

Study 5

Pierre Viret (1511–1571); The historical setting for Viret and his friends is the movement known as the Protestant Reformation (1517) which began in Germany with Martin Luther (1483–1546), eight years after John Calvin (1509–1564) was born in Noyon, France and six years after Viret was born in Switzerland. The Reformation affected social, political and economic life in very significant ways. Before the Reformation, Europe was controlled by the universalism of the Pope and the Catholic church. In addition, there was the influence of Humanism, the most significant intellectual movement of the Renaissance. The Renaissance means ‘rebirth’, a revival of classical learning, culture, art, politics, literature, and philosophy. Viret was a man of great mildness and persistence; called “the Angel of the Reformation.” He was a prolific writer, noted teacher, popular preacher and a gifted evangelist, but was one of the lesser-known figures of the Protestant Reformation. He was, however, one of the important leaders in France and Switzerland in company with John Calvin (1509–64), Guillaume (William) Farel (1489–1565) and Theodore Beza (1519–1605). Viret was one of Calvin’s close friends and a most trusted associate. Through his teaching, preaching and writing he influenced the thinking of several generations of Calvinists. (Other Swiss Reformers omitted in this paper: Ulrich Zwingli, (1484–1531) Johann Oecolampadius (1484–1531) and Thomas Wyttenbach (1472–1531)).

Sixteenth century composers: Monteverdi, Thomas Tallis, Gabrieli.

Professor John Murray (Westminster Theological Seminary) “**The Reformation was the rediscovery of the revealed counsel of God on the most vital issues of the Christian faith. It might be summed up in the rediscovery of salvation by grace. But the Reformation was the reassertion of the whole counsel of God, to the refutation of error and display of the truth. *Sola gratia* and *sola scriptura* were its fundamental principles. By one line of logical connection to another, all Reformation doctrine and practice are dependent on and traceable to these two principles. These principles need to be propagated with renewed zeal and zest’.** *Collected Writings, Vol. 1.*

Principal T M Lindsay, *The Reformation*, reminded his readers that the Reformation in Germany has normally attracted much more attention than the Swiss Reformation. He comments on its later consequences rather than its beginnings: "As time went on, it was seen that the principles of the Swiss Reformers both in doctrine and in church organisation, could be readily transplanted to other lands, and accordingly the Churches of France, Scotland, Hungary, and a great part of Germany inherited the traditions of Zwingli and Calvin rather than those of Luther and Melanchthon ... A Reformation arising in the midst of the free democratic Swiss life was more likely to be able to understand the spiritual democracy of New Testament Christianity than that which had its beginnings in Universities and the courts of German princes.'

Viret was born in the Swiss village of Orbe in the Pays de Vaud, one of the twenty-six Cantons (states) forming the Swiss Confederation; capital city is Lausanne. Viret's early education was under a schoolmaster named Marc Romain, a humanist scholar who was trained at the Universities of Paris and Strasbourg. The result was that Viret was introduced to French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and the classics. In 1527, Viret left for Paris to study for the priesthood at the College Montaigu where Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) and John Calvin had studied previously.

Most of Viret's activities during his three years at the University are unknown but he would have studied theology and the classics. The College curriculum was geared to continue medieval knowledge and traditions, but Reformation ideas flourished. Viret not only studied humanism but also Reformation doctrines. University communities are usually hotbeds for new and radical ideas and Renaissance and Reformation ideas were prevalent at the University of Paris. He returned to Orbe in 1530 with significant knowledge of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and classical literature; plus an introduction to Theology, philosophy, rhetoric and writings of the Church Fathers. He also returned to Orbe with increased learning and a growing library plus a newfound faith as he had embraced the Reformation. Viret (the only French speaking Reformer from French speaking Switzerland) was soon involved in the advance of the Reformation in French-speaking Switzerland. In 1531, Guillaume Farel came to Orbe to preach the 'Protestant Reformation.' He met Pierre Viret and preached in his hometown on 6 May 1531, Viret aged 20. By 1537, Viret was leader of the Reformed movement in nearby Lausanne, chief pastor of the main church from 1537–1559 and professor of New Testament at the new Lausanne Academy; plus teaching Old Testament, theology and acting as the school's principal. In 1546 he relinquished his professorship in the Academy for full-time pastoral ministry. Gradually the villagers were reformed until the whole of Orbe was reformed by

July 30, 1554. The two convents were changed into a house and a college. (Nestle opened a factory in 1900)

Viret worked to build the school's reputation, attract intelligent young men to attend and study, helped recruit faculty and lead curriculum planning. But in 1559 he incurred the wrath of political overlords and was forced to run. He was followed into exile by the majority of the faculty and most of the students. From 1559–61 he assisted Calvin in Reformation work while living in Geneva. His essential task was in leading one of the main city churches; but his interest in education linked him in assisting to commence the Academy of Geneva. He and Calvin worked together recruiting faculty and planning the curriculum.

Dr Robert Linder; 'The Genevans loved Viret. They immediately elected him a minister of the Geneva 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.' Viret devoted the last ten years of his life from 1561, to evangelism and pastoral ministry in France. This included taking an active part in establishing and maintaining educational institutions; teaching at the Academy of Nimes 1561–62. That year, 1562, he won most of the faculty in the medical college at Montpellier to the Reform side. During 1562–65 he was involved in an extensive evangelistic and pastoral ministry at Lyon while also directing a planned program of instruction in Reformation doctrine at local churches. Linking Viret with Calvin and Beza we can say that they all enjoyed poetry and music; and were to an extent, poets themselves. Calvin and Viret were not as talented in poetry as Beza but they did produce excellent prose, e.g. *The Institutes* (new French translation) and Viret's *Institution Chrestienne*. Also, the three Reformers placed great emphasis on quality education for all three were involved in the establishment of academies for the training of Reformed ministers and teachers.

Dr Robert Godfrey, president emeritus and professor emeritus of church history at Westminster Seminary, California; has referred to Calvin's commentary on Titus in which he includes: 'John Calvin, dedication to Guillaume Farel and Pierre Viret'. — 'We have good reason to glory before God and have the clearest evidence to show to men that our alliance and friendship have been entirely consecrated to Christ's name, have hitherto been profitable to His Church, and have no other aim than that all men should be at one with us in Him.'

Life was never smooth for any of the Reformers and one instance was Calvin's complaint to Viret in 1547 about strong opposition he faced in Geneva. **Robert Godfrey** quotes Calvin's letter to Viret: 'Their wickedness has, however, reached such a pitch, that I hardly hope to be able any longer to retain any kind of position for the Church, especially under my ministry. My influence is gone, believe me, unless God stretch forth his hand.'

Viret was expelled from Lyon in 1565 by Roman Catholic civil authorities and lived his final years in the lands of the King of Navarre, where he was befriended by the staunchly Protestant Queen of Navarre, Jeanne d'Albret, who made Viret the Superintendent of the Academy she had established at Ortez. He remained in this position until his death, aged 60 in April 1571, and was buried in Nerac. The Queen wrote of Viret's death; 'Amongst the great losses I have suffered during and since the last wars, I count the most grievous to be that of Monsieur Pierre Viret, whom God has now taken to Himself.'

In the Introduction to his book, *Pierre Viret, a Forgotten Giant of the Reformation, the Apologetics, Ethics and Economics of the Bible*; the author Jean-Marc Bethoud, includes a commendation from Thomas Ertl, the President of the Pierre Viret Association, who writes; *Pierre Viret was an extraordinary man and a model minister. He was a blend of gracious Christian character and remarkable theological insight and balance. His theology extended beyond the abstract and touched daily life. From the authority of Scripture to the role of magistrates, Viret made the study of God applicable to all of human existence.*

Following a brief Biography of Viret, Berthoud then includes five chapters on the scope of Viret's ministry.

1: Viret as Reformer. In 1537 he founded the first Reformed Academy in Lausanne and most of his time he taught theology to students who came from all over Europe. When expelled two years later the Academy had enrolled a thousand students. The whole staff then resigned and became the teaching genesis of the newly founded Genevan Academy. *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.*

2: Viret as Ethicist. Volume 1 of Viret's *Instruction Chrestienne*, include a treatise on the 'application of the Ten Commandments to every aspect of reality... an exposition of the Law of God.'

3: Viret as Apologist. The main apologist of the Reformation is shown by his connection to the authority and significance of every aspect of God's written Revelation and the way he links the teaching of the Bible to Creation, History and everyday life. His position is presuppositionist—i.e. the written Word of God is the basic presupposition of all fruitful thought.

4: Viret as Economist. His polemic was against the Church of Rome and the social abuses they engendered plus their accumulation of wealth. His polemic was also against inconsistent evangelicals—i.e. Calvinists who regarded the Reformation as liberation from moral and legal constraints and therefore refused all submission to the social and economic disciplines implied by the Law of God. He believed that the infernal cycle of economic injustice will breed revolution. The creature is cultivated and the Creator ignored. In many ways Viret's ethical thinking on social and political matters resembles that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

5: Viret as Philosopher. He believed that the true restoration of the Christian faith was re-formation, not a reform of deformed structures in church, state and society, but a return to the true form as expressed in the infallible Scriptures. The true or *substantial form* of the Church and the Christian life is only found in the Biblical model.

Viret writes: *For the faith of true believers is not founded on their particular opinions, nor on the opinion of men, but on the pure and explicit Word of God. And on this believers are established, not by opinion, but by certain faith, which is as different from mere opinion as the latter is from the sure knowledge of solid science.*

Berthoud writes: *From Viret's own writings, it must have become abundantly clear to the reader that Pierre Viret can, without hesitation, not only be considered one of the greatest (and most ignored) figures in the history of the Reformation, but also of the whole Christian Church.*