THE HUGUENOTS

Prayer
Scripture: Psalm 148
Hymn: 335 "All Things Praise Thee"

THE BEGINNINGS OF REFORMATION IN FRANCE

Some of the first discussion of and agitation for the reformation of the church in France arose in the circles of Renaissance Humanism. Scholars like William Budé and the Estiennes, thinkers like Dolet and Rabelais, poets like Marot, led an awakening in France that was stimulated by the French campaigns in Italy. The Renaissance influences help awaken an indigenous religious reform of which one of the early leaders was Lefèvre d'Etaples. As early as 1507 he resolved to consecrate his learning to a study of the Holy Scriptures and to "preach Christ from the sources." Lefèvre gathered about him a circle of like-minded men who were willing to keep the old forms and beliefs but who wanted to infuse into them a new spirit. He labored to make the Bible known to the people and began to translate it into the French in 1521. He published the Gospels in June, 1523, and the Epistles, Acts and the Apocalypse in October and November, 1523. His translation was based on the Vulgate and was quite literal. He considered it dangerous to try to be more elegant than Scripture. He and his friends preached to the poor and humble; they were critical of scholastic theology and the superstitious elements characteristic of French religion of the late Middle Ages. They reacted against the intellectualism of Erasmus and the Renaissance. They aimed at touching the hearts of the people by the simple preaching of Christ.

Another leader of a circle that discussed reform was the mystical Bishop of Meaux, Guillaume Briçonnet. He earnestly desired reform but dreaded revolution. He gathered about him a band of scholars dedicated to reforming the church from within. They eagerly read and admired Erasmus. They were heirs of the great conciliar leaders of the fifteenth century, such as Gerson. They wanted to bring to France a genuine revival of faith and love. They hoped to reconcile the great truths of Christian dogma with the New Learning, to enlarge the sphere of Christian intelligence, and to impregnate Humanism with Christian morality. When Luther's writings began to infiltrate France this circle eagerly read Luther.

One of William Briçonnet's most distinguished disciples was Margaret d'Angoulême, sister of King Francis I. She was considered "the violet in the royal garden." She was a sensitive, pious, tender soul of deep mystical tendencies, tuned to the intellectual and religious movements around her. She was ardently devoted to the New Learning. She mastered Latin, Italian and Spanish in her girlhood; later she learned Greek and Hebrew in order to study Scriptures in the original tongues. She gathered around her many of the better spirits of France. She was the center of a circle of scholars who eagerly read and
freely discussed every new book that appeared. They also read the older works, treasured by Renaissance Humanists, such as Marsiglio Ficino with his Christian Platonism, and Nicholas of Cusa, who tried to combine the Old Scholasticism with the new thoughts of the Renaissance. Margaret carried on a long correspondence with Briçonnet. She eagerly listened to the preaching of Lefèvre and Roussel. She and her circle read everything from Erasmus that appeared. When Luther's writings became available they read and discussed his works and were strongly influenced by Luther's doctrines of faith, grace, and the cross of Jesus.

Luther's books were his first emissaries to France. A student in 1520 wrote that no books were more quickly bought in Paris than those of Luther. At first only the Latin ones were read by the French but it is thought that very soon Luther began to be translated into French. Froben printed a volume containing what Luther had published up to October, 1518, and sent large quantities to Paris. Lutheran works poured into France from the printers of Frankfort, Strassburg, and Basel. Teachers read them and discussed them with pupils who also eagerly read them. Even some doctors of the Sorbonne read and approved some of Luther's ideas.

The works of Zwingli found their way into France and were read by those interested in reforming the church.

From the very beginning of the spread of the New Learning and Lutheranism, the Sorbonne was the stronghold of conservative Catholicism. In April, 1521, the faculty gave its judgment on the Leipzig Debate condemning Luther. Francis I hated Lutheranism and he was backed by the Parliament of Paris. In April 1523 a royal decree provided that no book should be printed without the imprimatur of the university. The king ordered the extirpation of the errors of Luther and the burning of Luther's books. Erasmus jibed that the burning of books was usually followed by the burning of people. In 1523 John Valliere was declared a heretic and burned. Briçonnet was summoned to Paris, reprimanded for leniency to heretics and fined. Lefèvre's doctrines were condemned. Louis de Berquin, a layman and champion of reform, translated and published works of Erasmus and Luther. He was arrested, tried and condemned. Margaret interceded for him with her brother, the king, and the king spared him.

Horrified by the outbreak of the Peasants' War in Germany in 1524, the King ordered archbishops and bishops to proceed against all who held, published, or followed the heresies and errors of Luther. Lefèvre and many of his friends fled to Strassburg. A number of "heretics of Meaux" and Lutherans were arrested and executed. Catholic theologians published tracts against Luther and Lefevre's translation.

The King's defeat by the Spanish and his captivity brought some relief from persecution. Lefèvre returned to Paris. In 1528-29 the French Council of Sens met to consider the state of
the church. It reaffirmed medieval positions and called on civil rulers to execute heretics and schismatics. While the council was sitting a statue of the Blessed Virgin was beheaded and mutilated. The king was furious. He ordered a new statue of silver and ordered the renewal of the persecutions. In 1529 Berquin was arrested again, tried, condemned and speedily executed on April 17, 1529, to prevent another reprieve.

In spite of all the Catholics did the Reformation continued to grow. In 1534 Aleander declared there were thirty thousand Lutherans in Paris alone. Luther and the German reformers, Zwingli and the Swiss reformers were gaining in influence. In 1525 reform groups were known to exist in less than a dozen cities (Paris, Meaux, Lyons, Grenoble, Bourges, Tours, Alençon). By 1540 reform groups could be found all over France, except perhaps in Brittany. Reformation opinions could be found in all levels of society. In the early 1530's William Farel, who had been in Margaret's circle when in Paris, was trying to take the Reformation to French speaking cities in Switzerland, with some success amidst bitter opposition.

Lutheranism brought division to French evangelicals. Some were ready to break with the old church and wanted a revolution as thorough as anything in Germany. Others were horrified at the division in Germany. Any change should come within existing institutions.

During his university days in Paris, young John Calvin became a close friend of Nicholas Cop, son of Guillaume Cop, physician to the King. It was in Cop's home that a circle of Humanists close to Margaret d'Angoulême, frequently met. While studying law at Orléans Calvin found time to study Greek under Melchior Wolmar, a German Humanist. When Margaret d'Angoulême founded the new law school at Bourges and invited Wolmar to join the faculty as professor of Greek, Calvin followed Wolmar to Bourges. It was in Wolmar's home that the first met the lad, Beza, who was also studying Greek.

After the death of his father, John Calvin took up humanistic studies in the College of France. He became an ardent member of the humanist circle of the Cops. In April, 1532, he published his scholarly humanist Commentary on Seneca's Clemency. Calvin returned to Orléans to complete his doctorate in law. While there he published his first religious work, an attack on the Anabaptists.

In the fall of 1533 Calvin was back in Paris where he helped Nicholas Cop prepare his inaugural address for his installation as rector of the university. The professors of the Sorbonne detected Lutheran heresies in the address and both Cop and Calvin had to flee from Paris. Calvin found refuge with Louis du Tillet in Saintonge where he made good use of du Tillet's excellent library. Calvin went through a conversion experience that made it impossible for him to remain in the Roman church. He returned to Noyon and resigned his benefices that had financed
his education. On visits to Paris, Orléans and Poitiers he visited house groups interested in Bible Study and Reformation and gave them instruction and encouragement. Calvin wrote prefaces for Olivetan's French translation of Old and New Testaments that became a favorite with those favoring reform. Disciples flocked to Calvin but it was dangerous for him to stay in any one place very long. In the fall of 1534 he returned to the home of du Tillet in Angoulême.

When Calvin returned to the home of du Tillet in Angoulême in the fall of 1534, du Tillet urged that they must flee from France at once. On the night of October 13, 1534, placards violently attacking the mass had been posted on many doors, walls, and prominent places in Paris. One was even placed on the door of the King's room. Francis regarded the placards high treason. The clergy, the University and Parliament called for strong action. Special gallows were prepared. Etienne de la Forge, who had been Calvin's host in Paris, was burned. Those suspected of Reformed opinions were rounded up. Even women and girls were burned.

In Basel, beyond the reach of the French King, Calvin finished his Institutes. He had received reports of the terrible persecution in France. Also he had learned that the King had sent a letter to the Lutheran princes of Germany who had been greatly aroused by the reports of the persecution of French Protestants in France. Francis I needed the help of the Germans in his war with Charles V of Spain. In his letter to the Germans he charged that the French who were being executed were guilty of sedition, that they were raving lunatics and anarchists. Calvin prefaced his Institutes with a letter to the French King, denying the King's charges and calling for him to make a fair investigation. He would find that the French Evangelicals were not plotting against the government but were seeking to live by the Word of God.

While the Institutes were being published Calvin visited the court of Renée of Ferrara who had made her court a refuge for persecuted Frenchmen. When the Inquisition began seizing her guests Calvin fled. Learning that the King had declared a moratorium on persecution in France Calvin briefly returned to Paris for the last time. He set out for Basel but had to detour to Geneva on account of the war between France and Spain. Farel came to his room in Geneva and persuaded him to join him in his reforming work in Geneva.

CALVIN AS LEADER OF FRENCH REFORM

Calvin's Institutes almost instantly received a hearty acceptance from French Evangelicals. It gave the French a center around which to rally. It gave them a system of doctrine and a plan of organization. The work marked Calvin out as the leader of French Reform. The French translation greatly increased his influence.
From Geneva Calvin followed events in France closely. He sent letters of encouragement to the persecuted. He sent strong letters of rebuke to followers who suggested that they could best serve the cause by staying in the Catholic Church. When Calvin became pastor of the French refugee church in Strassbourg his congregation became a model for churches in France.

The posting of the placards in Paris had resulted in severe persecution. Within a month two hundred persons were arrested; twenty were sent to the scaffold. The rest were banished after confiscation of their goods. In 1535 Francis was obliged to publish an edict ordering persecution to cease because he needed help from the Schmalkaldic League against the Spanish. In 1538 the persecution was renewed with vigor. Between 1538 and 1542 the Parliaments of major French cities published strong edicts calling for the extirpation of heresy. The Sorbonne published a list of prohibited books (1542-43) that included the works of Calvin, Luther, Melanchthon, Marot, and the translations of scripture by Robert Estienne. Parliament issued a severe ordinance against printing or selling Protestant books (July 1542).

In 1535 the Archbishop and Parliament of Aix accused seventeen Waldenses of Merindol of heresy. In 1540 they were condemned to be burned, but were pardoned by the King on condition they abjure heresy. In 1541 the Parliament sent the King false information that the people of Merindol were in open insurrection. The King ordered all Waldenses to be exterminated. Twenty-two of thirty Waldensian villages were utterly destroyed; between three and four thousand men and women were slain and seven hundred were sent to the galleys. Others escaped to Switzerland.

Evangelicals in Meaux organized themselves into a congregation modeled after the French refugee church in Strassbourg. Pierre Leclerc was their pastor and Etienne Mangin gave his house to be their meeting place. The authorities heard of the meetings and on September 8, 1546, raided the house, arresting sixty-one persons. The court declared the Bishop of Meaux was guilty of culpable negligence for permitting such meetings. Mangin's house was ordered razed and a chapel in honor of the Holy Sacrament was ordered erected on the site. All religious books in Meux were to be surrendered in eight days. Fourteen were condemned to be tortured and then burned alive. Five were hung up by armpits to witness the execution then scourged and imprisoned. Others were forced to witness the execution with cords around their necks, then led in an expiatory procession and forced to listen to a sermon on the Holy Sacrament.

On his return to Geneva Calvin kept up an extensive correspondence with his co-religionists in France. He sent them a steady stream of short theological treatises in French. He trained energetic pastors and teachers to circulate through France, preaching, teaching, circulating tracts and holding communion services. These workers had to constantly change their names to keep from being traced.
Francis I died on March 31, 1547. His repressive measures had driven Protestantism underground but it had continued to grow. More and more Frenchmen of all levels of society were comparing the purity of Protestantism with the corruption of Roman Catholicism. They contrasted the unintelligible pomp and ceremonies of Catholicism with the clear preaching of the Protestants. They compared the ignorant and indifferent priests with the earnest preachers. They compared the notoriously immoral court and nobles with the high moral standards of the Reformers.

Henry II followed his father as King. From the first he set himself resolutely to combat Protestantism. He had married Catharine de'Medici, daughter of Lorenzo II of Florence, and niece of Pope Clement VII. She was an ardent Catholic but her failure to bear children during the first ten years of the marriage made her position precarious. The King was greatly influenced by his mistress, Diana de Poitiers. The King was surrounded by strong supporters of Catholicism: his mistress, his chief Minister, Montmorency, and the powerful family of the Guises. On April 5, 1547, only five days after the old King's death, Henry II published a new law against blasphemy. A series of edicts followed calling for the extirpation of the Reformed faith. On October 1547 a new criminal court, the Chambre Ardente, was established to deal with heresy. Between December 1547 and January 1550 it passed more than five hundred judgments. The Edict of Chateaubriand (June 27, 1551) took measures to defend the Catholic faith. It regulated the printing and sale of books. It forbade the introduction into France of books from Protestant countries. No books could be published anonymously. All books had to be approved by the Faculty of Theology before they could be printed. Private persons who did not inform on heretics were liable to be considered heretics themselves. Parents were charged not to entrust children to teachers who might be suspect. No one could teach who had not been certified as orthodox. Masters were made responsible for their servants. No one was to have any intercourse with those who had taken refuge in Geneva. The goods of refugees were confiscated. Everyone must kneel in adoration of the Host and carefully attend the outward observances of religion.

Six years later the King had to admit his stringent measures had failed to check the growth of Protestantism. He proposed to establish the Inquisition in France as demanded by the Cardinal of Lorraine and Pope Paul IV but Parliament refused to approve. The Edict of Compiege (1557) ordered the courts not to inflict any lesser punishment than death. The penalty could be increased by torture or mitigated by strangling before burning. Special prisons were reserved for Protestant martyrs such as the Conciergerie where cells were below river level and water oozed from the walls, and the Grand Chateaulet with its terrible dungeons where cells were so small the prisoner could neither stand upright nor lie full length on the floor. Diseases decimated the victims. In 1547 in the Grand Chateaulet sixty died of plague before their trial.
THE ORGANIZATION OF THE FRENCH PROTESTANT CHURCH

In 1555 French Protestantism began to organize on a pattern urged by Calvin. He had proposed the simple three-fold ministry of the church of the early centuries. A group of believers should have a minister or pastor to preach the word and administer the sacraments, a consistory of elders to take the spiritual oversight of the community, and a body of deacons to look after the poor and sick. A few churches had been organized earlier (Meaux in 1546 and Nîmes in 1547) but they had been dispersed by persecution. Before 1555 the French Protestants were solitary Bible students or little companies meeting secretly to worship without any organization. In 1555 a little group meeting in the home of Sieur de la Ferrière, after prayer resolved to constitute themselves into a church. A father had explained to the group that he could not afford to go out of France to have his child baptized and that his conscience would not permit him to have the child baptized by the rites of the Roman Church. The little group called Jean le Maçon to be minister or pastor and then selected elders and deacons. Organized churches began to spring up in many places. Crespin named thirteen churches organized after the pattern of the Church of Paris between 1555 and 1557 (Meaux, Poitiers, Angers, les Illes de Saintonge, Agen, Bourges, Issoudun, Aubigny, Blois, Tours, Lyon, Orléans, and Rouen). Thirty-six more were organized before 1560. One hundred and twenty pastors were sent from Geneva to France before 1567. They had to keep their existence and meetings secret and their history was filled with tragedies. To fail to show reverence when passing a crucifix, an unguarded criticism of Catholicism or one of its ceremonies, to be found with a book printed in Geneva, led to arrest, trial and death. Wholesale arrests followed discovery.

In 1558 doctrinal differences arose in the congregation at Poitiers. The church appealed to Paris to send its minister Antoine de Chandieu, to heal the dispute. The idea of a Confession of faith for the whole Church was suggested. When the idea was submitted to Calvin he did not approve.

On May 25, 1559, ministers and elders from sixty-six churches met in Paris for conference. Morel, one of the Paris ministers, presided over the three days of deliberations. It was the First National Synod of the French Protestant Church. It compiled a Confession of Faith and a Book of Discipline. The Confession of Faith consisted of forty articles and was based on the short confession drafted by Calvin in 1557. The Book of Discipline provided for the Consistory consisting of minister or ministers, elders and deacons who ruled the congregation. Congregations were formed into groups. Over these was the Colloquy composed of representatives from the Consistories. Over the Colloquies were Provincial Synods; over all was the General or National Synod. Rules of discipline were drawn up. No church could claim primacy over others. All ministers had to sign the Confession of Faith and agree to submit to ecclesiastical discipline. This French system spread to Holland, Scotland, and to America.
Henry II, alarmed by the growth of the Protestants, was preparing more strenuous measures against them when he died of a wound accidentally received in a tournament (July 10, 1559). Calvin hailed his death as a merciful act of Providence. During the reign of Henry II fourteen hundred Frenchmen fled to Geneva. Many others fled to the Netherlands, England and Germany. It has been estimated that in addition to the organized churches there were no less than 2,150 conventicles or mission churches scattered over France and that the Protestants amounted to one-sixth of the total population—they may have numbered as many as 400,000 by 1559.

High officers of the government and great nobles had begun to join the Protestants. In 1546 the Bishop of Nîmes openly protected Protestants and was suspected of Calvinism. In 1548 a lieutenant-general was prosecuted for heresy. Anthony of Bourbon, a descendant of Louis IX, a son of Charles, Constable of France, and husband of Joan d'Albret, queen of Navarre and daughter of Margaret d'Angoulême, became a Protestant along with his wife. Admiral Coligny was converted along with his brother, d'Andelot. Shortly before the King's death in Parliament Antoine Fumee, du Faur, Viole, and Antoine du Bourg spoke on behalf of the Protestants and called for an end to persecution. Du Bourg contrasted the pure lives and earnest piety of the Protestants with the scandals that disgraced the Catholic Church and Court. The king was furious. Du Bourg and du Faur were arrested on the spot; du Bourg paid with his life. Fumee and La Porte were sent to the Bastile.

In 1560 at Tours the name "Huguenot" was applied to the French Protestants. They had been called "Lutherans", "heretics of Meaux," and "Calvinists." The origin of the name "Huguenot" is uncertain. Some think it was derived from a King Hugo of a medieval romance. Some think it may have come from "Hausgenossen", a term of contempt like modern "scab" used in Alsace for metal workers who did not belong to a gild. Others think it was a corruption or mispronunciation of "Eidgenossen," the name of members of the Swiss Confederation. Huguenots were recognized as some of the finest of the French people—people of religion who lived upright and sober lives.