

THE BIBLE AND THE FRENCH PROTESTANT REFORMATION OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY¹

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One of the basic assumptions of Reformation history is that the Bible held a central place in the Protestant movement.² However, there seem to have been few attempts to determine exactly what this meant for Protestants in France in terms of the French Bible's

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²This study is not concerned with the related and important issue of whether or not the printed Word was as important as the preached Word in the sixteenth-century French Protestant Reformation. The importance of printing and literacy in the diffusion of Protestantism has been emphasized by a number of historians, including Henri Hauser, who called the Reformation in France "the heresy of a Book." Others have corroborated this view by pointing out that during this period a vast number of French Bibles and NTs were printed, that many French people had the Bible rather than the Books of Hours read to them in church, and that even many of the almanac and alphabet-books produced in that day combined reading lessons with scriptural instruction. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that preaching was also central to the spread and consolidation of French Protestantism. For example, Pierre Viret regularly preached to 8,000 people several times a week over a period of more than six months in Nîmes in 1561. Moreover, in other Protestant areas, such as Germany, there was also great emphasis on the Bible, but the majority apparently did not possess (let alone read) a copy of their own. Robert W. Scribner, extrapolating from Miriam U. Chrisman's recent work on the role of books in the Strasbourg Reformation, estimates that in the Strasbourg area in the sixteenth century, only one in five families appeared to have a Bible. Obviously, more research needs to be done on this subject. Pierre Imbart de la Tour, *Les origines de la réforme*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1905-1935), 3: 336-337, 380-381; Henri Hauser, *La naissance du protestantisme* (Paris, 1940), p. 59; Robert Sauzet, *Contre-réforme et réforme catholique en Bas-Languedoc: le diocèse de Nîmes au XVII^e siècle* (Paris, 1979), pp. 151-152; J.-M. Constant, *Nobles et paysans en Beauce au XVI^e et XVII^e siècles* (Lille, 1981), p. 327; Miriam U. Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg, 1480-1599* (New Haven, CT, 1982); Richard

origins and uses, and especially its influence. In other words, how did the first-generation French Protestant Reformers establish and use the Bible in their perceived calling of restoring the Gospel to the Christian church, and with what results? In particular, why did there emerge no "authorized version" of the Scriptures in French, no translation which achieved anything like the universal authority of Luther's Bible in Germany or the King James Version in England?³

These questions for the most part will be examined through the eyes of three important first-generation French Reformation leaders: John Calvin (1509-1564), Pierre Viret (1511-1571), and Theodore Beza (1519-1605). More than any others, these three men provided the leadership of the early Protestant movement in French-speaking lands, a movement which they preferred to call the Reformed Church but which eventually became known popularly as Calvinism.⁴

1. *The French Reformation Bible in Historical Perspective: An Overview*

However, the story of the French Reformation Bible does not begin with Calvin, Viret, and Beza, but with the humanist

Gawthrop and Gerald Strauss, "Protestantism and Literacy in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present*, no. 104 (August 1984), pp. 31-55; and Robert W. Scribner, "Images, Piety, and the Reformation," lecture, Annual Meeting of the Historical Association, Homerton College, Cambridge, April 4, 1986. For a recent, highly suggestive study of the place of literacy and popular culture in the Lutheran Reformation, see Robert W. Scribner, "Incombustible Luther: The Image of the Reformer in Early Modern Germany," *Past and Present*, no. 110 (February 1986), pp. 38-68.

³For a first-rate discussion of the place of the Bible in the Reformation, see Roland H. Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Eng., 1963), 1: 1-37.

⁴The first-generation Calvinists usually referred to their movement as "the Reform" and to the institutional expression of it as "the Reformed Church." "Calvinism" is a later term, one which Calvin would have deplored. In France, Protestants in general began to be called "Huguenots" around the middle of the sixteenth century. Very soon thereafter, the term was applied in particular to those adherents of what had become the dominant form of Protestantism in that country, namely the Reformed Church. See "Calvinism," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 12 vols. (Oxford, 1933), 3: 45; and Janet G. Gray, "The Origin of the Word Huguenot," *SCJ* 14/3 (Fall 1983): 349-359.

scholar and reformer, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. With a Protestant resonance, he wrote in the Preface to his French translation of the NT in 1523:

And in order that everyone who has a knowledge of the French language and who does not understand Latin, be disposed to receive this present grace which God, by his sovereign goodness, pity, and mercy . . . has arranged for you in the common tongue, by his grace, the Gospels . . . in order that the simplest member[s] of the body of Christ, having this in their own language, be able to ascertain the truth of the Gospel . . . and afterward they will be, by his good pleasure, immersed in the New Testament, which is the book of life and the only rule of Christians. . . .⁵

Lefèvre's OT was printed in Antwerp in 1528, and the New and the Old were brought together in the so-called Antwerp Bible of 1530. There were further editions, with extensive corrections, in 1534 and 1541, all allegedly in harmony with medieval Catholic reverence for the Scriptures, but apparently alarming enough to earn the Antwerp Bible a place on the Index in 1546. Even though Lefèvre protested that he was a good Catholic and that all he sought was the internal reformation of the Church, his efforts at Bible translation were suspect by many in high places.⁶

Meanwhile in the borderlands of France, reform was proceeding even more rapidly as the Waldensians met on September 12, 1532, in a synod at Chanforans in what is now Piedmont, to authorize a new translation of the Bible into French. The gathering included not only a number of Waldensian leaders, but also the French reformers Guillaume Farel and Antoine Saunier and most likely

⁵"Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples a tous Chrétiens et Chrétiennes," June 8, 1523, in A.-L. Herminjard, ed., *Correspondance des Reformateurs dans pays de Langue Française*, 9 vols. (Geneva, 1864-1897), 1: 133-134. There was a sharp break in the history of the publication of Scriptures and Scripture portions in France beginning in 1523. Before that year, the publications were mostly abridgments, collections of excerpts, and paraphrases, nearly always with accompanying medieval glosses. After 1523, there was a flood of Testaments and Bibles in fresh translations by Christian humanists like Lefèvre.

⁶Bettye Thomas Chambers, *Bibliography of French Bibles: Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century French-Language Editions of the Scriptures* (Geneva, 1983), pp. xi and 42-44; Henry Heller, "The Evangelicism of Lefèvre d'Étaples: 1525," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 19 (1972): 42-77; and Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Lefèvre: Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 154-162.

Pierre Viret and Pierre Robert dit Olivétan. The last-named was Calvin's cousin and, like Lefèvre and Calvin, also a native of Picardy. From this decision to underwrite a new translation emerged the Olivétan Bible (also known as the Neuchâtel Bible), translated by Pierre Robert and published by Pierre de Wingle in June, 1535. Following the Reformation principle of translation from the original languages, this version would be used by all of the Calvinist reformers in the first two decades of the movement.⁷

Interestingly enough, this first true Protestant version in French was dedicated to Farel, Viret, and Saunier. It contained three prefaces by Calvin (one in Latin for the entire Bible, and one in French for each of the Testaments), and three prefaces by Pierre Robert (one an exposition on the true church, one an explanation of the linguistic principles employed in the translation, and one an introduction to the Apocrypha in which its non-canonicity was explained).⁸ Calvin's Latin preface is remarkably similar in tone and content to that of Lefèvre in the latter's 1523 translation, except that Calvin's is longer and more pointedly evangelistic. This Olivétan Bible became the basis for all "Geneva" versions of the Scriptures well into the nineteenth century, including the widely used Geneva edition of 1588.⁹

The avowed purpose of the Olivétan translation was to provide for the reform of the church and the spread of the Gospel. As Olivétan says in his first preface: "Jesus charged and commissioned me to draw this precious treasure out of Hebrew and Greek coffers and to pour it into French travellers' purses."¹⁰ In his preface to the NT, Calvin assures his readers: "Without the Gospel all wealth is poverty, all wisdom is folly, all strength is weakness. . . . But through Christ the poor are made rich, the weak are made strong,

⁷Chambers, p. xii.

⁸*La Bible Qui est toute la Sainte escripture. En laquelle sont contenus, le Vieil Testament et le Nouveau, translatez en Francoys* (Neuchâtel, 1535). (Hereinafter cited as Olivétan, *Bible*.) Only Calvin's NT preface was reprinted in subsequent printings and versions of this Bible. For more information on the 1535 Olivétan Bible, see Chambers, pp. 88-92.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Pierre Robert dit Olivétan, "P. Robert Olivétanus lhumble et petit Translateur a Leglise de Jesus Christ. Salut," in Olivétan, *Bible*, sig. *ii; and Paul T. Fuhrmann, "Calvin, The Expositor of Scripture," *Interpretation*, 6/2 (April 1952): 188-189.

the fools wise, the sinners just, the desolate comforted, the doubtful certain, and the slaves free.”¹¹

Unfortunately for the Protestants, the constantly changing and evolving state of the French language in the sixteenth century served to outdate Olivétan’s translation soon after it was published and therefore diminished its usefulness. Throughout the century, it was subjected to continuous revision by the pastors of Geneva. Calvin and Viret played a leading part in these revisions during the two decades after the initial publication of the Olivétan Bible. During the 1550s, they were joined in this effort by Beza, and gradually the younger man took over the main burden of revision. Finally, in 1588, a committee of Geneva pastors headed by Beza and Corneille Bertram, professor of Hebrew at the Academy of Geneva, published what became known as “The French Geneva Bible.”

This 1588 revision of the original Olivétan version contained a number of corrections in light of the latest and best biblical scholarship and represented a major linguistic improvement over all previous French translations of the Scriptures. It remained the standard French Protestant Bible, virtually uncorrected, until the revision of David Martin in 1699-1707, and was not significantly changed until 1805.¹²

2. *Importance of Scripture to the French-Speaking Protestants*

Why were the French-speaking Protestants so determined to keep an up-to-date translation of the Bible in circulation during the sixteenth century? It was because they believed that the Christian knows God *only* through the Scriptures, the written Word of God, and that a person is empowered to believe in the Gospel (liberated by, with, and in Christ) by the Holy Spirit, who makes alive in the reader the promises made to others. The church, the congregation of believers, needs no other authenticator, no other source of

¹¹John Calvin, “A Tous Amateurs de Jesus Christ et son Evangile, Salut,” in Olivétan, *Bible*, sig. aa ii.

¹²This is only a brief sketch of a large number of revisions of the Olivétan Bible in the years 1535-1588. For further details, see Chambers, pp. xii-xiv and 479-481. For a discussion of the history of the French language in the sixteenth century, see Ferdinand Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française des origines à nos jours*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1966-1967), vol. 2: *Le XVI^e siècle*; and Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI^e siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris, 1942), pp. 383-411.

authority. The church must stand under the Word of God if it wants to understand itself and its mission rightly.

The Sufficiency and Authority of Scripture

The principle which in Luther was expressed by the characteristic formula of *sola scriptura* appears in Calvin as a fully articulated "doctrine of sufficiency." He repeatedly affirms the sufficiency of Scripture in his writings, both in its negative and in its positive form: (1) the Christian need not look outside of Scripture for guidance in faith and morals because (2) Scripture contains everything that the Christian may require for salvation and spiritual welfare. Moreover, Calvin taught that the Bible was above the church and should be read by each person for himself/herself. Thus, in his *Institutes* Calvin asserts:

But a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. . . . But such wranglers are neatly refuted by just one word of the apostle. He testifies that the church is "built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles" (Eph. 2:20). If the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the foundation, this must have had authority before the church began to exist. . . . For if the Christian church was from the beginning founded upon the writings of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, wherever this doctrine is found, the acceptance of it—without which the church itself would never have existed—must certainly have preceded the church.¹³

Again, in another place in the *Institutes*, he exclaims:

Read Demosthenes or Cicero; read Plato, Aristotle, and others of that tribe. They will, I admit, allure you, delight you, move you, enrapture you in wonderful measure. But betake yourself from them to this sacred reading. Then, in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow, that, compared with its deep impression, such vigor as the orators and philosophers have will nearly vanish. Consequently, it is easy to see that the Sacred Scriptures, which so

¹³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20 and 21 (Philadelphia, 1960), 1.7.2. (Hereinafter cited as *Institutes*.)

far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.¹⁴

Little wonder that the early Protestants in France were called "Biblians"!¹⁵

From this high view of Scripture flowed all other French Protestant concerns for the restoration of apostolic Christianity. They saw the Bible as the means to reform the visible church; as the authority for Christian doctrine and practice; as the agency for meeting the spiritual needs of people, especially the Elect; as a source of inspiration for living and dying; and as the centerpiece for civilized living.

Scripture as a Means to Reform the Church

The Reformation had begun, after all, as a movement to reform the visible church by applying to it the superior and incontestable authority of the Word of God. Thus, the Word became the panoply of the Protestant movement, its bulwark of strength, and its seal of divine approval. This devotion to the Word appears from Luther's early literary efforts onward through Calvin's entire work, and it is a familiar theme in the writings of nearly all of the French Protestant leaders, including Viret and Beza. No expression came more readily to the pen of Calvin, Viret, or Beza than "*la parole de Dieu.*"

Therefore, in his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin states, in essence, that there can be no true religion without the Bible:

This is how we can distinguish true religion from superstition: when the Word of God directs us, there is true religion; but when each man follows his own opinion, or when men join together to follow an opinion they hold in common, the result is always concocted superstition.¹⁶

In fact, Calvin declares in the preface to the reader of his *Institutes* that one of his main purposes in publishing this work is "... to

¹⁴Ibid., 1.8.1.

¹⁵Fuhrmann, p. 188.

¹⁶John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, 59 vols. (Brunswick, 1863-1880), 37: 692. See Jer 7:21-24.

prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word," in order that they might understand it and use it in reforming the Church of God.¹⁷

Beza, too, shared this view and contributed heavily through the use of his considerable philological gifts to making the French Bible available to the cause of reform. On the important question of what distinguishes the true church from the false, he wrote: "... in each place where the Word of God is purely announced, the Sacraments are purely administered, with church polity furnished in accordance with the holy and pure doctrine, there we recognize the church of God."¹⁸ If one first searched the Word, then all else would fall into place in a truly reformed church, according to Calvin and Beza.

The Bible as Authority for Christian Faith and Practice

In particular, the French Reformers saw the Scriptures as the sole authority for Christian doctrine and practice. Calvin taught that the Scriptures are a "depository of doctrine," and the only sure guide for practice in the Christian life. He argued: "Now, in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture."¹⁹ Indeed, the binding authority of Scripture in these matters has nowhere been more forcefully laid down than in Calvin's *Institutes*: "For our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness, and at least without finding fault, whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture."²⁰

Viret expressed his views on this subject early in the Reformation, at the Disputation of Lausanne in 1536, when representatives of the Reformers and of the established church met to determine the religious fate of that city in French-speaking Switzerland. The edict of convocation specified that all churchmen were to come ready to prove the truth of their teaching "by the Holy Scriptures." Thus, the central question of the disputation was raised almost

¹⁷"John Calvin to the Reader," *Institutes*, 1: 3-5.

¹⁸Theodore Beza, *Confession de la foy chrétienne, contenant la confirmation d'icelle, et la refutation des superstitions contraires* (Geneva, 1559), p. 122.

¹⁹*Institutes*, 1.6.2-3.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 1.8.4.

immediately when the claim was made for the Church of Rome that since that church was “before and above Scripture,” it alone had the right to interpret Scripture, and that correct interpretation was contained in papal decrees, conciliar decisions, and the writings of the church fathers and doctors. Viret immediately challenged this position and insisted that the Scriptures were “. . . given to us of God through the prophets and apostles” and they alone are “sufficient to instruct, teach, admonish, and correct us; to cause us to be perfect, engrossed in and ready to every good work.” Moreover, he affirmed that “the canonical Scriptures are alone infallible and ordained to regulate and authenticate all others,” which without the authority of the Bible “would have no weight or power.”²¹

Beza agreed with Calvin and Viret on this point. However, during the last years of his otherwise distinguished leadership of the Geneva Church and Academy, Beza presided over a diminution of this strong linkage of Scripture and doctrine in French Reformed thought. He did his best to be true to the work of Calvin, but his teaching methods led to innovations. Calvin had taught theology primarily by means of biblical exegesis, a fitting commentary on his high view of Scripture and strong emphasis on biblical doctrine. Beza, however, felt the need to clarify and to systematize the Bible passages under study. Consequently, the content of the lectures which Calvin delivered under the rubric of “Scripture and Doctrine” became so unwieldy that Beza finally reluctantly agreed in 1595 to a division which resulted in a separate set of lectures on each subject: “Scripture” and “Doctrine.” Ironically, the historic Calvinist close linkage of the Bible and Christian doctrine thus was first weakened by Calvin’s successor and best-known disciple, a man often accused of being “more Calvinist” than Calvin himself—Theodore Beza.²²

The Bible in Spiritual Nurture

The first-generation French Protestant Reformers also emphasized the Bible as the means of meeting the spiritual needs of people, especially the Elect. This process begins, declares Calvin in

²¹Arthur Piaget, ed., *Les Actes de la Dispute de Lausanne*, 1536 (Neuchâtel, 1928), pp. 40-42.

²²Pontien Polman, *L'Élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du XVI^e siècle* (Gembloux, 1932), pp. 126-127.

his preface to the NT portion of the Olivétan Bible, when individuals can read for themselves in the Scriptures that “Jesus is the Messiah.” In fact, he points out that the burden of the four Gospels is precisely to demonstrate this truth. Moreover, since Jesus is the Messiah, salvation is available through faith in his work on the cross. Moreover, Calvin asserts:

Scripture is also called gospel, that is, fresh and joyful news, because in it is declared that Christ, the sole true and eternal Son of the living God, was made man, to make us children of God his Father, by adoption. Thus he is our only Savior, to whom we owe our redemption, peace, righteousness, sanctification, salvation, and life.

Furthermore, we are called to this inheritance without respect for persons; male or female, little or great, servant or lord, master or disciple, cleric or lay, Hebrew or Greek, French or Latin—no one is rejected, who with a sure confidence receives him who was sent for him, embraces what is presented to him, and in short acknowledges Jesus Christ for what he is and as he is given by the Father.²³

Viret, too, makes clear this connection between Scripture and salvation, in some ways even more clearly and forcefully than Calvin. In a large section of one of his major works, Viret discusses the means which God has ordained for making the blessing of faith in Christ available to people. In summarizing his passage, he affirms:

This means is the preaching and manifestation of His Word, the hearing of which will bring His elect to a knowledge of Him. And thus they obtain eternal life by this knowledge. . . . And because of this He condemns all service and all religion which rests on any other foundation than upon His only and pure Word, in which He has given a clear declaration of His will.²⁴

²³Calvin, “A Tous Amateurs de Jesus Christ,” in Olivétan, *Bible*, sig. aa ii. This is perhaps Calvin’s most comprehensive and eloquent statement of the manner in which God’s salvation knows no sexual, economic, social, or racial barriers. As such, it is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul’s similar declaration in Gal 3:26-29.

²⁴Pierre Viret, *Instruction chrétienne en la doctrine de la loy et de l’Évangile; et en la vraye philosophie et théologie tant naturelle que supernaturelle des Chrétiens; et en la contemplation du temple et des images et oeuvres de la providence de Dieu*

The French Protestant Reformers also saw the Bible as the basic guide to the Christian life. In this regard, Calvin likened the Scriptures to a pair of spectacles, given to human beings so that they can begin to understand the Creator and his creation.²⁵ In his preface to Olivétan's NT, Calvin urges all to "take and read." In addition, he admonishes the clergy to allow Christians to read the Bible for themselves. Prodding the shepherds of the sheep, he chides:

O you who call yourselves bishops and pastors of the poor people, see to it that the sheep of Jesus Christ are not deprived of their proper pasture; and that it is not prohibited and forbidden to any Christian freely and in his own language to read, handle, and hear this holy gospel, seeing that such is the will of God, and Jesus Christ commands it. . . . Surely, if you are truly their vicars, successors, and imitators, it is your office to do the same, watching over the flock and seeking every possible means to have everyone instructed in the faith of Jesus Christ, by the pure Word of God.²⁶

In one of his major works Viret summarizes this point concerning the link between the Scriptures and the spiritual needs of humanity in a near-classic statement of the Reformed position:

If then it is a question of the true service of God, we can reduce what is required of us to four points according to the declarations given to us in Holy Scriptures. The first is that man should place his complete trust in him [God] only, expecting from him alone his salvation through Jesus Christ. Second, that he should call upon him for all his necessities, both temporal and spiritual, according to the rules which he himself has given us. Third, give thanks for all the blessings you have received and receive daily from him. Fourth, be obedient to him in all that he commands you, both in regard to his holy person and in regard to your neighbor.²⁷

en tout l'univers; et en l'histoire de la création et cheute et réparation du genre humain, 2 vols. (Geneva, 1564), 1: 7.

²⁵*Institutes*, 1.6.1.

²⁶Calvin, "A Tous Amateurs de Jesus Christ," in Olivétan, *Bible*, sig. aa ii verso.

²⁷Viret, 1: 7.

Scripture as Source of Inspiration for Living and Dying

In addition, the French Reformers saw the Bible as a source of inspiration for living and dying. This was especially true of the Psalms, the translation of which was begun by the French Protestant poet Clément Marot (49 Psalms, published 1533-1543) and completed by Beza (101 Psalms, published 1551-1562). Really a verse translation rather than a version of this portion of the Bible, these Psalms became the hymnal of the French Protestants.

Although scholarly consensus usually ranks Beza's translations below those of Marot, the Geneva pastor succeeded in his purpose of providing the French Reformed Church with a model of serious, pious poetry, while at the same time being faithful to the biblical text. Moreover, the Huguenot Psalter provided a source of inspiration and encouragement to the embattled French Protestants during the Wars of Religion and was carried with them to other places in Europe and ultimately to America. They sang Scripture as they went to the stake and into battle, and the biblical hymns served as a signal of recognition wherever Huguenot believers gathered. Particularly impressive was Beza's Huguenot battle-song, Psalm 68, which begins:

Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered;
 whose majesty is over Israel,
 and his power is in the skies.
 Terrible is God in his sanctuary,
 the God of Israel,
 he gives power and strength to his people.
 Blessed be God!²⁸

²⁸Clément Marot and Theodore Beza, *Les Pseaumes mis en rime française* (Lyon, 1562). As Jill Raitt points out, the quality of Beza's translations of the Psalms was affected by the fact that he wrote them while at the same time working on other major projects (such as his NT *Annotations* and translations) and during periods of great activity in the Academy of Lausanne, where he taught. See Jill Raitt, "Theodore Beza," in Raitt, ed., *Shapers of Religious Traditions in Germany, Switzerland, and Poland, 1560-1600* (New Haven, CT, 1981), p. 101. On the Huguenot Psalter and its use, see Michel Jenneret, *Poésie et tradition biblique au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1969), pp. 88-105; and Emmanuel-Orentin Douen, *Clément Marot et le psautier huguenot*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1878-1879), 1: 3-5. For a scholarly discussion of the many editions of the Huguenot Psalter, see Pierre Pidoux, ed., *Le Psautier huguenot du XVI^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Basel, 1962).

The Bible as Centerpiece for Civilized Living

Finally, the early French Protestants believed that the Bible should become the centerpiece for civilized living, a guide for society based on humane and godly values. Calvin taught that learning and culture should manifest God's glory because the Bible taught that they were his handiwork. Both Scripture and nature bear testimony to God's sovereign rule in the world, a sovereign rule which makes sense out of life.

In this connection, Calvin believed that because of sin no sound natural theology was possible. Scripture was the only medium of truly knowing the Creator and of apprehending his revelation in creation. Similarly, it was the only sure way of making sense out of creation. Remaining traces of the image of God distinguish the human race from other creatures and provide momentary lightning flashes of what could have been if the first parents had not sinned in the Garden. But it is Scripture and not any memory of primeval purity which provides the basis for civilized behavior and orderly conduct.

This is illustrated by Calvin's advice to rulers and magistrates in his preface to Olivétan's NT. He warns:

And you kings, princes, and Christian lords, who are ordained of God to punish the wicked and to uphold the good in peace according to the Word of God—to you it belongs to have this sacred doctrine, so useful and needful, published, taught, and understood in all your lands, realms, and lordly domains, to the end that God may be magnified by you, and his gospel exalted. . . . What is more, you ought to know that there is no better foundation, nor one firmer, for keeping your domains in true prosperity, than to have him as Chief and Master, and to govern your peoples under his hand; and that without him they (your domains) can be neither permanent nor endure for long, but shall be accursed of God and shall consequently fall down in confusion and ruin.²⁹

But perhaps Viret says it even more clearly in one of his major works. After discussing what it is that makes humans different from the animals of the forests and the beasts of the fields, Viret concludes:

²⁹Calvin, "A Tous Amateurs de Jesus Christ," in Olivétan, *Bible*, sig. aa ii verso.

There can be no true civilization, no consideration for the very young and the very old, no concern for the poor and the afflicted, no true courtesy and no true love, no true peace and no true commerce unless the behavior of mankind is governed by the rules and precepts of Holy Scripture. Without the Word of God to guide us, we soon shall return like dogs to our vomit and like pigs to our sties.³⁰

3. *French Bible Translation After 1535*

For all of the reasons mentioned above, the French Protestant Reformers exhibited the greatest enthusiasm for up-to-date and accurate translations of the Bible in the language of the people. After the initial Olivétan translation of 1535, and despite repeated royal edicts which forbade translation of any part of the Bible and the printing or selling of translations, commentaries, annotations, tables, indices, or epitomes concerning Holy Scripture in the Kingdom of France, the revisions rolled from the presses. (Unfortunately, vernacular translations became associated in the eyes of the stronger party in France—the Roman Catholics—with schism and heresy.) New editions rapidly supplanted each other nearly every year at first: in 1536, 1538, 1539, 1540, and 1543.

The last of the afore-mentioned editions—that of 1543—was the first NT to carry Calvin's name as reviser. Calvin then corrected and updated the entire French Bible in 1546, and he did so again in 1551, this time aided by Beza and Louis Budé. Another new revision appeared in 1553, followed by yet another new version in 1560 done by Calvin and Beza.

Meanwhile in France itself, no vernacular edition of the Scriptures was published in Paris, the seat of both political and ecclesiastical authority, between 1525 and 1565. Lyon, on the other hand, continued to be an active center for the printing of Bibles all during the period. However, printers in that city, most of them in sympathy with the Protestant cause, had to adopt measures of prudence not necessary in Geneva. Various techniques were used to evade royal censors, such as omitting the most blatantly Protestant expressions from title-page phraseology and incorporating St.

³⁰Pierre Viret, *De l'autorité et perfection de la doctrine les saintes Escritures, et du ministère d'icelle; et des vrais et faux pasteurs, et de leurs disciples; et des marques pour cognoistres et discerner tant les uns quelles autres* (Lyon, 1564), p. 6.

Jerome's prefatory epistles instead of Calvin's prefaces. Yet, despite all the precautionary measures, it was apparent from the version of the biblical text used, from the marginal notes, and from certain peripheral texts that these Lyonese editions were Protestant works. When Lyon became a Protestant city and Viret became its chief pastor in the early 1560s, all of these pretenses were dropped and the printers made their editions openly Calvinistic.³¹

By 1565, the Geneva version of the Scriptures was being published in all French-speaking printing centers, including Caen, Lyon, and Paris itself. In order to counterattack, the Roman Church allowed and encouraged several approved French Bibles. One translation, produced by René Benoist of the theological faculty of the University of Paris, appeared in 1566. Although the Benoist Bible had been protected by royal "privilege," the Sorbonne quickly condemned it in 1567 as little more than an amalgam of several Geneva editions. However, this censure did not prevent its frequent reprinting and its use as the basis for what became known later as the Louvain Bible, the authoritative French Scriptures for the Roman Catholic faithful. The Louvain Bible, with officially approved marginal notes, was first published in 1578 and gradually superseded the Benoist Bible, remaining the accepted French Catholic text for the next hundred years.³²

Therefore, by the end of the sixteenth century, there were two authoritative French translations of the Bible: the Louvain Bible of 1578 for Roman Catholics and the Geneva Bible of 1588 for Protestants. Both were ultimately based on the suspected and tainted Lefèvre Bible, and both had been produced outside of the Kingdom of France.³³ In addition, France itself was torn by violent theological controversy and religious war. All of these factors—as well as an unparalleled transformation of the French language during the

³¹Chambers, pp. xii-xiii.

³²Ibid., pp. xiv-xv.

³³The problem of establishing a viable indigenous movement with a separate identity while relying heavily on outside help is a familiar theme in the history of Christian missions. Such an arrangement often carries with it all of the political and diplomatic problems inherent in this type of situation. In any case, this dependency on Bibles produced outside France illustrates the complexities of the religious scene in France in the sixteenth century. Moreover, this reliance on external resources for Bible translations and Bibles also helps to offset recent arguments that the role of Geneva in sixteenth-century French Calvinism, though

sixteenth century—explain why no French translation of the Scriptures attained the universal acceptance in that country comparable to the status achieved by Luther's Bible in Germany and the King James Version in England.

4. Conclusion

In the end, the French Protestants failed in their efforts to win France and in their crusade to provide a suitable translation of the Bible acceptable to the overwhelming majority of French people. The fact that the Roman Catholics did no better in terms of providing a standard version of the Scriptures was small consolation. Authority in the Roman Church rested on a different center of spiritual gravity.

This failure to exert a long-term cultural impact through a standard translation of the Bible, despite the strong biblical emphasis of the French Protestant Reformation, had important repercussions for French national life beyond the sixteenth century. The fact that the French Protestants failed to make France a biblically oriented society in the same sense that Germany and England were biblically oriented societies meant that biblical ways of expression penetrated much less deeply into the French idiom than into that of English or German. Also, perhaps the fact that the French Protestants failed to reform the mainstream church in France in a biblical sense and failed to persuade the French people as a whole of the benefits of a civilization with the Bible as its centerpiece helps explain why France became the first major Western nation to embrace secularism.

Even more interesting and certainly more ironic, as with Calvinist thought in general, the great emphasis of the first-generation French Calvinists on the Bible in church and society had its greatest impact not in France but in England and Scotland, not among French-speaking people but among English-speaking people, not

significant, was not really as crucial and extensive as formerly supposed. This emphasis on the determinative influence of Geneva in the French Reformed movement can be seen in Imbart de la Tour, *Origines de la Réforme*, and in Robert M. Kingdom, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Geneva, 1956). The recent challenge to this view is illustrated by Menna Prestwich, "Calvinism in France, 1555-1629," in Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541-1715* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 71-107.

among Reformed French Christians but among Puritans and Presbyterians. Thus, the first-generation French Protestant concern that the Bible be the centerpiece for reform in the church and for civil behavior in society-at-large would be more fully realized in London, Edinburgh, and Boston than in Paris.³⁴

³⁴J. N. V. van den Brink, "Bible and Biblical Theology in the Early Reformation," *SJT*, 14/4 (December 1961): 337-352, and 15/1 (March 1962): 50-65. Van den Brink makes a strong case for the primary importance of the Bible in the Protestant Reformation and for its positive cultural impact on the sixteenth-century European society. Unfortunately, his argument contains only one illustration from the Reformation in France, a reference to Guillaume Farel's insistence at Montbéliard in 1525 that the sum total of the Christian religion was nothing more than "the pure contents of the Scripture." See 14: 341.