it, and with what substance he wishes to fill it. The one therefore who has to fill with some liquid a bottle or phial, or some other such container which has a narrow opening and neck, pours little by little into it, the liquid by which he wishes to fill it. For if pours too much into it at one time, not all of that which has been poured will enter into it. The container will spew out the liquid at the opening before it will be full. For this reason all that one would desire to pour into it will not enter into it, but to the contrary it will fall mostly upon the ground, and that which goes into it will only be a small quantity, in comparison with that which spills outside and is totally lost. “It is necessary for those who teach the uneducated and ignorant, to have such consideration. For as containers are not all of the same shape and capacity, so intellectual abilities are not all alike and of the same nature, nor are all as well disposed as others to receive and retain that which one would put into them. Some are more uneducated and untrained; while

others are more discerning and penetrating. The ones have already been taught for some time, and have greatly profited; while the others have only just begun; or if they have already been instructed for a long time, they have not yet benefitted and advanced in this study as they should, and as it was necessary for them. As a result some wish to be treated and taught in one way, and the others in another, according to the requirements of each one's nature and capacity. For these reasons it is more than necessary, for those who take part in teaching in some area of the arts and sciences whatever that might be, and chiefly in Christian doctrine, to have regard for all those differences and diversity of minds and intelligence, and to consider well the nature and capacity of these vases they have to fill, so that they do not waste their time, or even cause harm rather than help.⁶

ON THE WORTH OF THE COMMON CHRISTIAN

Wherefore I esteem more highly the judgment of a simple laborer, being one of the elect of God and regenerate by His Holy Spirit, than that of all the Popes, bishops, priests, philosophers and doctors who are infidels and hypocrites.⁷

AN APPEAL FOR PERSEVERANCE:

I appeal to you again in the name of God that you persevere more and more, with greater courage than ever; considering the promise that Jesus Christ has made to those who persevere until the end (Matt. 24:13). Little would be accomplished in starting well, if perseverance was not joined to it. In acting in this way, although the judgments of men are so corrupt, since they judge all things in general in a contrary manner, esteeming something worthy of praise that is worthy of condemnation; and something worthy of condemnation that is worthy of praise; nevertheless, you must strengthen and encourage yourselves by that of which you are certain, not only so that you might never waste your time nor your effort, in well doing; but also because a day will come among men, when he will make known who was righteous, and who has been more loyal and obedient, in his presence as well as before the King and magistrates whom he has constituted over us.⁸

ON MARTYRDOM:

It is necessary always to stand upon this, that we must hold the glory of God in greater esteem than our life, and we should always elect a thousand deaths rather than violate a single commandment of God.⁹

ON HIS ILLNESS OF 1561:

. . . by the will of our God and Father, I fell sick, in such a way that my entire body was weakened, being so low, that I could not wait for anything else, in my judgment, except to be placed in the ground.

I have never had, in the past, a sickness which had led me so close to the grave, not even when I had been poisoned by the artifices and practices of the enemies of the Gospel, at which time, I was hardly more than twenty-four or twenty-five years old, when they sought my death.

However, God, who had already delivered me from death, which the fatal poison would have conveyed to me, and who withdrew me in a miraculous way from the sepulcher, in order that I might serve even longer in the holy ministry of the Gospel, to which it pleased Him to call me from my youth, delivered me again from death this other time, where I was even closer to death than anytime in the past.¹⁰

ON GOD’S USE OF TRIALS TO FURTHER HIS PLANS:

By this experience [Viret’s illness of 1561], the Lord has once again made me better understand, that it is not left to ministers to choose their locations, nor to go or run to any other place which might seem good to them, but rather to go where it pleases God to send them. For God is the Lord of the harvest. It is, therefore, His responsibility alone to send out the laborers (Matt. 9:38; Rom. 10:15), choosing those whom He pleases, and according to the time He so ordains.¹¹

ON VIRET’S RECEPTION BY THE CHURCH IN NIMES:

It was with such warm sentiment and excellent intention that you greeted me at my arrival, not simply as a momentary rest in passing, but contrarily, and since that time, has only continued and increased even more and more. Nevertheless, you have not acted in this way for anything, which you might have seen as being worthy in me. For in seeing me, it seemed that I was nothing more than a skeleton covered with skin, which carried my bones, for the purpose of being buried there; so that even those who were not of our religion but strongly opposed to it, showed pity at seeing me, to the point of saying: “What has this poor man come to do in this country? Has he not come except to die?” I heard even, when I rose to preach in the pulpit for the first time, that many having seen me, feared that I would fall from it, before I could finish the sermon. If you had found nothing in me according to the flesh, which might have moved you to offer me such a grand reception, I surely have not given you any other particular reason, since that time, by any service which I have performed on your behalf. I know very well, for that reason, that there is no other cause which might have moved you to receive me, as you have received me, except the warm affection that God has given you for the holy Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ, of whom I am a minister, and whom you have seen in me, for the honor of the holy ministry, which He has entrusted to me, considering that which He has said to His disciples, to whom He made this charge: He who receives you receives Me; and he who receives Me, receives Him who sent Me; .

. . and whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward (Matt. 10: 40, 42).¹²

CONCERNING THOSE WHO TRIED TO KILL HIM

[God] has delivered me from the two-edged sword of those who were for the moment my enemies, but who now, by the grace of God, have become friends and fellow-servants in the house of God.¹³

[F. Viret's Lausanne Academy](#)

THE BIRTH OF THE REFORMED ACADEMY

Soon after the city of Lausanne accepted the Reformation, Viret took up residence there as minister of the Cathedral Church. Though Lausanne was labeled Reformed, it was still heavily steeped in centuries of Catholicism, and thus carried over much debauchery into the new Protestant religion. The scandals of the former Catholic pastors were particularly harmful to the propagation of the new Faith, and Viret determined that something must be done to alter the injurious influence. Bemoaning the state of the pastors, he wrote, "They like better a pint at their side than a Bible."¹

To rectify this state of affairs, the Bernese magistrates determined to begin an academy for the training and education of young men for the ministry. The Lausanne Academy was founded in January of 1537, and was the first Protestant academy of the French-speaking world. Scholars came from many neighboring countries to teach at the new school. Lausanne became a haven as persecutions drove many a notable Protestant scholar from his home. Viret noted in August of 1549, "Every day many people flock here, our school grows day by day, producing such abundant fruits, and extends far and wide. We must all give thanks to the Lord."²

The Lausanne Cathedral was provided by the lords of Bern as the location for the newly-formed Academy. Lectures were given there and at any adjoining house possessing sufficient space for the classes. As historian André Gindroz notes,

. . . the professor of Philosophy taught in the vestibule of one of the canonical houses located on the eastern side of the Lower City. The library and the college were placed in Menthon's chateau, . . . But the great fundamental teaching, that of theology, was given in the Cathedral choir. There, under that admirable dome, in the thousand colors of the variegated light dazzling through the stained glass windows, not far from a pope's coffin, two illustrious Reformers, the vehement Farel and the gentle and courageous Viret, taught, in a tender and firm voice, the vital doctrines of the Reformation. Such a place! Such men! Such teaching! . . . Such words the pious Reformers drew from their raptured hearts! Such tones escaped their breasts, palpitating with emotion and faith! Under the cold stone of the tombs of the ancient bishops the stirring of their bones could almost be heard as their magnificent Cathedral, snatched from Rome, was given to Christ!"³

Though countries such as Italy and Germany were represented at times in the teaching staff of the new Academy, the faculty was predominantly French. Indeed, so many were the French professors that in 1558 dean Jean Haller noted that the instructors were ". . . all French, except Viret."⁴

Though the Academy was well equipped with wise and knowledgeable professors, the Messieurs of Berne noted with dismay a lack of students with enough schooling to enter the Academy. To remedy this situation a boarding house was commenced in which young students would be given appropriate training to equip them to enter the Academy upon conclusion of their studies. A Genevan, Antoine Saunier, was loaned to Lausanne for a year to organize and establish the school.⁵ It was completed October 30, 1540. The structure housed a dozen young men, and was paid for by the lords of Bern. This soon earned it the name *Les Douze Escholiers de Messieurs*, or The Gentlemen's Twelve Students.

In 1542 Celio Secondo Curione, a refugee from Piedmont, Italy, was appointed house tutor of Les Douze Escholiers.⁶ The young scholars were placed under his charge, and it was his duty to see that they were cared for and fed. Curione retained this office (as well as professor of Arts at the Academy) until 1546, at which time he was succeeded by André Zébedée, an instructor from the Guyenne College at Bordeaux.⁷

In 1548 the Bernese magistrates granted a sum of 3,000 livres to be used in the founding of a library at the Academy.⁸ This resource was an invaluable aid to the Academy's students, who found within the newly-created library a wealth of Reformed teaching essential to those who were leaving the folds of Catholicism. In 1553 a grant of 100 florins annually was provided as a book allowance for the library.

STUDENTS OF THE LAUSANNE ACADEMY

The Lausanne Academy grew and flourished for over twenty years, during which time thousands of young Protestant students passed through its doors, hailing from every corner of Europe, including France, Germany, England, and Poland.⁹ The Academy turned out countless pastors and martyrs for the Reformed faith. One such martyr, Pierre Naviheres, lodged in Viret's home while attending the Academy. He, along with four other French students, desired to return to their hostile homeland to preach the Gospel to their Catholic family and friends. They departed with the blessing of the Academy, but had scarcely crossed the French border before they were discovered and imprisoned. Despite Viret's and many other professors' strong interceding on their behalf, the young scholars were burned at Lyon, May 16, 1553.

Besides the preachers who left the Academy to proceed as missionaries to the surrounding Roman Catholic countries were many world-renowned men of the Faith who also received their training at Viret's Academy. Some students who entered the Academy included Zacharias Ursinus and Casper Olevianus, authors of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1562, and Guido de Bres, author of the Belgic Confession of 1561.

THE LAUSANNE PROFESSORS

Viret's Academy boasted learned instructors from Italy, Germany, France, and Switzerland. In 1540 the salary of Hebrew and Greek professors was 200 florins, two muids of wheat, and two barrels of wine. Professors lodged in the canonical houses near the Cathedral.

Some prominent men among Viret's professors included: Theodore de Beze, successor to Calvin in Geneva and principal of the Lausanne Academy, and Mathurin Cordier, the author of a book of Latin dialogues which remained the standard in elementary Latin classes for several centuries. Conrad Gesner, who left Zurich to teach at the Academy, assumed the Greek chair in 1537 at only twenty-one years of age. He was succeeded by Jean Ribit and Chevalier Francis Berauld.

Other professors included Claude Prévôt, Pierre Pandor, Claude Molinier, Jean Tagaut, who taught Mathematics and Philosophy, Antoine Chevalier, instructor in Hebrew, Jean Randon, the Headmaster, Jean Merlin, a Hebrew professor, and Francis Hotman, a professor of Law who was converted to Protestantism after observing the fortitude of the Reformed martyrs.¹⁰ Imbert Paccolet, a French refugee, arrived at the Academy in August of 1538 and taught Hebrew for ten years. An old priest, Jacques Valier, also gave lectures at the Academy, as well as assisting Viret as a preacher in the Lausanne Church.

THE ACADEMY MOVES TO GENEVA

As the years passed, relations with the Bernese magistrates became increasingly more and more difficult as Bern sought to reserve for itself the jurisdiction pertaining to the churches within their domains. Viret, seeking to further the Reform in Lausanne, did his utmost to turn the formerly Catholic populace into a Christian people. This he found impossible to carry out without Church discipline. However, try as he might, Viret could not persuade the lords of Bern to delegate such God-given authority to the Church.

Throughout his pastorate at Lausanne, Viret made numerous journeys to Bern to plead the cause of his congregation and beg the magistrates to allow him the discipline necessary to establish and build the Church. Viret pled with the Bernese lords, assuring them that a true Church must be permitted to govern its members. Bern, however, desirous of retaining its omnipotence over its subjects, refused to relinquish such authority to the Church, stating that it was the State's prerogative to govern the Church.

An example will serve to illustrate the problem with Bern's mandate: during Viret's pastorate, a certain churchgoer in Lausanne opened and operated a house of prostitution under his mother's roof. Despite this blatant disregard of God's Law, the pastors, according to Bern, were required to allow—in fact, could not restrain—the guilty man from attending the Lord's Supper. Little or no jurisdiction was afforded to Viret and other Lausanne pastors in the realm of morals. As Viret stated, this lack of discipline would result in no Church at all. Pastors, he stated, must be allowed to enforce "this discipline, by which we can distinguish between swine, dogs, and sheep, according to Christ's teaching." ¹⁷ "Discipline," he noted, "can be abandoned, if the administration and use of the Word of God and the sacraments are also abandoned, for the Word and the sacraments cannot be properly administered without it." ¹⁸

Despite his continued appeals, Bern refused to permit Viret to restrict the Lord's table. All must be allowed to participate, and any pastor who refused to administer communion was to be discharged immediately. The Lausanne pastors, following Peter's initiative (Acts 5:29), sent numerous letters to Bern in which they stated their obligation to follow God rather than men:

We have not been called to this charge [the ministry] to close our eyes, to keep silent, to conceal vice, and to cover the scandals of those who have been entrusted to us, but to be on guard, to be attentive, to unceasingly lift our voice with strength, when needed. . . . We must do this to discharge our duty in good conscience. . . . We do this to show that we are innocent and free of the blood of those who perish by the offence of others. ¹⁹

The dispute regarding the jurisdiction of the Church and the sanctity of the Lord's table finally came to a head in 1558. Writing to Calvin on August 24, Viret confided, "I have more bitter worries than anyone. I'm between the anvil and the hammer, and know not where to turn. . . . I pray that God does not withhold His directions from me." ²⁰

Faced with the decadent moral state of many in his congregation, Viret announced that it was impossible for him to administer communion on Christmas Day, 1558, without first being permitted to examine and instruct those who wished to partake. Going before the

Council of Lausanne, he begged a seven-day postponement of the communion service to provide the time necessary to examine the communicants. After much travail and debate the Council at last agreed to give the pastors the stipulated time.

When news of the ruling reached Bern, however, the magistrates were outraged at this usurpation of their authority. They sent immediately to Lausanne to countermand the decision of the Council and to dismiss and expel Viret and his colleagues.

Thus ousted, Viret and his associates were forced to pack their belongings and seek refuge elsewhere. This refuge was soon found in the neighboring city of Geneva, where Calvin welcomed his friend with the warmest affection.

Bern appointed other ministers in Viret's stead, but those who were nominated to fill his place refused, preferring rather to join Viret in exile than submit to Bern's ungodly demands. Numerous professors and students of the Academy also followed the expelled ministers, swelling the number of the exiles to a vast multitude. Johannes Haller, a contemporary of Viret, noted that "over a thousand people migrated from Lausanne to Geneva."²¹ The significance of this mass exodus from the city of Lausanne can scarcely be overstated, for the city's population at the time was little more than 5000.²²

The host of distinguished refugees exiting Lausanne was not, however, permitted to merely languish in the city of Geneva. Despite the dire appearance of their plight, God had prepared marvelous works for the exiles. Just five months after their arrival in the city, Calvin founded his Genevan Academy, employing as its core the outcasts who had fled Lausanne.

12.2 Die Wet

Law of God

Share₄

PREFACE TO *CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION IN THE DOCTRINE OF THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL*

My aim in this volume has been to produce an exposition of the Law of God, Law which must be regarded as the rule for every other law through which men are to be directed and governed.¹³

Thus God has included in this Law every aspect of that moral doctrine by which men may live well. For in these Laws he has done infinitely better than the Philosophers and all their books, whether they deal with Ethics, Economics or Politics. This Law stands far above all human legislation, whether past, present or future and is above all laws and statutes edicted by men. It follows that whatever good men may put forward has previously been included in this law, and whatever is contrary to it is of necessity evil. . . . This law, if it is rightly understood, will furnish us with true Ethics, Economics and Politics. It is incomparably superior to what we find in the teachings of Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero and the like thinkers who have taken such pains to fashion the customs of men.¹⁴

For as it can only be God Himself who is able to give us such a perfect Law by which we are truly enabled to govern ourselves, likewise it is only He who can provide us with Princes and Magistrates, Pastors and Ministers gifted with the capacity of applying this Law. Further, He is fully able to shape such men into adequate instruments for His service and to grant them the authority necessary for the accomplishment of the duties of their office. Thus armed they are enabled by God to maintain those over whom they rule (and of whose welfare they are accountable to God) in a spirit of due subjection. For, just as He has granted us this Law in order that we might clearly know what we lack, so He likewise grants us, through Jesus Christ His Son, the Holy Ghost by whom our hearts are renewed and through whom we receive those gifts and graces so necessary for the accomplishment of our vocation.¹⁵

THE LAW OF GOD THE SOURCE OF ALL OTHER LAWS

There is not any law which could be considered just or holy, except in as far as it is conformed to the Law of God, and based on it. For it is the fountain from which all other laws must flow, like streams flowing from it as their source. Because God who gave it, is the Law himself, according to whose will is the only rule of justice.¹⁶

PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Consequently, in order that men do not undertake anything according to their own caprices, concerning such subjects, God himself has desired to give them a Law and standard, by which he has shown them, how they should regulate all their affections, and all their words, and all their works, in order to

conform them to his will. For this same reason, he has declared to them in the Law, which things are right or wrong, and how they please or displease him, and how he can be honored or dishonored by them.¹⁷

. . . he felt that "good laws" in a truly Christian state always would be based upon the Ten Commandments of God found in the Holy Scriptures.¹⁸

THE LAW OF GOD THE ONLY FOUNDATION FOR ANY TRUE KINGDOM

Viret could conceive of no civil government except by law. Furthermore, he differentiated a "true kingdom" from a spurious one on the basis of whether or not the civil laws of the realm followed the written Law of God found in the Scriptures.

. . . In discussing this topic, he cited Plato who had pointed out that a city in which the law dominated the magistracy was politically sound but that a city in which the magistrates managed the law was headed for ruin. Viret's great emphasis was upon government under civil law, and particularly under civil law derived, as fully as possible within a given political context, from the moral law of God. In this manner the civil magistrate operated indirectly under Divine Law and, to a certain extent, became an agent of God's will.¹⁹

ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE LAW OVER THE STATE

Viret, unlike Calvin, was ready to extend openly the authority of the Bible over the state.

. . . In so doing he made it clear that the authority of the Bible when it shed light on political matters always superseded the authority of the ruler, and the authority of God's moral law with all its political implications took precedence over any codified civil laws. In fact, Viret taught that the only legitimate kingdoms with valid laws were those which had a legal code based upon the Ten Commandments of God.²⁰

. . . it should be noted that Viret believed that every secular ruler should be subject to a well-defined and codified set of civil laws and that these civil statutes should rest squarely on God's laws. He conceived of every civil authority being bound by these laws and of every individual being equal before them.²¹

ON THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Viret's rule for interpreting the Ten Commandments, and thus for explaining all similar seeming contradictions in Scripture based upon them, was that Table One always took precedence over Table Two, and man's relationship to God always came before his obligations to his fellow-man. Thus, if the second table commanded honor to fathers, mothers and all superiors, and those superiors ordered disobedience to God, then the requirement to honor them based on Table Two was abrogated by the enjoiner of Table One to have no other gods before the Almighty. In this manner Viret was able to explain away every Biblical command to obey the civil magistrates when those officials legislated or acted in a manner contrary to the first four of the Ten Commandments.²²

12.3 Role of Ruler and Magistrate

The Role of the Ruler and Magistrate

Author: Georges Bavaud

Excerpt from *Le Réformateur Pierre Viret* (Labor et Fides, Geneva, 1986), pp. 333-340



THE CONTEXT OF CHRISTIANITY

Within the context of Christianity, the charge of the magistrates is clearly distinguished from that of the ministers of the Church, who alone bear the responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God. The ultimate concern of the civil servants, however, is the same as that of the ecclesiastical pastors: to lead Christians to the Kingdom of Heaven.

The magistrate is, in fact, the defender of the two tables of the Decalogue: "The title which Aristotle gave the magistrates . . . agrees well with what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy (1:9-18) and St. Paul in the epistle to the Romans (13:1-7). What is this title? He calls them Keepers of the Law."¹ Viret continues: "We must understand that they also have the care of the souls of their subjects, that the keeping and preservation of the entire Law and of

both tables is committed to them, and that they serve for the salvation of men by using their power and authority to uphold the holy doctrine, the true service of God.”²

Thus the Reformer calls rulers and magistrates the “guardians and custodians of the Church and her well-being.”³

In this Christian society, the Lord has established two swords: that of the magistrate is equipped with coercive power, that of the minister can do no more than appeal to the conviction proceeding from the power of the Word: “The one [office] is civil and temporal and holds the physical sword, to support and defend itself; the other is ecclesiastical and spiritual and possesses for its conservation the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”⁴

To better reveal both the distinction of their functions and their profound unity, Viret employs an analogy of the body and soul. Just as man—in both his body and soul—is wholly subjected to the lordship of the Creator, so also the magistrate and the ecclesiastical minister both merit the title pastor, and are both in the service of the one and only Jesus Christ, Head of the People of God:

Thus just as man is composed of both body and soul, so also God has ordained that there be two types of pastors . . . Because it is exceedingly difficult—indeed, impossible—for man to attend to one thing, without also looking after the other, God has limited to each one his office and calling and has given to one the very particular charge of souls, to the other that of the body and goods. And just as within a body there are many members, yet nevertheless but one head and heart, thus also the Christian people must not be a body in which all are members, without possessing a head and heart, that is, Jesus Christ, who alone is the true Head, who has raised up the evangelical pastors and civil magistrates who must be as the eyes of all poor people, to direct and conduct them under their Head, Jesus Christ.⁵

Viret reproached the Anabaptists who refused to recognize “the difference between the political and spiritual, the civil and ecclesiastical, order. For the one cannot abolish the other, nor are they opposed, but rather aid one another.”⁶

Within the Reformation era these principles were common to Catholics and Reformed alike. However, Viret saw an important difference separating the Protestants and Papists.

The latter exempted clerics from secular jurisdiction. The Reform, by contrast, restored to rulers their prerogative to judge all citizens who might infringe upon the laws, ministers included.

The text of Matthew 22:21, “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s,” is interpreted by Viret in this manner: “Just as He did not wish to loose the yoke of rulers and lords under the title of service to God and Christian liberty, thus also He did not under the guise of service to earthly kings and princes relinquish the service of God.”⁷

Even more, the Pope, according to Viret, sought to keep both swords within his own hands. Alluding to the Emperors who had been humiliated by the Bishop of Rome, the Reformer wrote: “This Antichrist showed no horror in so wickedly insulting the sovereign power ordained by God in the man who is the representation of God.”⁸

In addressing himself to the rulers, Viret entreated them to cast down the power which had abducted their office: “They ought rather to turn their weapons against the Antichrist and his accomplices, who have disarmed and stripped them of the power which God gave them for all time, and again confirmed by His Son Jesus Christ.”⁹

THE USURPATIONS OF THE MAGISTRATE

The role of the magistrate is to support the Church in her work of evangelization, not to restrain the liberty of the ministers in their own mission: the preaching of the Word and the exercise of discipline. Thus, according to Viret, the Reformed magistrates revealed the same appetite of power as the Pope, to the detriment of the Church of God.

“They desire to make of the minister of the Church the same as the Pope and his own wish to make of them, and often seek above all to subjugate the Church and conduct and govern it by their statutes, laws, force, and ordinances, as if it were a republic and a civil administration.”¹⁰

Again, according to Viret, this produced confusion of the two swords:

It seems that they . . . commit the same error of which they accuse the Pope [and] the bishops . . . for they accuse them of having usurped the power of the swords, both temporal and spiritual. Yet what they themselves practice is scarcely different, for they complain that the Pope and other men of the Church have stolen the temporal sword from the magistrates, while they themselves likewise seek to steal the spiritual sword from the Church and her ministers.¹¹

Viret appears to be alluding to the Bernese magistrates—the authorities who had dismissed him from his charge as pastor of the Cathedral of Lausanne—when he wrote: “The difference is this, that instead of a Pope with a long robe, they wish to replace him with another in a short robe, . . .”¹²

The situation becomes even graver, for the magistrate alone possesses the physical sword, that is, coercive power: “If all the power of the Church is within the hands of the magistrates, they can rip it apart and sew it back together as they please. They have no need to borrow the sword which already resides among them”¹³ (an allusion to the fact that the Pope was required to appeal to the secular arm).

Thus Viret saw the dawning of a new “deformation” of the Church. “Satan will raise a new papacy under another mask, but it will unceasingly return to the same point, though it take another path.”¹⁴

THE MAGISTRATE’S AUTHORITY

St. Paul’s doctrine in Romans 13:1-7 on the divine origin of political power plays a large role in the doctrine of Viret. According to the apostle, civil authority is “the minister of God to thee for good.” The Reformer spoke of the work of “judgment” accomplished by the magistrate: “Magistrates were established to work [judgment] according to the law and according to its commandment, not by envy, hatred, wrath, and vengeance, but by righteous indignation proceeding from love and a true zeal for justice.”¹⁵ . . .

Viret speaks severely against the magistrates who so easily offer mercy to the guilty: “As if God were honored in bestowing mercy and life against His commandment, to those for whom He commands death.”¹⁶

Certainly the Reformer is conscious of the inherent dangers of power; thus he declares: “there is no superiority nor lordship, nor mastery among men . . . which exempts us from the humanity and love which is required of us toward our inferiors.”¹⁷

Viret nevertheless stresses the obedience subjects owe their masters: “It is an exceedingly wicked government and regime when those who should obey and be commanded, instead command and reign.”¹⁸

Thus the Reformer reveals but little sympathy for the democratic form of government: “Instead of a few lords who oppress the public liberty, there are oftentimes far too many in the popular state, so that each seeks to be master and live without restraint.”¹⁹

. . .

Viret considered wars as oftentimes inevitable: “When a good ruler enters upon a righteous war to punish the wicked and defend the good whom God has committed to his defense, he sins no more than an officer who executes the righteous sentence of his ruler.”²⁰

. . .

The Reformer expressed a profound concern to turn Christians back from all shedding of blood:

I desire it to be well considered . . . that every war is so exceedingly dangerous and full of hazard that there is nothing of which Christians must have a greater horror than of taking up arms; I mean not solely against Christians, but against all men of the earth; there is nothing which Christians should be more wary to employ, nor which is less suited to their profession. I desire also above all that Christians always remember that the Church of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom is not a temporal or earthly Kingdom, but spiritual, and that Jesus Christ gave no physical weapons to His Church, neither to advance nor augment it . . . and that He always enjoys a greater triumph over His enemies under the cross and persecutions than in prosperity.²¹

Within this context Viret's reaction when faced with the invention of artillery can be better understood: "The invention of artillery came not from them [the Turks] to us, but from us to them. If ever a skill for the destruction of mankind has been invented, this is the most excellent of all . . . and more worthy of being called diabolical than human."²²

We also note that Viret was well aware of the dangers of the practice of torture, even if he did not combat it in an absolute manner: "If there be a danger that men be burdened by false witness in civil cases, it is much greater in criminal cases, and above all when torture is employed. For it is simple indeed to compel an innocent man to witness falsely against his own life, or even against the life of others, by use of torments."²³

Thus the Reformer called for prudence: "It is well required that judges and magistrates carefully take heed to not easily judge men, without legitimate cause, and not lightly arrest them on testimony forced from them, if they have no clear proof or evidence, that they be not counted guilty of innocent blood."²⁴

Viret entreated the magistrate not to show too much indulgence toward the guilty, but to display a high sense of justice. To him, the condemnation of an innocent man was a crime which perverted the magistrate's role.

IS REVOLT LAWFUL?

In the countries ruled by rulers hostile to the Reformation, the Protestants posed this question: Is it lawful to revolt and appoint leaders favorable to the Gospel?

Viret quite clearly gave a negative response: "The crime of mutiny and sedition has always been greatly odious among men, and not without just cause. For nothing is more contrary to the public peace and human society."²⁵

The cause of the Gospel does not in the least permit revolt: "For if we desire that idolatry be abolished and God be honored, . . . we do not however wish to trouble the public order.

We in no way touch the civility and force of the Republics, nor the magistrates, but render them the honor and obedience we owe them.”²⁶

Viret did not desire to inspire men by the example of the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews: “We are not in the same state that the people of Israel were in the land of Canaan. We have not the commandment, nor the leaders and magistrates ordained by God, to drive out and kill the papists and our enemies.”²⁷

The Reformer forcefully blamed those reckless Christians who provoked the Catholics by untimely initiatives:

Those who thus madly or recklessly, and without order or good form, destroy idols, or post scandalous placards, or do some other such thing which they ought not, only to stir up some great persecution and scandalize those who are not instructed, are not to be praised, but are rather worthy of reprehension.²⁸

Certainly Viret also recognized the case of people who “have great liberties and freedoms and who are as lords themselves, save some small allegiance they give to some ruler.”²⁹ In the case where this ruler “seeks by tyranny, force, and violence, to destroy the Gospel,”³⁰ the Reformer clarifies that armed resistance is not only legitimate, but also necessary.

Translator’s note:

On resisting tyrants, Viret declares, “But if there is a people who had their laws, liberties, and Magistrates, and who keep their duty towards those who claim some rule over them and yet, in spite of this, some tyrant comes who, instead of watching over them, which he had promised and vowed to them, and instead of doing his duty as his office required, he wished to tyrannize those to whom he should give salvation, this is another matter. For such a people have an honest means by which they can resist the tyranny of such tyrants, by their legitimate Magistrates, and can by this means avoid servitude; they can follow the counsel of St. Paul, of whom we have already spoken before, who said: ‘Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.’”

He continues, “If it happens thus, that a ruler of whom by right they be not his subjects, converts into a tyrant, and does not content himself with that which is his due and rightful pay, but desires by tyranny, force, and violence to ruin the Gospel, religion, and liberty of the country, and seeks to destroy, as a Turk, those whom he should protect as his children; they must then seek to defend themselves against his tyranny by the best means which God has given. There is no doubt that in such a case the rulers and magistrates must not be faint in defending their people and the country which God gave into their charge against such tyranny and violence. And if they do not, they are traitors and unfaithful to God, their country, and the people who have been committed to them.” *Remonstrances aux Fidèles*, pp. 334, 337.

Author Bio:

Georges Bavaud was a Swiss Roman-Catholic Priest and theologian. He was a professor of dogma at the University of Freiburg (Switzerland). His excellent work on Viret is entitled, *Le Reformateur Pierre Viret, 1511 – 1571*.

Footnotes:

[1] Pierre Viret, *Instruction Chrestienne en la Doctrine de la Loy et de l'Évangile, Tome I* (Geneva, 1564), p.450

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 604

[4] Pierre Viret, *Exposition Familière sur le Symbole des Apostres*. . . (Geneva, 1560), p. 318

[5] Pierre Viret, *Dialogues de Désordre qui est à Présent au Monde*. . . (Geneva, 1545), p. 63

[6] Viret, *Instruction Chrestienne, Tome I*, p. 505

[7] Pierre Viret, *L'Interim fait par Dialogues* (Lyon, 1565), p. 98

[8] Pierre Viret, *Des Actes de Vrais Successeurs de Jésus-Christ*. . . (Geneva, 1554), pp. 404-405

- [9] Pierre Viret, *Remonstrances aux Fidèles qui conversent entre les Papistes* . . . (Geneva, 1547), p. 133
- [10] Pierre Viret, *Exposition Familière de l'Oraison de Nostre Seigneur* . . . (Geneva, 1548), p. 297
- [11] Pierre Viret, *Le Monde à l'Empire et le Monde Démoniacle* . . . (Geneva, 1580), p. 421
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 422
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 432
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] Viret, *Instruction Chrestienne, Tome II*, p. 601
- [16] Viret, *Des Actes de Vrais Successeurs*, p. 331
- [17] Viret, *Instruction Chrestienne, Tome I*, p. 437
- [18] *Ibid.*, *Tome II*, p. 292
- [19] Viret, *Le Monde à l'Empire*, p. 112
- [20] Pierre Viret, *Familière et Ample Instruction en la Doctrine Chrestienne et Principalement Touchant la Divine Providence* . . . (Geneva, 1559), p. 536
- [21] Viret, *Remonstrances aux Fidèles*, pp. 342-343
- [22] Viret, *Dialogues de Désordre*, p. 169
- [23] Viret, *Instruction Chrestienne, Tome I*, p. 621
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 621
- [25] Pierre Viret, *Épître aus Fidèles pour les Instruire* . . . (Geneva, 1559), p. 206
- [26] Viret, *Remonstrances aux Fidèles*, pp. 243
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 239
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 32
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 337
- [30] *Ibid.*

12.4 Pierre Viret: and the Refusal of the Church to Fold Before the Power of the State

Author: Jean-Marc Berthoud

Excerpt from *The Acts of the Church: Christianity in French-Speaking Switzerland*. Pages 45-55



Twice the night before Christmas, 1558. In the vicarage of the Madeleine, at the foot of the cathedral, Sebastienne Viret awaited with anxiety and some impatience the return of her husband, who had been for some time detained by the debates of the local Council of the Two Hundred.

What could these men be discussing so late into the night on Christmas Eve? It was a question of postponing the celebration of the Lord's Supper, held three times a year, at Passover, Pentecost, and Christmas; a delay of eight days had been requested, to postpone the Supper until the first of the new year. This earnest demand came from three pastors of the cathedral: Pierre Viret, Jacques Valier, and Armand Banc, who wanted this delay in order to be able to arrange the times necessary for the examination before the Consistory—but not the discipline—of those whom the pastors considered unworthy to partake of the Supper because of their scandalous life or faltering faith. This was at all costs immediately to make the most of the last concession of the Bernese lords. We find here the culminating point of a conflict of powers between the pastors of the Classe of Lausanne on the one hand, of whom the undisputed leader was Pierre Viret, who called for the right of the Consistory, that is, the Church, to excommunicate the unfaithful, and, on the other hand, the political authority, Their Excellencies of Bern, who did not wish in any way to hear talk of the least departure of their absolute control over their Vaudois subjects. After a turbulent debate the Council acceded to the demands of the pastors. The celebration of the Supper would be postponed a single week.

But what now had the Council and the Senate of Bern done? For, since the conquest of 1536, the power of the Pays de Vaud was in their hands. What would be the reaction of those who had been named by their subjects: “Our Illustrious, High, Powerful, and Sovereign Lords, their Excellencies of the City and Republic of Bern”? The response was not long in coming. Informed the same day by their bailiff, the lords of Bern responded with the greatest vigor. The Supper of the first day of the year was completely banned, and a delegation of the Senate was immediately dispatched to Lausanne with quite rigorous instructions: Viret and his two colleagues were dismissed from their

offices, effective immediately. The City Council received a strong reprimand for their “abuse of power,” and the Classe of Lausanne (an assembly of pastors and deacons of the region from Lausanne to Vevey) received orders to fill the posts which had thus been made vacant. The unanimous refusal of the Classe to replace Viret and his colleagues brought about the imprisonment of all its members. Released after three days, these pastors were summoned to appear before the Senate, at Bern, February 23-25, 1559. They were placed under the alternative: submit unconditionally to the “Reformation of the Messieurs of Bern,” or resign from their office. About thirty of the pastors chose exile, among whom were nearly all the professors of the flourishing Academy founded by Viret and the Messieurs of Bern in 1537. The dean of the Academy, the famous Theodore de Beze who had arrived in Lausanne in 1549, had realized earlier than his colleagues the uselessness of pursuing the battle with the Bernese power for the spiritual independence of the Vaudois Church. In August of 1558 he had requested leave, and rejoined Calvin in Geneva. He there assisted in founding the famous Theological Academy, which took those exiled from Lausanne, to engage in the work of spreading the Reformation throughout the entirety of Europe. At the end of February 1559, Pierre Viret, seeing finally that nothing more could be obtained, rejoined his friends Calvin and Beze at Geneva where he received shortly thereafter the sentence of perpetual banishment pronounced against him by the Bernese authorities.

Thus at the age of 48, after a fruitful ministry of twenty-eight years, Pierre Viret left forever his home country to which he would write later, “If I should wish that God be glorified among men, where should I desire that He be so more than in the country of my birth?”

Was this then the man, so little inclined to conflicts and controversies, who thus provoked such a violent tempest among the Vaudois, a tempest which scarcely has equal before the great schism of 1847? Was this Pierre Viret, the Vadois Reformer, friend and companion-in-arms of Guillaume Farel, John Calvin, and Theodore de Beze, the faithful pastor who was named the Angel of the Reformation? Forced into innumerable combats in order to establish a true Reformation in the Pays de Vaud, he was driven to engage in a war lasting nearly twenty years with his suzerain in the goal of obtaining true spiritual autonomy of the Church in the face of the pretensions of the absolute sovereignty of the Bernese state. The leader of the Church capable of a such a persistent long-term fight could, in all sincerity, write of himself:

I have always naturally loved peace and have always been in horror of all dissensions and troubles. However, the knowledge that it pleased God to give me His Word, from my youth, and the experience acquired for which I exercise the ministry of His holy Gospel, incites me still more to push for peace and concord, and to better consider what Jesus Christ said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’

August 1, 1550, at a time when he was busy with the inextricable difficulties which the tenacious will of Bern procured for him to keep the high hand over the Church, Viret wrote to his friend Calvin:

One thing comforts me, the peace which reigns in my house, the mutual affection and the good accord among ministers and professors and the constant progress of our schools. If these things be blemished, I could not live, but must emigrate from here.

Pierre Viret was born in 1511 in the ancient Roman and Burgundian village of Orbe, of parents especially pious who belonged to the middle-class. His father was a tailor by profession. After a start at education in the parish school of Orbe—which one could scarcely call mediocre considering Viret’s remarkable knowledge, his immense education, and perfect mastery of ancient languages, particularly Latin—he left his native village the end of 1527 at the age of 17 in order to complete his studies at Paris, where he thought to prepare himself for the priesthood. At Paris he applied at the College Montaigu, which had been frequented before him by John Calvin, and where he had as a classmate Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. As Calvin, he was strongly marked by the Scottish philosophical teaching of the tendency of the Scot John Major. This common influence explains in part the close resemblance of the thought of the two Reformers. At Paris, after bitter spiritual battles, Pierre Viret converted to the Evangelical faith and opted for the Lutheranism which could so easily conduct those who accepted it to the pyres kindled by the false church. He knew the anxiety of those “poor consciences,” as he described himself, “so troubled and nearly desperate, not knowing which way to turn.” He added: “In good time, being still at school, the goodness of God withdrew me from that labyrinth of error before I was plunged too deeply in that Babylon.”

This Babylon was, obviously, the Roman Church. The beginning of 1531 he returned to Orbe, having left Paris in order to escape from the persecution which held sway over those who dared to profess Evangelical convictions.

From the beginning of 1528, after the famous dispute of Bern in which Zwingli, Bucer, Capito, Oecolampadius, and Farel participated, Their Excellencies of Bern were won over to the Reformation. The Great Order of the Reformation of February 7, 1528, laid down the Word of God as the sole foundation of the Church in all territories under Bernese authority. Throughout the rest of the Burgundian wars until the end of the fifteenth century, the Bernese held possession of a certain number of baillages in common with Fribourg: Orbe, Echallens, Morat, Grandson, Avenches, Payerne, etc. Wherever this was the case, Their Excellencies sought to progress their own territorial extension by way of the Reformed Faith. Certainly they acted by religious conviction, but also, it cannot be doubted, with the offices of a political conquest with long term serious reflection.

This it was that Guillaume Farel, provided with a diplomatic mandate officially issued by the Bernese authority, went to preach the Word of God in all the common baillages. He there provoked many troubles and disputes but, by the grace of God, he also brought about a number of conversions. Ambassador of God, he was equally provided with letters of recommendation from the Bernese authorities which made him their delegate, the diplomatic agent of Their Excellencies. Thus Farel, in the first years of his activity in French-speaking Switzerland, was both the iron lance of the Gospel, and at the same time the political expansionist of Bern.

For Bern had adopted the Zwinglian reform in which the political power, after having broken from a faulty ecclesiastical authority, entirely absorbed it to its own advantage. It was a question here not of a State Church in which the Church, joined to the State, would be meanwhile preserved as an independent spiritual reality, but a true State-Church. The Caesaro-papism of the Roman Church was replaced by the religious autocracy of a united Christian State in which all real distinction between temporal and spiritual powers would disappear. On the one side as on the other, the distinction was lost—and not the opposition!—which established the Bible between the spiritual power (the Church wielding the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God) and the temporal power (the State wielding the sword). This confusion of powers well explains also the pyres of the Roman Church, and the drowning of the Christian Mennonite Baptists in the Limmatt at Zurich by Zwingli's State-Church. The dead hand on Zwingli's sword at Kappel, October 11, 1531, was the logical consequence of such confusion.

Bern adopted the Zwinglian vision of a State-Church in which the magistrates dominate the ecclesiastical power with a high hand. Up until the eighteenth century, Their Excellencies also arrested the Baptists who dared to enter their territory, and sold them at the slave market of Venice to the Turks who sent them to man their galleys. Georges de Lagarde put his finger on the absolutist and statist deviation of the Zurich reform when he wrote:

The Zurich State realized within their breast the unity of the public life. It was solely responsible before God for all political or religious acts. High priest and king, it rediscovered the attributes of the ancient pagan cities. It was sovereign.

Later, under the prudent and courageous direction of Heinrich Bullinger, the Church of Zurich recovered a part of its spiritual autonomy in connection to the State. Bern was the Swiss city which pushed the hardest to found the Zwinglian position. As James Good, the American historian of the Reformed Churches in Switzerland wrote:

For no part of Zwingli's Erastian view (the theory of the submission of the Church to the State) saw a development so extended as that of Bern. There not only was the Church united to the State, but it was also reduced to a nonentity in the arms of the State. By destroying the reign of bishops by the Reform, the State was merely entirely substituted for them and reigned by its own authority.

Gonzague de Reynold, in his study on the genius of Bern, helps us better understand to what point this vision of connections between the State and the Church rejoined the secular politics of Their Excellencies.

For Bern, from its inception, is the only city in the interior of Switzerland which possesses a State thought . . . it reaches to the natural limits, the summit of the Alps and the peak of the Jura . . . A realistic politic, which is not hampered by theories, is itself sufficiently often devoid of scruples; a political enemy of doctrines and suspicious of ideas. . . . To be its own master and to reign among the others. Not to admit superior power, to subordinate, therefore, the Church to the State, and education to politics.

We have here not the spirit of the Bernese people but those of the political elite who ruled throughout all the medieval and patrician epoch. Gonzague de Reynold, speaking of the political spirit of Bern more clearly, says:

The final, most pronounced character of this spirit is the envy of authority.
I will analyze it.

No one allowed to leave, to run out of power; to retain it until the last particle; to fix it, to render it absolute.

To limit it to the bourgeois, then solely to the patrician families. To be attentive to this worthless faction, worthless personal ambition which cannot be seized; to defend the entire family from having more than a representative at the Senate and more than a hundred thousand livres in his purse. To never permit the discussion of power, to also fear lest someone speak of good: to exercise silence, with lips sealed, to withdraw from spectators, curious, and strangers. To give favor often, sometimes to reforms, never to concessions. To demand respect of power as a sacred thing, given by God.

We find here before us a resurrection of the spirit which animated the Roman Empire; of this the leaders of the Republic of Bern were well aware. Gonzague de Reynold writes:

The ancient energetic city and poor of every hour, the humanists please themselves to compare it to Sparta; the now powerful Republic compared itself to Rome; as she, on the long-enduring rock, wrote the four sacred letters: S.P.Q.B.: Senatus Populusque Bernensis.

This is that power that God in His providence used in order to back up Guillaume Farel in his efforts to uproot the French-speaking province to the errors of papal Rome.

Palm Sunday 1531 Farel was in Orbe, according to the order of Their Excellencies, to preach the Word of God there at all costs. This is not the place to describe the battles which followed and the manner in which the city was little by little won over to the Gospel. Among the listeners of the fiery Dauphine evangelist was found a young man of twenty years, entirely accepting of his preaching. This was our Viret, and Farel quickly detected the grace of God which his modesty and young age concealed. As he was to do later with Calvin, Farel imposed the vocation of minister of the Word of God upon Viret, and established him as pastor of his native community. Viret had the joy of bringing his father and mother to the knowledge of salvation, and when he left Orbe fifteen months later, he left a flourishing community. From ten people it had passed to more than forty-five.

In 1534, after an itinerant ministry which led him to receive a sword wound in the back—a forceful argument from a monk of the Payerne Abbey—Viret was found at Farel's side at Geneva. There again an attempt was made on his life, this time by poison. He survived, though his health was

never restored. In 1536, after a short journey to Germany to solicit aid in favor of the Vadois of Piedmont, who were being harshly persecuted by Charles II of Savoy and Francis I of France, Viret settled in Lausanne, where he began to preach the Gospel before the arrival of the Bernese troops. The year 1536 saw the conquest of the Pays de Vaud by Bern and Fribourg, the famous Lausanne Dispute in which Viret took the lead role alongside of Farel—he was not then twenty-five—and the Reformation Edicts which imposed the Reformation by force on a population still largely established in the old Catholic traditions. Apart from the period running from January 1541 to July 1542 when he assisted Calvin at Geneva, Viret, until his exile in 1559, consecrated all his energies and great gifts which God had given him to feed the Vaudois Church, and more particularly his Lausanne parishioners. This long pastoral experience permitted him to have a clear regard for his Vaudois fellow citizens who, though truly desiring that someone should throw out the bishop, wished to limit this to what Viret called a diffamation, and refused all true reformation according to the Word of God.

They gladly hear the preachers when they cry out against the vices of the priests and monks, but they do not wish to hear the preachers cry out against their vices. They want a Gospel preached without repentance and without a changed life. They want, under the title of the Gospel, a liberty which would be to them an unrestrained licence to do all that they please. They want to be unburdened from the yoke of the Antichrist, but they want nothing to do with carrying Christ's.

In order to achieve a Church which would sanctify itself, Viret, in spite of his love for peace, was progressively caused to enter into a merciless wrestling match with the Roman power of the Bernese Republic. Roger Barilier, in his remarkable historical piece *Viret Banished*, sanctioned by the dramatic circumstances which we have examined, characterized Viret's thought so justly by these words which he placed in the Reformer's mouth:

The Church will not be reformed; she shall not truly be the Church until the day when she will be emancipated from the civil power, when the authority of the minister will be recognized, when she will be disciplined according to the Gospel, and when she will clearly confess, by her faith and by her works, the name of the glorious Savior.

In Viret's satirical dialogue, *Le Monde à l'Empire et le Monde Démoniacle* [The Corruption of the World's Empires and the World Demonized], we read:

The reformation of the Gospel can be understood in two ways.

How is this?

One can well take the reformation of the Gospel for a reformation by which men reform their lives and conversation to the rule of the Church. . . . But there is also another way which can be called a hidden or illegitimate reformation.

What do you mean by this hidden or illegitimate reformation?

A reformation made by design in which men do not truly wish to reform their morals, old and wicked customs, and manners to the rule of the Gospel, but they wish to reform the Gospel to their rule and to make it serve their affections and their particular gain and profit.

Viret, much more than Calvin or Farel, Bullinger or Zwingli, desired a Church separated from the State. But, as Calvin himself had done, after having welcomed as providential the support of the Bernese power in establishing the Reform, the French-speaking Reformers—Farel also—quickly realized the spiritual dangers which represented the political predominance of the State over the Church. No true reformation of the Church and the society can be effective without the reestablishment of a true spiritual autonomy of the Church beside the State. This necessary independence is marked, negatively by the refusal of the interference of the magistrate in the internal life of the Church; positively by the reestablishment within the Church of a true ecclesiastical jurisdiction leading to the disciplinary power of the consistories, which should materialize in the right of excommunication of the unfaithful and public sinners. Their Excellencies of Bern, in their slow but inflexible march toward absolute power, could not at any moment tolerate such pretensions. This would signify the establishment of a state within the State, the manifestation of a power which evaded—no matter how small—their will of total ascendancy over society.

For Viret, the Church should respect the power of the magistrate as being directly instituted by God (like the father of the family, which is a Biblical model of all social organisms), and not reduce it to an inferior state as had often been done by the papacy. Listen to him:

The Church has her ministers and conductors, not to engage in things pertaining to the office of the civil magistrates, but solely over those things which concern her ministry and her discipline. For the power which the Lord has given her (which sign is the power of the keys) is confined within these limits. Thus, if she overstep, and if her ministers usurp in any way the office of the magistrates, they

abuse their office and are not true ministers but tyrants who usurp that which does not in any way belong to them.

But, by contrast:

There is no prince who has the right to give the laws of religion and service of God. . . . If a presumptuous prince be found who desires to stop serving God, none should obey him, under pain of obeying the devil.

In 1551, several years before his departure from Lausanne, Viret could write these strong words on the limits of pastoral obedience:

The pastor remembers that he is a minister of God and not of men; he faithfully discharges his offices which have been confided to him, he endeavors to obtain justice from the magistrates and the Church. That which he cannot obtain he returns to God and occupies himself solely with doing that which is his duty. He will right gladly suffer to be deposed and driven from his ministry and will expose his own life rather than act against his conscience and lose the Church in confirming impiety and tyranny.

Also, of such magistrates who dare to usurp spiritual power, Viret adds:

. . . they want a liberty which is an unrestrained license . . . They want to take under their paw the poor ministers and preachers, as their valets, to make them scurry about and go under their hand as they please. If the ministers do not wish to do this, . . . they will immediately cry that such ministers are ambitious and rebels and that they wish to set aside the magistrate.

Viret well knew that the medieval vision, a vision largely inherited by the Reformers, which tried largely to coincide the State and the civil society and in which all the citizens were submitted to ecclesiastical discipline, different and more demanding than that of the magistrate, was not faithful to the teaching of the Bible. This vision of a homogeneous religious society drew its origins rather from a political totalitarianism of Aristotle, of which the Roman Empire was a striking example. In this sense the teaching of Viret is much in advance of that of his contemporary Reformers and, what matters more to us, is much more faithful to the model of the Church which we find in the Bible. He wanted a living, regenerated Church, disciplined by the Word, truly confessing, a Church which would be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, and whose teachings would affect all institutions of society, beginning with the State, in order to conform it, through the sanctification of faithful Christian citizens in every social order, to God's design for all His creation. Viret wrote:

We will not stop at the multitude but at truth. For we love more to have a little herd of sheep who line up according to the obedience of the Word of God, than a truly great herd made up of dogs, swine, wolves, and foxes, and mixed with all sorts of beasts.

He understood better than anyone the necessary distinction of the two swords, both having their authority from God, both submitted in their action to the divine norm of the Scripture, but each exercising in its own proper domain the means which were appropriated to it. To the question: Why is it necessary for the Church to arrange a discipline properly exercised by elders when there exists a civil jurisdiction perfectly capable of exercising justice, Viret responded:

Because matters are diverse. For this reason it is necessary that the offices pertaining to the Church and its administration and government be distinguished from those which pertain to the civil government and the republic. For otherwise there would be confusion if temporal and spiritual things were all put together.

Such a perspective did not refuse less the entirely new Roman tyranny of popes and short robes (that of the Bernese), to whom the false reformation was nothing but a diffamation, of the old; these popes and their bishops had a long robe of clerical Rome.

Instead of a pope with his long robe, they want to make another with a short robe, which it will be well to fear more than those whom they so condemn, if it happens that they once take root and be received and sustained.

And Viret, without difficulty, clearly showed the inevitable consequences of the appearance of such a power as that of Bern accumulating the religious and profane authority. This is that ancient Roman power which, since the French Revolution, has reappeared on the world scene in all its ancient force under the form of the modern Hegelian State: sovereign, absolute, completely autonomous, not accountable to anyone, least of all God. This State without faith or law has become, as was foreseen by the supreme theoretician Hegel, a god walking upon earth, a god who knows no boundaries to his power, nor justice to his right.

If the complete-power of the Church is within the hands of the magistrates, they can cut it up and sew it back together as they please. They have no need to borrow the sword which they have beside them. They give and take away ministers as it seems good to them. They treat them as their valets. When they be drunk and angry, they give them leave, as the fancy takes them. And in this way the wolves

will receive their fill in the Church, and the true pastors will be cast out. For the tyrants will never allow anyone to tell them the truth.

A contemporary theologian who, like Viret, has consecrated his entire life to the practical application of the Law of God to all aspects of reality, Rousas John Rushdoony, in his study on the connections of Christianity and the State before the Reform, reached the same conclusions as our Reformer:

If the state is not placed under the sovereign authority of the triune God, there can exist no hope of liberty for men and the Church. The State, having become its own god, its own source of rights and morals, it is therefore impossible for it to deceive or to do any wrong. Faced with such a State no man can possess the least right of critique or any other liberty of having any other opinion besides theirs. . . . The modern humanist State is thus the most jealous god in history. It will not tolerate any rival.

The confrontation with Bern was inevitable. After two years of such an appreciated ministry in Geneva, Viret's failing health obliged him to seek a milder climate in France in the spring of 1561. In this country he exercised his remarkable talents to the benefit of the Churches of Midi, of the city of Lyon, and finally, which was his last exile, in Bearn, the kingdom of Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre.

Viret was a man of rare modesty. Posterity, in taking at his word his deceptive appreciation of himself, hold him in fundamentally low regard. Here is an example of what some of his contemporaries say of his preaching gifts:

His speech was so sweet that he would continually hold the attention and the interest of those who heard him. His style, which married strength to harmony, was so caressing to the ear and to the intelligence that even those of his hearers least interested in religious matters, those most impatient of other preachers, would hear him out without difficulty and even with pleasure. One has said, that they were as though suspended on his lips, that they wished his discourses were even longer.

At his side Melchior Adam wrote:

In Lyon, preaching out in the open, he brought thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. By the power of his divine eloquence he would even cause those passing by to stop, listen and hear him out.

Of Calvin Beze wrote, "None have taught with greater authority," of Farel, "None thundered more mightily," but of Viret he said, "None has a more winsome charm when he speaks." Some of his

contemporaries placed him above Calvin as a preacher. But if Calvin is incomparable as a dogmatic exegete and polemist, Viret largely surpasses him as ethicist and apologist. His strength was a domain often neglected, because of its awkwardness: the application of the Word of God to all domains of life. His *Christian Instruction in the Doctrine of the Law and Gospel* of 1564 is unquestionably the best commentary on the Ten Commandments that the Christian Church has ever known. In this work, as he presents the appearance of the philosophical idealism of Descartes (a subjectivism that does not allow any true link between the knowledge of nature and that of the Creator, Romans 1:18-23), Viret gives us a magisterial application of the Biblical doctrine of the general revelation of God throughout all creation. His marvelous polemical dialogue, *Le Monde à l'Empire et le Monde Démoniacle* (1561) contains—among other treasures—a historical, social, and economic analysis of the light of the Word of God which permits him, for example, to put his finger on the functioning of certain economic phenomena perverted in his time, two centuries before the development of modern economic science! As a Christian moralist he was comparable to a John Chrysostom of the fifth century, to a Cardinal Pie of the nineteenth, or even to a Rousas Rushdoony of our epoch. It is high time that we finally begin to grasp the importance of this remarkable thinker, that we repeat his words in modern adaptation, and that we return to his vision of the application of the complete Word of God to all aspects of human life, to all scientific disciplines. Without such a return to the Biblical reality we can have no hope for the revival of the Church and for the restoration of his reformational influence over the entirety of culture and society.

To conclude this too brief survey, I will give you the words of a man who knew Pierre Viret well and who, moving beyond the modesty of his friend, sought to place him among the great men of God, the humble and powerful servants by which the Lord Jesus Christ is glorified in His Church. This is what Theodore de Beze wrote in his *Portraits* in 1581:

Pierre Viret

I see his body, beaten, fraught with suffering and age,
 Recipient of poison, wounds, and all man's deadly rage.
 I see the virtue of the Lord, His noble mysteries,
 And in great silence I submit myself to His decrees.

I read the precious writings, full of wisdom without end,
 That you, my dearest Viret, in that dreadful prison penned.
 I see the goodness of your judgment, and your conscience clear,
 And know that truly God resides within your mansion here.

I know Christ watches o'er His Church with gentle, loving care,
 For, seeing it half-dead, engulfed in flame, in great despair,
 He lights a fire in men's souls within that dreadful heat,
 Enflaming hearts, enlight'ning minds, to make His Church complete.

If all the folly of the world rejects His sacred way,
 Demanding from us some new sign, some miracle today,
 Our gentle Viret will provide a witness with each breath;
 He spoke to them in life, and he is speaking still in death.

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