

AUGUSTE LECERF, THE LAST OF THE FRENCH CALVINISTS?¹

In about 1930 a visitor to Paris rang at the door of Auguste Lecerf, French pastor and teacher at the Protestant seminary in the French capital. « Some friends, he said, have told me to call on you. You are unique, it seems, you are the last of the French Calvinists »!

Lecerf was born in London in 1872, the son of parents who had been forced to leave France because of their revolutionary activities during the political upheavals of the time. Raised in an atmosphere of revolutionary atheism, as an adolescent Lecerf was preoccupied by the search for truth. He read Paul's epistle to the Romans and was almost persuaded. One rainy Sunday evening he slipped into the back row of a London chapel, heard the gospel preached, and came out a new person.

From that time Lecerf felt called to his native land. He returned to France and studied theology in Paris, distinguishing himself as a remarkable linguist because of his mastery of the biblical languages and Latin, but also of English and Dutch. His linguistic ability stimulated him in the study he excelled in, that of dogmatics, as he read the likes of Turretin, Witsius, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield.

During the 1930's Lecerf published two weighty volumes. They were his thesis on the nature of the knowledge of God, which were translated into English under the unattractive title, *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics*.² Lecerf believed that the only valid way of avoiding the rationalism of liberal theology or blind faith in the irrational teachings of Rome was to adopt a full blooded calvinism as expressed by the Reformers, their confessions of faith and their followers. Only calvinism was consistent in its method and content with belief in the God of the Bible and divine revelation. Throughout his life he debated with his liberal colleagues and the neo-thomism of philosopher Etienne Gilson and his circle.

Lecerf was a doughty proponent of absolute divine sovereignty. One of his favorite sayings was: «We believe in a God powerful enough - because he is all-powerful - to accomplish *freely* through the acts of his creatures, what he himself wills *necessarily*.»

However, Lecerf's brand of calvinism did not favour professional advancement. After several years in the pastoral ministry, he taught biblical languages at the Protestant Seminary in Paris and gave informal private lessons in dogmatics over cups of tea to students who were only too willing to listen. Only in 1936, the

¹ Published in the Dutch daily the *Reformatorsch Dagblad* in 2009.

² *Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker, 1981). Published in French in 1931 and 1938 by "Je sers", Paris and re-edited by Editions Kerygma in 1999.

year before he received a doctorate *honoris causa* from St. Andrew's University, as Karl Barth was also to do, was he named lecturer in dogmatics at Paris, at the age of 64!

Lecerf died in 1943, after dictating his personal confession of faith: «In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: I declare that I die in the faith recovered by the Reformers and expressed in the *Geneva Catechism* and the *La Rochelle Confession*.... »

The «last of the calvinists» left a remarkable legacy to the French churches, but one which has sadly been spurned or passed over by both Reformed and evangelical protestants alike. In spite of numerous articles and conferences, some of which were published posthumously in a volume entitled *Studies in Calvinism*, and his renown on the international scene, Lecerf was spitting against the wind as they say in his own country.³

The influence of Barthianism, whose dangers he did not initially measure, swept aside Lecerf's projected 20th century reformation. In the years after the reunion of the Reformed Church in France in 1938, Barth's teaching became the cement holding that church together, only to crack under the pressure of renewed liberalism and political theologies after the events of 1968. Today, theologies of all varieties can be found in the pluralistic Reformed Church, from radical feminism to evangelicalism often of the charismatic variety, but the number of those who would see themselves as the inheritors of Lecerf's theology can probably be counted on two hands.

Lecerf was, however, influential in keeping the flame of reformed beliefs flickering in the French churches. In 1935 at an exposition commemorating the work of Calvin, Albert-Marie Schmidt, author of a popular book on the Reformer, thanked Lecerf publicly for having made it possible for «thousands of young people to find the 'one thing necessary' to believe and hope in God today.»

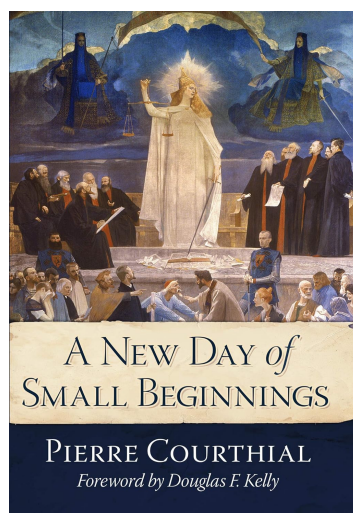
Inspired by his vision, a number of Lecerf's students remained attached to his teaching throughout their ministry. Two of those who sat at his feet were Pierre Marcel and Pierre Courthial. In 1927 Lecerf had founded the French Calvinistic Society, which published a regular bulletin with theological articles and comment. Marcel continued this publication and later founded *La Revue réformée* which celebrated its 50th anniversary in the year 2000. Since 1982 this journal has been published by the Faculty Jean Calvin at Aix-en-Provence and is widely read throughout the francophone world.

Pierre Marcel, born in 1910, became the leader of the calvinist movement in France and a theologian in his own right. After writing a doctoral thesis at the

³ *Etudes Calvinistes*, Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel, 1949, republished by Editions Kerygma in 1999.

Protestant seminary in Montpellier on the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd, he was pastor in the Eglise Réformée at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, for many years. With French Calvin scholar Jean Cadier he published Calvin's writings in modernised French, beginning with the *Institutes* in 1955 and followed by the series of New Testament commentaries. Marcel himself wrote books on baptism (translated into English), religious instruction, preaching, and against the historical critical method of studying the Bible. He completed a remarkable book on suffering the day before he died in 1992.

Pierre Courthial, born in 1914 and died in 2009. He followed in the Lecerf-Marcel line. After studying under Lecerf, he entered the ministry of the Reformed Church in 1938 and was the youngest delegate at its constituting synod. He later succeeded Marc Boegner, honoured for his defence of Jews during the occupation, a well-known figure in the early years of the World Council of Churches, as pastor of the Church of the Annunciation in Paris (the 'Westminster Chapel' in Paris), where he stayed until 1974. Courthial was a great preacher, an avid reader with an encyclopaedic memory. After a short barthian phase, he discovered the writings of modern calvinists, both English, Dutch and American. The author of many articles, collected in a book entitled *Foundations for the future*.⁴ Courthial also wrote a commentary on the French confession of faith, and a book on the covenant in a unique work entitled *Le jour des petits recommencements*.⁵ This work portrays God's acts from the creation to the return of Christ, underlining the covenantal structure of God's dealings with humanity. Courthial is one of the few theologians who have dared to undertake this task since the New England theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote his *History of Redemption* in the 18th century!



⁴ *Fondations pour l'avenir*, Editions Kerygma, 1981.

⁵ *Le jour des petits recommencements*, 1996, *A New Day of Small Beginnings*, Zurich Publishing, 2018.

As with Lecerf before them, the significance of Marcel and Courthial for protestantism in France has gone largely ignored in the mainstream churches. Marcel was turned down as successor to Lecerf for the chair of dogmatics at Paris by the Synod of the Reformed Church, after having been nominated by its theological commission. The fact a liberation theologian was named in his place says it all.

Courthial was never again elected to be a delegate to the synod of his church throughout his many years of ministry as pastor of the largest church in Paris. In fact he narrowly avoided disciplinary procedures when he became one of the founders of the Free Reformed Faculty of Theology at Aix-en-Provence in 1974, where he taught until 1990. Courthial later became honorary dean of the seminary, now renamed the Faculté Jean Calvin. He received a doctorate *honoris causa* from Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia in 1978.

The history of the reformed faith in France in this century is sad and joyful at the same time. There has been a constant falling away from the faith of the Huguenots, the faith for which they died. Modernism and secularism has swept all before it, and its theological pluralism has undermined the church and weakened the witness to the gospel though the years. However, the reformed heritage has been kept alive, a small flame flickering in the winds of postmodern relativism.

What does the 21st century hold for reformed christians in France? Lecerf-Marcel-Courthial fanned the flame. Will their successors have not only the conviction, but also the courage and vision to keep the flame alight?

The mantle of Elijah must fall on Elisha! Was Lecerf the last of the Calvinists or, as Jacques Pannier, the well-known protestant historian said in an obituary to Lecerf, «the first of the modern calvinists»? Time will tell whether those who work in France today in the line Lecerf-Marcel-Courthial have been equal to the task...